On the Nature of Social Capital under Post-Communist Transition: Perspectives from Romania

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Abstract:

The sharp difference in contemporary levels of social capital between the post-communist and other democratic states raises many questions regarding citizens' non-participation, not least in the field of housing and urban governance. Based on established but still divisive definitions of the concepts of individual and collective social capital, this article documents the continued salience of communist legacies on present forms of engagement. Through participants' narratives collected in a Romanian post-'socialist city', the paper reflects on the changing nature of social capital from traditional, rural and mostly positive to communist, urban and mostly negative forms while revealing the significant change inflicted by post-communist processes of commodification and institutionalization. The paper argues that citizens' non-participation may be seen as a resourceful response against persistent negative forms of social capital, but only inasmuch as citizens are empowered to exert democratic accountability via new and transparent institutionalized channels; this matches citizens' preference for 'home-based' civic engagement facilitated by technological affordability. Findings support institutional rather than cultural approaches to social capital and call for increasing institutional transparency and accountability in the private and public domains alike.

Keywords: social capital, civil society, post-communism, transition, Eastern Europe, Romania, social change.

1 Introduction

Socioeconomic and spatial change has visibly marked post-socialist cities, not least their housing environments. Globally, housing governance has engaged neoliberal strategies of privatism (Barnekov et al., 1989) that is an increasing reliance on the role of private sector in the production and consumption of housing. In post-socialist societies, housing privatism (Saunders, 1990, Saunders and Williams, 1988, Somerville, 1989) has resonated to socio-cultural values of home-centredness and a rejection of the collectivistic ideology and practices of communism. It is now clear that widespread housing problems require coordinated action. For instance, the management of privatized socialist blocks requires homeowners' collective engagement. *Ex post*

facto utility development in suburban settlements necessitates partnership between residents and local authorities. Access to scarce resources and public funds entails competition between places, actors and programmes. However, the extent to which residents are prepared and empowered to engage locally or in the structures of local governance and civil society in order to promote their agenda in the decision-making process remains an open question (Howard, 2003). The paper employs the concept of social capital, which is understood as individuals' abilities to get things done by engaging in more or less diffuse local social networks. The weakness of social capital in post-communist societies was evidenced particularly by quantitative studies (Rose, 2009).

Universalistic explanations of declining levels of social capital refer to general processes, such as urbanization, (post)-industrialization, socioeconomic privatism and technological development (Coleman, 1993). Middle-range explanations emphasized more particular processes, such as the communist legacies of distrust and compulsory participation in centrally controlled organisations (Mishler and Rose, 2007). Nonetheless it has remained unclear to what extent, for how long, and through what mechanisms these legacies would persist and how they relate to new post-communist processes, most notably the commodification and democratization of urban space. Some scholars embraced visions of cultural determinism according to which individuals' strategies are ingrained in social norms, which remain unaltered across many generations (Huntington, 1993, Putnam et al., 1994). Conversely, the significance of the political, legal and institutional environments within which interaction takes place and individuals' ability – albeit differential – to adapt to sudden institutional change was stressed by others (Coleman, 1986, Ostrom, 1990, Rose et al., 2008).

By bringing fresh analytical insights from a case study conducted in a paradigmatic post-'socialist city', the paper aims to contribute to this debate while elaborating on the changing nature and forms of social capital in Romania and on the factors that best explain their attributes. Based on established but still divisive definitions of the concept of social capital, section 2 examines briefly its main constituents and their particular features under communism. In order to contextualise the study, the section also illustrates the sharp differences in contemporary levels of social capital across countries grouped by prior political regimes. After some methodological considerations (section 3), sections 4 analyses the changing forms of social capital in Romania. Finally, section 5 presents some concluding remarks. Data pertains to a larger research that analysed comparatively residents' responses to housing problems in the communist high-rise estates and the post-communist suburban owner-built housing (Soaita, 2010). An important part of this study focused on residents' inclinations for and experiences of collective participation in order to undertake effective management of their housing – at the level of dwelling, street, neighbourhood or the city – as well as regarding their engagement within the structures of civil society. The paper argues that citizens' non-participation may be seen as a resourceful response against persistent negative forms of social capital, but only inasmuch as citizens are empowered

to exert democratic accountability as well as to articulate their agenda in the decision-making process via new and transparent institutionalised channels.

2 Social capital in post-communist societies

2.1 The constituents of social capital

Understood as individuals' ability to benefit or to be excluded from resources because of their social embeddedness in relatively small groups, social capital can have both positive and negative consequences (Bourdieu, 1985). The term 'negative social capital' (Portes, 1998) refers to a dominance of negative consequences rather than benefits, such as exclusion of outsiders, excessive claims on group members, restriction on individual freedom or unfair allocation of resources. Putnam et al (1994:67) expanded the concept of social capital to features of social organizations localised in cities, regions and nations that facilitate collective action, institutional performance or economic growth, which so became synonymous with 'civicness' or civic society (Portes, 2000). There is a growing consensus that social capital consists of three key elements: social networks; linked/embedded resources; and shared norms that facilitate the social exchange of resources. Sociologists (Bourdieu, 1985, Coleman, 1988, Portes, 1998) have given them a relative equal weight while political scholars (Howard, 2003, Putnam et al., 1994) have emphasized the role of social networks and norms while resources were uncritically seen as positive consequences of collective action.

A large body of literature describes or prescribes the positive or negative features of these three constituents, delineating between segregating/bonding/strong and enabling/bridging/weak ties (Narayan, 1999, Granovetter, 1973); between positive norms of trust, reciprocity, good reputation, solidarity and care (Fukuyama, 1996, Ostrom, 2000, Putnam et al., 1994) and negative values of nationalism, racism or criminality (Rubio, 1997). Bourdieu (1985) stressed that social capital, like other forms of capital, should be at least partially convertible to economic, human or symbolic capital. Consequently, social capital needs to be analysed with an awareness of other forms of capital, in order to reveal more than it conceals (Butler, 2008, DeFilippis, 2001, Portes, 1998). Some scholars have rejected the general comprehensiveness of the concept and narrow it down to trust (Butler, 2008, DeFilippis, 2001, Fukuyama, 1996, Mungiu-Pippidi, 2005, Portes, 1998, Torche and Valenzuela, 2011), solidarity (Adler and Kwon, 2002, Robinson, 2005) or simply to resources (Callois and Aubert, 2007).

2.2 Social capital under communism and post-communism

Structural socioeconomic and political constraints specific to the communist regime have marked the constituents of social capital. Genuine (in)formal organisations/associations were repressed and replaced by centralised and bogus mobilisation (Kornai, 1992). The only 'islands of sociability' remained 'defensive' and resumed to close networks of family and friends (Smolar,

Table 1 Comparing particularistic and universalistic societies

Ideal types:	Particularistic (anti-modern)	Universalistic (modern)
*Institutions prevalence	Informal, in contradiction with the formal	Formal, in small contradiction with the informal
* Rule of law	Week	Strong
** Societal signals	Favours, bribes, connections	Prices, laws, shared norms
Visibility	Opaque, translucent	Transparent
***Social networks	Bonds + Vertical	Bridges + Horizontal
** Output	Inefficient	Efficient
*Trust	Ascribed	Generalised
Social capital prevalent features	**Negative**	**Positive**

*Mungiu-Pippidi (2005); ** Rose (1998) *** Narayan (1999)

1996:27). Inefficient command economies produced consumer goods in dramatically short supply to which access was conditioned by privileges and favours. Uncertainty and distrust were the societal norms beyond close groups of family and friends. With a focus on Southern-East Europe and ex-Soviet Union, Mungiu-Pippidi (2005) and Rose (1998) applied a theoretical framework of particularistic (anti-modern)/universalistic (modern) societies to contrast communist societies to liberal democracies (Table 1).

However, how relevant are these communist legacies after 20 years of socioeconomic and political change? The freedom of association has coagulated in an emerging civil society – synonymous with Putnam's (2001) collective social capital – which, nonetheless, has remained weak and at distance by citizenry (Howard, 2002, Petrova, 2007). Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the weakness of civil society in terms of average number of active membership by person and participation in collective forms of protest.

Table 2 Average number of organisational memberships by person and prior regime type

	Older democracies	Post-authoritarian	Post-communist	Romania
WVS 1995[a]	2.38	1.84	0.91	1.14
WVS 2000[b]	2.11	1.39	0.62	0.31
1995/2000	-13%	-38%	-24%	-73%

Source: [a]Howard (2002); [b] Bernhard and Karakoc, (2007)

Table 3 Average number of participation in protest, by person and prior-regime type

	Older democracies	Post-authoritarian	Post-communist	Romania
Protest	0.92	0.49	0.42	0.23

<div align="right">Source: Bernhard and Karakoc (2007)</div>

While quantitative accounts measure important differences across countries or groups of countries, they can only speculate about why people feel reluctant or inclined to engage in the structure of civil society or to develop civic forms of social capital. Before examining the changing nature of social capital in Romania, the next section will introduce the case study and the structure of data. Data belong to a larger project that analysed residents' responses to housing problems in two major urban types, the communist high-rise estates and the post-communist suburban owner-built housing. An important part of this study focused on residents' inclinations for and experiences of collective participation in order to undertake effective management of their housing either at the level of block, street, neighbourhood or the city.
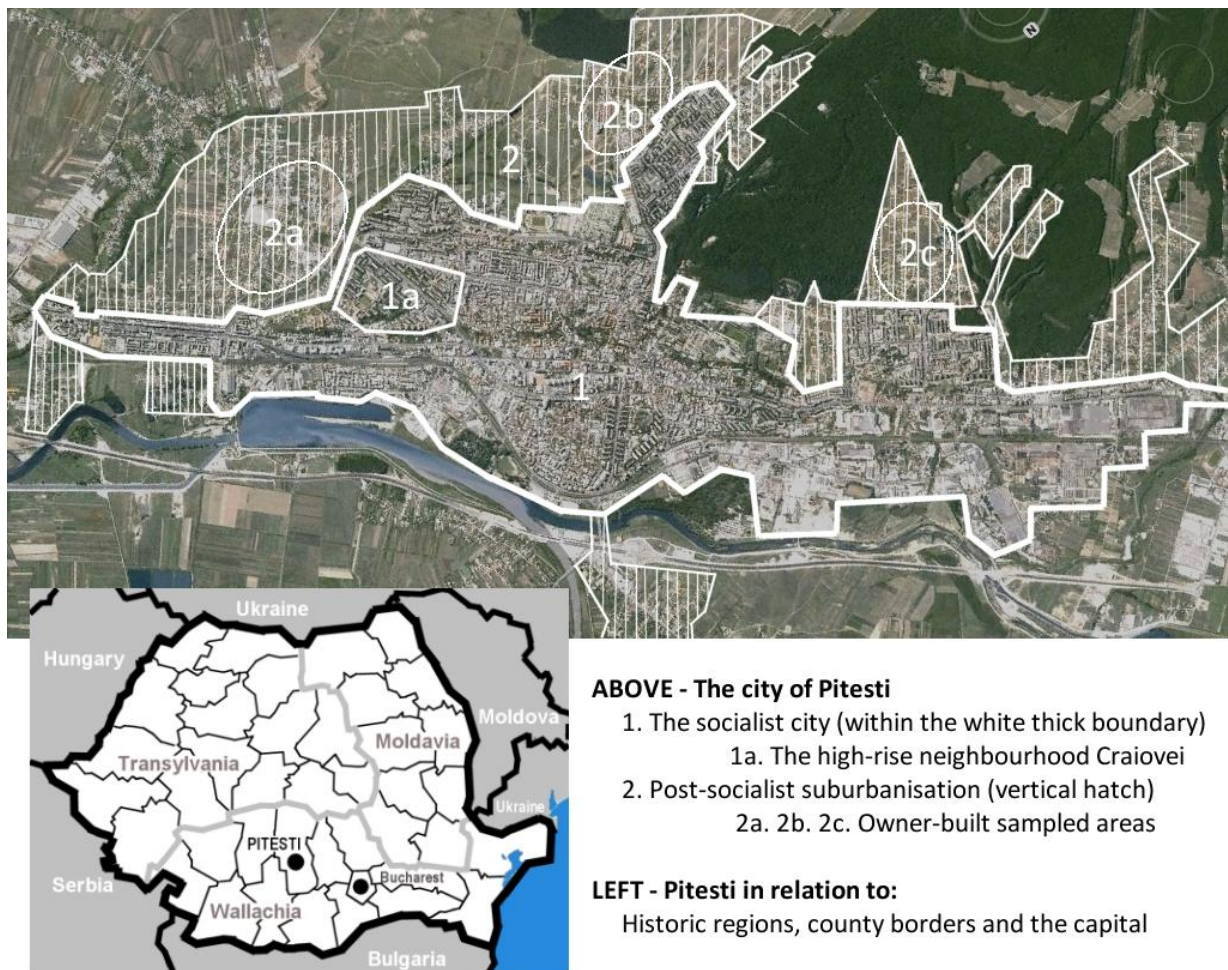
3 The case study

Among other 16 Romanian second-tier cities, Pitesti (170,000 inhabitants) was a typical Eastern European 'socialist city' (Andrusz et al., 1996), most notably in terms of massive post-1948 urban and industrial growth. Pitesti has enjoyed a relatively 'successful' post-communist trajectory (Benedek, 2006). One typical high-rise housing estate and three representative suburban areas were selected for systematic analysis (out of 15 and eight, respectively, see Figures 1 and 2). From September 2007 to June 2008, I systematically collected 150 and 100 questionnaires, respectively as well as 24 in-depth interviews in each housing type. Additionally, 21 interviews were held with decision-makers (9) and housing professionals (12).

All participants were asked 'What is your opinion about the participative culture in Romania, such as people gathering to solve problems together, express opinions collectively or just socialize?' with the following probes: Can you give any examples? Why do you think this is as it is now? Are there any differences across rural and urban locations? Are there any differences between communism and post-communism eras? Are there any differences across ages, education levels, ethnic groups or by any other factors? Residents were also asked questions on their participation in any groups and associations, whether and why they voted or 'voiced' their views through the structures of local governance.

Interestingly, while residents' profile varied significantly by housing type – owner-builders being significantly more affluent and slightly younger than the blocks residents – their propensity to engage in collective action locally or to promote their agenda at the local government differed insignificantly while their general opinions about the participative culture in Romania converged entirely. This seemed unsurprising not only because 80% of owner-builders had only recently

Figure 1 The city of Pitesti and selected neighbourhoods

ABOVE - The city of Pitesti
1. The socialist city (within the white thick boundary)
   1a. The high-rise neighbourhood Craiovei
2. Post-socialist suburbanisation (vertical hatch)
   2a. 2b. 2c. Owner-built sampled areas

LEFT - Pitesti in relation to:
Historic regions, county borders and the capital

Craiovei (1a)

Suburbs (2c)

Source: author collection (2008)

moved from blocks and most participants were first/second generation urbanites, but because participants – whether residents, decision-makers or housing professionals – stepped back visibly from the roles in which I approached them into that of *citizens.*

4 The changing nature of social capital

4.1 Individual social capital

Among many respondents, Mr 'Popescu' paralleled empirically the portrayal of post-communist societies as possessors of negative social capital. He explicitly condemned the amoral use of 'connections' and lamented the lack of positive social capital:

> There is a malevolence to use functions, positions, money and nepotism, all for only perverse purposes: 'Let's help my nephew, poor thing, as he drove onto someone on a pedestrian crossing, at 100 miles/hour'! Conversely, no one takes an initiative such as "Let's plant some trees on our street or help those elderly people" (56, owner-builder).

Mr Popescu's scepticism reflected general societal perceptions but also his unsuccessful efforts to organize a small neighbours' group in order to provide water and sewage to their adjoining owner-built houses in what was, in the middle 1990s, unplanned and un-serviced suburban land. Have individuals, families and communities in Romania always been weak in terms of social capital or have they developed negative forms in recent decades? Among others, 'Sorina' (female aged 50, architect) recalls her mother's village where the local community was organised according to clear norms, values and rules, therefore rich in forms of normative social capital (Coleman, 1988):

> In my mother village it was considered that along your plot, up to the middle of the road, it was your duty to keep clean and no one ever questioned not doing it. Mum told me she and her brothers were in charge with this kind of work. There were other very clear rules, for instance how to build your house in relation to your neighbour's for both best interests.

Rural traditions of reciprocal help have survived up today, such as *claca* (similar to the Italian 'aiutarella', Putnam et al., 1994):

> Everyone knows what is *claca*! I come and help you, you come and help me! We harvest today my crop, tomorrow we harvest yours. It's still practiced but more rarely and only in villages (male aged 48, owner-builder).

From a landed class' privilege of compulsory peasant unpaid work, *claca* was reinvented at the end of the 19th century as an example of horizontal and instrumental form of social capital. The communist state successfully captured and maintained it:

> Schools and bridges were built like that, by villagers while the municipality brought building materials. The Mayor mobilised people, with a rake, with a brush, and they cleaned streets, painted white tree trunks, fences, and cleaned ditches. Mayors were back then the key mobilisers (male aged 64, owner-builder).

The urbanization process in Romania coincided with the communist engineering of a 'new' society, therefore the transfer of *claca* to urban areas 'was not well received by authorities' (male aged 68, block resident). Instead, centralised organisations with compulsory participation developed mostly around the work place:

> There were plenty of organised activities which we had to attend, sports, football, theatre, choir, painting, ballet and "patriotic work"! From childhood to adulthood, we were compulsory regimented as 'homeland falcons', pioneers and communist party members! (female aged 50, block resident).

As the command economy produced extensive shortages, the benefits accessed through social capital were not information, public safety or clean streets but rather privileged provision of food, basic goods and urban flats. Social capital did not allocate benefits, but misallocated scarce goods, a practice vocally condemned as 'amoral':

> Corresponding to the traffic of influence that one could make, the "connections" one had, one could get or not a flat. Oh, such a dirty traffic of influence existed around housing allocation! What an amoral swamp was the municipality! (male aged 54, block resident).

It has been argued that in slow and disorganized transition, old vertical power relations and power structures from communism have opportunities to capture the new socioeconomic order (Aslund, 2007). This was apparent in Romania:

> The same people remained in every important position, whether small or big firms, whether privatized or para-statal. They kept their exclusive networks and traded among themselves (male aged 59, owner-builder).

> During the 1990s, ministers got many excuses to steal, to be greased, to close the eyes. The practice of corruption was transmitted to the mass society, making every public employee easy to bribe and any 'entrepreneur' a tax escapist. For this we pay now (male aged 57, block resident).

Corruption and bribery demonstrate the fungibility of negative social capital into overt economic gains. However, this research documented processes of change – commodification and institutionalization – that have resulted in societal perceptions of a loss of social capital, not always lamented. Wedding practices can exemplify a nostalgic loss of social capital via commodification whereas administrative change can illustrate a welcomed weakening of negative forms of social capital. Similar to *claca,* weddings – commonly of well over 100 guests – are rotational practices that render visible the horizontal social networks possessed by the new couple. Customary gifts traditionally over-cover wedding costs in order to insure the financial start-up of the new couple. From a helping and pragmatic rural tradition in which the couple was given some help to celebrate, they have become 'money-rising business but the aim is still helping the new couple' (male aged 54, block resident). Weddings have become increasingly commoditized not only in terms of venues – restaurants rather than family/communal gardens –

but also in terms of monetized gifts of significant cash necessary to cover higher costs, thus afforded by fewer guests.

The institutionalization of public and private administrations – in terms of information management, computerization, CCTV systems or queuing management – has undermined traditional forms of negative social capital, notably bribery and misallocation of resources:

> I see a City Hall that works: every paper is registered, whether a claim, a suggestion or a complaint, a good management of information since '98-2000. I thus resolved all my problems without gifts, without bribes (male aged 36, owner-builder).

4.2 Collective social capital

When the framework of analysis moves from individual/small groups to civil society, then its weakness is well acknowledged by participants:

> Citizens' involvement in urban affairs is a big zero! (female aged 51, architect).

Rates of participations found among residents in both housing types do not differ significantly from those measured in other studies. Only 9% of participants said they took part in any active organisations and just a few more engaged in neighbour groups whereas participation in any neighbourhood associations was almost nil in both housing types. Yet, 40% of block residents and 70% of owner-builders 'voiced' their opinions to local authorities (but only 9% and 12% respectively expressed 'voice' often or very often). Block residents preferred indirect communication (letters, phone calls) whereas owner-builders favoured direct interaction (audiences). How did participants explain their own and their fellow citizens' reluctance to engage in the structures of local governance and civil society? The communist legacy of passivity was perceived to be the strongest determinant:

> One was always told 'You stay put and quiet and I give you what you need; you just go to work; if I tell you "patriotic work" you do patriotic work; if I tell you "meeting" you go to meeting; if I tell you "applaud" you applaud; if I tell you "choir" you sing; you just do what I say' (male aged 68, block resident).

But 18 interviewed participants felt averse to ever join any type of organisations out of dislike of ideological collectivism. Interestingly, many participants believed that civic disengagement was a national cultural trait of insular individualism, unlikely to ever change. Such ethnocentric explanations of non-participation based on (insular) individualism are probably not unique to Romania since levels of collective social capital have fallen worldwide. However, social perceptions of others' insular individualism and predatory capitalism were seen as hallmarks of the disorganized Romanian transition, spanning social distrust (explored at length in Soaita, 2010) and penalizing promoters of collective actions:

> At every step somebody tries to fool you. One rings the doorbell showing a 'medical record' or 'building permit' to ask for cash for a sick child or a new church... Many people don't keep their word, as a friend once *explained* to me '*I* gave you my word and it's *me* who

took it back'! And there is a fight for everything, for money, for a business, for a job or a job promotion. This new freedom was very wrongly understood (female aged 46, block-resident).

People do not want to get involved in any common action. No! They always believe that only *you* have something to gain, that this is the reason that *you* have taken on the initiative (female aged 34, owner-builder).

Studies of democratization demonstrated the important role played by the political class and particularly by political elites in designing the macro processes of politico-economic change, a point strongly emphasised by the Mayor:

I believe that people feel reluctant to participate in any kind of communal activities and organisations because they have been cheated and disappointed too many times. Responsible for this is the political class. The political class are culpable for this. Then, of course, other factors play a role such as lack of time, lack of structures and poverty.

The above analysis demonstrates critical links between politico-economic regime and social capital. However, politico-economic change intertwines in complex ways with more general changes in society. A persuasive change of social values from traditional/rural/communitarian to modern/urban/liberal resulted in participants equating direct engagement in collective action with an undesired return to a not so distant past, albeit rural/pre-modern or communist/collectivist:

Collective participation as in villages is old fashioned, it's not feasible, it can't solve the problems people have now. And then, again networking? Again privilege? No, this is not the way forwards, rather you fill in a form and wait your turn. But this should be transparent for everyone to see! (female aged 47, block resident).

Many participants opted for commodified and institutionalized structures that facilitate individual rather than group action as this can 'offer choice and a fair chance to everyone' (male aged 38, block resident) and break up forms of negative social capital. Nevertheless, commodification and institutionalization twined with poverty are likely to exclude people who could not afford fees, subscriptions or face the time constraints of multiple jobs and inefficient bureaucracies. Not surprisingly, preferred forms of civic engagement were (on-line) signature for support and phone/on-line complaints or suggestions, therefore 'home-based' civic engagement from which the relatively comfortable participants in this study were not excluded.

5 Concluding remarks

The specific aim of this paper was to clarify the changing nature and forms of social capital in Romania. Using Mungiu-Pippidi's (2005) and Rose's (1998) theoretical framework, the paper has argued that structural politico-economic constraints resulted in the predominance of negative social capital under communism. The continuing salience of communist legacies is supported by comparative analysis of civic engagement by prior-regime type. The analysis has documented that, while levels of organisational membership and participation in protests have fallen

worldwide, they were constantly and significantly lower in the group of post-communist countries. The paper has brought fresh empirical evidence in order to examine the changing forms of social capital through the lens of residents in a post-communist 'socialist city'.

Delayed urbanization and industrialization overlapped the communist engineering of society and resulted in an ideological cleavage between rural and urban worlds. Traditional forms of *individual* social capital were relatively well maintained during communism in most rural areas but they have diluted recently. Not only was their transfer to socialist cities discouraged, but negative forms developed instead, by which misallocation of scarce consumer goods was secured by privilege and favour. Post-communist widespread practices of generalised bribery have clearly demonstrated the persistence of perverse forms of individual social capital throughout society as well as their fungibility into illicit economic capital. Although marginal, positive forms of individual social capital have survived up to the present, such as wedding practices or the rural *claca*. However, recent processes of comodification and institutionalization have undermined both negative and positive forms of social capital; considering their prevalence, it is not surprising that convincingly nostalgic communitarians were missing among the participants of this study.

Citizens' reluctance to develop new forms of *collective* social capital was ingrained in unconstructive experiences during communism and post-communist transition. Compared to perverse forms of individual social capital that facilitated privileged access to scarce goods, other forms of compulsory and formalistic participation in centralized organizations/associations were not ostracized but rather unpopular. Pragmatic constraints, most notably lack of time and poverty were significant and clearly undermined the development of middle-class club memberships privileged by Putnam's et al (1994) analysis while encouraging 'home-based' forms of civic participation facilitated by technological affordability. However, in order to empower rather than isolate, 'home-based' civic engagement requires effective mechanisms to increase institutional transparency and accountability in the private and public domains alike. Effective institutional transparency and accountability were seen as *the* way forwards to build up liberal universalism instead of old group privileges and constitutes the key policy recommendation of this study. Citizens' non-participation may be therefore seen as a resourceful response against persistent negative forms of social capital, but only inasmuch as citizens are empowered to exert democratic accountability via new and transparent institutionalised channels.

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