MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement)

Grant agreement no.: FP7-266831

WP5: Interpreting Participation (Interviews)

Deliverable 5.4: Cross-national report

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1. Introduction
The MYPLACE project uses multiple research methodologies in 30 case study locations across Europe to understand the civic and political engagement of young people in historical and cultural context. WP5 ‘Interpreting Participation’ uses semi-structured interview data, based on a common interview schedule, to: elicit meanings attached to statements or opinions expressed in the survey; provide an opportunity for respondents to explain their own positions; and generate space to discuss issues not included in the questionnaire. Approximately 30 interviews were conducted in each fieldwork site (2 sites for each of 15 research teams). These datasets were analysed first at national/regional level by the relevant teams and reports on these findings are published at: http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/deliverable_5.php 2014. The current report provides a meta-ethnographic synthesis of national level data in order to provide a European level understanding of young people’s civic and political engagement. The findings of the analysis are structured according to five key themes which emerged from the synthesis: politics and ‘the political’; political participation; history and memory; extremism and radicalism; and imagining a better society.

2. Methods: Data collection and analysis
In this section, a brief outline of the case study design and research locations of the MYPLACE project as a whole is provided. This is followed by a more detailed description of the methods of data collection and analysis employed specifically in WP5 and which underpin the analysis reported here.

2.1 Case study design and research locations
MYPLACE seeks not only to understand the contemporary political and civic engagement of young people in Europe but also how this is shaped by the past and what it might tell us about the future. For this reason, the countries included in MYPLACE were selected to research contrasting social and political heritages from communist to fascist as well as countries with no such experience. The two contrasting locations (four in Germany to reflect different political heritages in former eastern and former western Germany) in each country were selected on the principle of including one location where it was hypothesised that young people will have a greater propensity to be receptive to radical political agendas than in the other selected location¹. It is important to note that throughout this report where countries are referred to (e.g. ‘respondents in Estonia’) this is employed as a shorthand only

¹ The primary consideration when selecting locations was the importance of local factors contributing to the propensity for young people to be receptive to radical agendas. The following criteria were all considered as potentially important in the selection of each location by each team: community segregation and perception of minority groups; underlying socio-economic inequalities; civic engagement; continuity and discontinuity in political heritage; the activity of ‘supply’ side movements and the integration of populist/radical groups with other youth ‘subcultures’; ideological resonance and local democracy; and the extent of political engagement/alienation.
to indicate respondents in the two selected locations. In all cases no claims are made to providing representative picture of youth attitudes at national level and where there are significant differences between locations within a country this is noted.

Table 2.1 summarises the selected locations and the abbreviations used in this report for both country (following ISO 3166-1 standard codes while differentiating between sites in eastern Germany by DE-E and in western Germany by DE-W).

**Table 2.1: MYPLACE research locations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country (and abbreviation)</th>
<th>Location (and abbreviation if used)</th>
<th>Hypothesised receptivity to radicalisation</th>
<th>Geographic notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Croatia (HR)</td>
<td>Podsljeme Pešćenica Zitnjak (Pešćenica)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>District of Zagreb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>District of Zagreb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark (DK)</td>
<td>Odense East (OE) Odense Center (OC)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>District of Odense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>District of Odense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia (EE)</td>
<td>Narva area (Idu Viru) Tartu</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Area in eastern Estonia, bordering Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>City in central southern Estonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland (FI)</td>
<td>Lieksa and Nurmes (PK) Kuopio</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Two small towns in eastern Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Town in central Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia (GE)</td>
<td>Kutaisi Telavi</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>City in western Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Town, north west of Tbilisi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (western) (DE-W)</td>
<td>Bremen Bremerhaven</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>City in north western Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>The sea port that serves Bremen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (eastern) (DE-E)</td>
<td>Jena Rostock</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>City in south eastern Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>City in north eastern Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece (GR)</td>
<td>New Philadelphia (NF) Argyroupouli (AR)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>North eastern district of Athens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>South western district of Athens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary (HU)</td>
<td>Sopron Ozd</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Town close to the Austrian border</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Town close to the Slovak border</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia (LV)</td>
<td>Agenskalns (Rīga) Forstate and Jaunbuve (Daugavpils)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>District of Riga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Two districts of Daugavpils, close to the Russian border</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal (PT)</td>
<td>Lumiar Barreiro</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>District of Lisbon in the main city area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>District of Lisbon on the opposite side of the river Tagus to the main city area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia (RU)</td>
<td>Kupchino Vyborg</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>District of St Petersburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>City close to the Finnish-Russian border</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia (SK)</td>
<td>Rimavska Sobota Trnava</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Town close to the Hungarian Border</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>City north east of Bratislava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain (ES)</td>
<td>Vic Sant Cugat</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Town around an hour from Barcelona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Town close to Barcelona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK (GB)</td>
<td>Coventry Nuneaton</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>City in central England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Town in central England</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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2.2 Collection of data

The follow up semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sub sample of approximately 30 of the survey participants in each of the research locations (see Table 2). The respondent set was generated using theoretical sampling informed by respondents’ answers to two key questions in the questionnaire concerning participation and (in)tolerance. These interviews, generally undertaken with respondents several days after the survey questionnaire, were carried out with respondents of contrasting types and intensities of political (non)engagement and levels of (in)tolerance and controlled for on key socio-demographic variables (gender, ethnicity/nationality, age and education). This design meant that all interviewees were exposed to the same sensitisation to the questions in the questionnaire.²

The follow up interviews were undertaken using an interview scenario formulated to explore themes from the questionnaire in greater depth and with the flexibility to explore interesting topics as they emerged naturally. Interviews were generally undertaken with respondents several days after completion of the survey questionnaire. The common interview scenario began with a ‘warm up’ section designed by individual teams to maximise local sensitivity followed by six common blocs of questions on: political heritage and transmission; history and memory in everyday life; participation and understanding of ‘the political’; culture and lifestyles; understanding the language of politics; and receptivity to populism/extremism. In addition to common core questions, a series of ‘prompts’ (including visual aids) and ‘suggested additional questions’ were devised by each participating team to ensure local sensitivity.

A total of 903 semi-structured interviews were recorded with 447 males and 454 females (2 respondents had ‘other’ gender identities). The interviews recorded by the fieldworkers were on average 66 minutes long.

Table 2: MYPLACE interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Field locations</th>
<th>Volunteers</th>
<th>Interviews recorded</th>
<th>male</th>
<th>female</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Podsljeme</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pescenica Zitnjak</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Odense East</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Odense Center</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Narva area</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tartu</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² In a small number of research locations the target number of follow-up interviews could not be achieved from the survey sample due to low volunteer rates. In these cases, teams followed a supplementary protocol and recruited volunteers based on the same criteria as for eligibility for the survey and respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire prior to follow-up interview to ensure consistency in sensitisation although the questionnaires were not included in the survey data set.
2.3 Analysis of data

Interviews were analysed following a common approach to the coding and analysis of qualitative data designed and adopted within the MYPLACE consortium. The MYPLACE qualitative data analytic strategy is based on an inductive approach but one that recognises that such an approach is never pre-theoretical. Drawing on Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2010) and Burawoy (1998), the strategy employs inductive coding at the early stages of analysis (to maximise the opportunity for theoretical imagination) whilst undertaking a conscious process of ‘theoretical matching’ and validation against both data and existing theoretical frameworks at the third or interpretative level. To this end, all partners employed NVivo 9.2 software to code qualitative data, following protocols and guidelines for coding at three levels, where Level 1 nodes provide the closest, descriptive, representation of the phenomenon, Level 2 nodes group ‘families’ of Level 1 nodes while Level 3 nodes take the form of themes or metaphors draw not only on the data analysed but also on relevant theoretical writing. Through the synthesis of these higher level ‘nodes’ at cross-case or cross-national level, micro empirical data are placed within current theoretical context as well as extending this theory on the basis of the research findings.
For the purposes of the transnational analysis, in order to allow access to the original data, recorded in 15 languages, partners prepared English-language memos about: 1) each respondent (in total 903 respondent memos) providing the main demographic data and description of the interview itself; and 2) each Level 2 node, providing a description of the context of the node, a brief interpretation of each subordinated Level 1 node and illustrative quotes with translations. Altogether 434 memos were prepared, varying in length from 4 to 59 pages. These thematic memos were analysed together with significant parts of the reports using NVivo software in the elucidation of the cross-national Level 3 nodes.

This report summarises the findings of the cross-national analysis of data. This analysis was conducted drawing on the meta-ethnographic synthesis approach of Noblit and Hare (1988) as well as a more recent example of its application to a synthesis of qualitative research in the field of health studies by Britten et al (2002). Meta-ethnography is a method for the synthesis of qualitative empirical data that is interpretive rather than aggregative in approach; it works through the principle of the ‘reciprocal translation’ of the meanings of one case into the meanings of another (Noblit and Hare 1988: 10-14). In this sense it does not operate on the basis of ‘inductive generalisation’ – which, according to Burawoy (1998: 19) seeks common patterns among diverse cases at the expense of context - but the generation of themes, concepts or ‘metaphors’ through the ‘translation’ process.

The findings of the report are detailed below according to a series of ‘metaphors’ or ‘concepts’ derived under five broad themes: politics and the political; political participation and activism; history and memory; extremism and radicalism; and visions of a better society.
3. Findings

3.1 Politics and ‘the political’

Politics is political. Those who ask what the political means, it follows, must anticipate that the answers they receive are also political. Indeed, it is in young people’s articulations of their understandings and characterisations of politics, more than anywhere, that the power of the interview as a site of narration of the subject is evident. This is immediately apparent in the diversity of answers to questions that respondents gave, not only in terms of substance but also in their varying depths of reflection and different degrees of expressiveness or demonstrativeness. This is inherent in the research process; as they respond to questions on politics, interviewees are not objectively describing their behaviour but positioning themselves, in relation to the interviewer, in relation to those in power and, sometimes, in relation to the biography of the self (or potential self). These interview narratives thus have particular importance in allowing a glimpse into how young people construct and narrate themselves in relation to politics and providing some basis to explain findings from the MYPLACE survey data where this positioning also informs the responses young people give albeit less visibly. These constructions of the subject are deeply contextually shaped – by individual and structural factors, by historical and current political and economic constellations and trajectories and by the local, national and global contexts in which respondents find themselves. While it is impossible to do justice to all of these factors, where patterns in particular field site locations or clustering of responses by region, political heritage or welfare regime are identified, these are highlighted. This is not to imply that these factors provide causal explanations for patterns identified but to invite reflection and future exploration through further analysis and triangulation with survey and ethnographic data.

This section of the report is structured around the metaphors or themes emerging from narratives in four subsections. The first captures immediate associations with politics or 'the political', often in response to the question, 'What comes to mind when you think of 'politics' or 'the political'? The second subsection records how interviewees evaluate, predominantly, but not exclusively, negatively, politics, politicians and political parties. The third considers how these associations and evaluations translate into either the embracing or disavowal of politics. Finally, the implications of these attitudes to politics for wider views on democracy and possible alternative forms of political system are discussed.

3.1.1 ’Solving conflicts with words’ or ’just a lot of arguing’? Meanings attached to the political.

There are three dominant sets of associations with 'politics' in the narratives of the young Europeans interviewed: the sites and institutions of formal politics; broader definitions of 'the political'; and, usually negative, general evaluations of what goes by the name of politics today.

'Berlin and the Bundestag': Politics as formal institutions
Immediate associations young people have with 'politics' are frequently: formal political institutions ('the government', the 'Prime Minister', 'President' (national and EU), 'parliament', 'the assembly', 'local authorities', 'the monarchy'); particular national buildings or city districts in which these are housed ('Berlin and the Bundestag', 'Westminister') or particular, usually national but sometimes international, politicians. They might also include: the substance of politics e.g. 'laws and law making', 'government', 'ruling the state', 'the constitution' 'elections', 'decision-making'; particular policy areas e.g. ‘tax’, ‘immigration’, 'education'; or its agents e.g. 'politicians', 'parliamentary representatives', 'political parties', 'the media'. 'Citizens' were also mentioned as an association with politics suggesting that some respondents positioned ordinary people (non-politicians) also as agents of politics; this was mentioned by a very small number of respondents relative to the routine association of politics with professionals (politicians, members of parliament etc). In some cases there was a certain elision between institutions and agents especially in the equation of 'politics' and 'politicians' (DE-W, GB) and in Portugal there was a particularly strong tendency to associate the word 'politics' with specific individual politicians. In Georgia the political was associated also with key acts and events such as a change of government or other milestone political events and arguments as well as confrontations between political parties and 'political wars'.

Some young people interviewed associated politics with particular policies or challenges. Thus for a number of respondents in Portugal, 'politics' triggered thoughts of ‘austerity measures, whatever, crisis [...]’ (Alice, Lumiar, PT). Others noted that they associated politics either with domestic politics, 'what is happening internally in Russia' (Igor, Kupchino, RU) or, conversely, 'relations with foreign countries [...] well because politics isn’t only in Estonia, it’s global' (Karl, Tartu, EE). For others still, politics had a very local and banal connotation, bringing to mind, first and foremost, 'traffic rules, education [...] money, kindergarten' (Vivienne, Bremerhaven, DE-W) or 'sports' (Dato, Kutaisi, GE).

'Politics is [...] everything and everywhere': Beyond institutions

Immediate, often single word, associations with 'politics' are often followed, or in some cases replaced, by more general evaluative definitions of politics. These imagine politics, firstly, as a particular system of ordering society. Thus, in Croatia, respondents defined politics as 'public debate', or a means to solve problems in the community/state'. In the same vein, one respondent from Greece understands that ‘[...] politics provides the means for the evolution of society’ (Lakis, NF, GR) while an eastern German respondent states that 'Politics is a maturing process of any society' (Bjoern, Jena, DE-E ).This process is evaluated positively by a western German respondent who associated politics with 'A representation of different opinions (Liselotte, Bremen, DE-W) while Aapo, from Finland, also associates politics with parliament, which he envisages as a place where ‘some think about things in this way and others in that way and then they begin to discuss and try to construct compromises. Something that would be beneficial for all.’ (Aapo, Kuopio, FI). Similarly, in Spain politics was imagined as a sphere of cooperation, agreement, or consensus of various political entities or actors.

For me it would be political consensus [...] for me it would be consensus. Something institutionalised to the largest possible extent and consensus,
dialogue, reaching agreements, taking decisions to agree with the majority of stakeholders, with as many agents or social groups in the interaction as possible.

(Guillemin, Sant Cugat, ES)

‘Real’ democracy is defined as ‘the dialogue between members of the parliament and the citizens […] having a dialogue between the person responsible for taking decisions and governing the country and the citizens that have needs, problems, whatever. This is democracy’ (Gianna, AR, GR). This understanding of politics as a means of resolving competing claims and interests through discussion is succinctly expressed by an Estonian respondent: ‘politics in the wider sense is solving conflicts with words’ (Andrus, Tartu, EE). ‘Debate’ or ‘argument’ is the most prominent of the broader definitions of ‘the political’ among UK respondents also although, for them, debate is not always seen as productive and mutually beneficial:

[...] the image that comes into my head if you say politics, I just think of a, er, a bunch of idiots sat in the House of Commons, just shouting and heckling at each other. They argue about everything, they can never make their minds up. (Nick, Coventry, GB).

Other responses from the UK dataset also suggest that politics causes division and argument and therefore is best avoided while a Portuguese respondent characterised the 'talking' of politics not as 'debate' but 'dispute': 'Politics [...] politics, for me, is a dispute, isn’t it?' (Marcela, Lumiar, PT). In Georgia the association of politics with political tension and opposition was particularly prevalent; respondents were unanimous in asserting that different political opinions cause tensions and conflicts in Georgia today. Politics, it was said, caused people to argue, fight and verbally and physically abuse each other. Tensions had been especially high in the period leading up to the 2012 parliamentary elections and, in one of the fieldwork sites there had been incidents when members of opposing youth political parties had exchanged verbal abuse loudly and young activists had physically attacked one another. When reflecting on such events, respondents tended to apportion blame to both the government and the opposition or, indeed, to Georgian society in general for its failure to tolerate opposing views. Thus, in Georgia there was a strong association of politics with tension and hostility: ‘[When hearing the word ‘politics’, my peers] think of demonstrations, they are reminded of unrest, the tense relationship between government and opposing political parties.’ (Eka, Telavi, GE).

At this broader level, politics is also understood as the means by which power and influence are dispersed and negotiated in society: ‘I would definitely say that politics is the struggle for power and distribution of power, all the actors in politics, everything revolves around power [...]’ (Marko, Pešćenica, HR). A Portuguese respondent echoes this, calling politics 'Power. A matter of power, managing the various powers that exist in society [...]’ (Joaquim, Lumiar, PT). The prevailing distribution of power was described negatively by a UK respondent who, when he hears the word ‘politics’, thinks of ‘the ruling class, I mean the people who actually run the society alongside with other elements of the ruling class of society like enterprises, corporations, yeah it, that is politics for me' (Istvan, Coventry, GB).

'The political', for some respondents, is far from constrained within the four walls of formal political institutions or embodied by particular political figures. Rather, ‘Politics refers to every social event that has to do with people, is everything, it’s his history, it’s the system
that dominates him, it's the power relations. Generally it is everything. Politics is a very
general term.' (Themistoklis, AR, GR). In this view, politics is a matter not only of big but also
small decisions: 'Politics is all that is political. All the small decisions, like going shopping and
what you'll buy there. That is political as well.' (Anu, Kuopio, FI). In this sense 'politics is
everything' (Biel, Sant Cugat, ES) and 'everywhere': 'Politics is principally everything.
Everywhere and everywhere, coexistence of people can only be regulated by politics and is
regulated by politics.' (Alex, Jena, DE-E). UK respondents also consider 'everything is politics'
(Umair, Coventry, GB) and talked about societies and campaigns such as 'no to sexism'
(Natalie, Coventry, GB), LGBT activism, meetings and demonstrations, squatting and even
'illegal raves' (Pam, Coventry, GB) as examples of 'the political'.

For me political is not necessarily what most people consider as in, government,
or something like that, it can be anything: it can be society, it can be university,
it can be any sort of society, it can be a sports team, it can be all sorts. [...] that’s
the sort of thing that I think of. It’s just a lot of arguing and not a lot happening.
(Sebastian, Coventry, GB)

Notably this understanding of politics as residing in the everyday and outside the realm of
'formal' politics and political parties is less likely to be found in post-socialist societies. The
exceptions to the rule are the above statement by Alex and one Georgian respondent who
noted, not necessarily positively, that 'everything happening in the country today is
connected to politics and everything is politicised.' (Misha, Telavi, GE). Indeed one UK
respondent reflected upon the importance of regime context for understanding what might
constitute the political:

It depends how, oh, it’s hard to explain. [sighs] Like it depends on the country as
well, like if you said, like ‘political’ to me, like if I was living like in a communist
country, then politics [...] you would have no say in it, like, say, like, North Korea
for example, if you said ‘politics’, ‘politics’ to one of the, like, one of the people
living there, then you’ll probably have, like, no say in anything, like, just have to
listen. (Gilbert, Coventry, GB)

The question of whether there is a particularly strong form of ‘disavowal’ of the political in
post-socialist societies due to the heightened permeation of politics into the fabric of
society during the socialist period is returned to below (Section 3.1.3).

3.1.2 ‘Politics is one big dirty game’: Evaluations of politics, politicians and
parties

It is a well-established thesis that European societies are experiencing a crisis of
democratic legitimacy manifest in an erosion of trust in politicians, disidentification
with mainstream parties and growing criticism of key political institutions, albeit
alongside continued support for the basic principles of democracy (Hay, 2007). While
finding no evidence of a consistent erosion of system support rooted in a decline in
feelings of political legitimacy, Pippa Norris (2011: 4-6) argues that nonetheless
contemporary societies are characterised by a ‘democratic deficit’ rooted in the
divergence between levels of satisfaction with the performance of democracy and
public aspirations. This is confirmed by MYPLACE survey data. Even in those countries
where young respondents described their society in positive terms or expressed pride in their democracy (Finland, Denmark or Germany), they were highly disappointed in politicians, political parties and the political elite in general. Trust in national parliaments, measured on a 0-10 scale, showed a mean of only 4.50, with just ten of the 30 research locations (each of two locations in Denmark, Finland, Georgia, plus all four German locations) scoring above 5.0. Trust in parties was even lower with an overall mean of 3.75 on the same scale. Based on responses in agreement or disagreement with two statements - ‘Politicians are corrupt’ and ‘The rich have too much influence over politics’ - a scale to measure attitudes to politicians and politics was constructed. On this scale of 0-8 (where 0 = negative views and 8 = positive views), the mean score for respondents across all 30 locations in Europe was 2.46, falling as low as 1.14 (in Greece) and rising only as high as 4.55 (in Denmark)3.

The follow up interviews with the subset of survey respondents analysed in this report confirm that beneath this lack of trust lies an almost universally negative evaluation of the agents of politics (politicians, political parties)4. In this subsection the texture of these negative narratives is explored. This is done, firstly, thematically. Taking the most prominent narratives in terms of the number of references and distribution across the locations studied, we explore narratives of politicians and parties as: removed and distant from real problems; self-interested and self-serving; corrupt; deceitful (don’t keep promises); ineffective (‘do nothing’); and indistinguishable from one another (‘all the same’). Given that positive evaluations are encountered significantly less frequently, these are considered together rather than thematically disaggregated. Secondly, distinctions are made within discrete narratives between negative evaluations of politicians and parties that: involve a degree of intentionality in wrongdoing, i.e. acts perpetrated by politicians or other political entities at the expense of a third party or the general public; and those that refer to structural relations as being the root cause of the perceived behaviour. The first three of these narratives – politicians as a distant, elite, group, as self-interested and self-serving, are interlocking. The fourth narrative – politicians are dishonest or fail to keep their promises – when added to the mix shapes the wider metaphor of politics as ‘dirty’; as one respondent from Georgia puts it ‘the whole society concurs that politics is one big dirty game.’ (Sopo, Kutaisi, GE).

‘People that are politicians are people that can afford to be politicians’: Politicians as distant from real problems and real people

The perception of politicians as ‘distant’ from real people and their problems is neither a universal nor the most frequently cited association with politicians; it is considered first because it establishes the important, but often unspoken, understanding of politicians as a distinct and separate social stratum and thus marks the ‘they’ to which other associations discussed below are attached. In line with their consistently more class-based narratives,

3 The two Greek locations showed the most negative attitudes, the lowest score of the two is cited here. The two Danish locations demonstrated the most positive attitudes, the highest score is taken here.

4 It is worth noting here that, in contrast, criticism of the substance of politics e.g. the legislative process is relatively rare. Exceptions are the UK and Russia where there is criticism of parliament wasting its time on ‘ridiculous’ laws such as having to have your dog on a lead in a park (UK) or non-propaganda of homosexuality to minors (Russia) as well as more general criticism of legislation being introduced reactively (UK).
this association with politicians is particularly prevalent among UK respondents whose perceptions of politicians as ‘out of touch’ with ordinary people both explicitly and implicitly suggest that politicians come from ‘privileged’ backgrounds and do not understand ‘the average person’.

I wouldn’t want to ever ally with any of the political parties, although if I had to, it’d probably be Labour, but I still don’t really like them. They’re all, half of them are millionaires, and they stand for not, they stand for like the working people apparently. They’re all millionaires, they’re all from Oxford and Cambridge and Eton. I didn’t go there. (Gemma, Coventry, GB)

The sense that politicians are a class apart has been strengthened recently due to widespread discussion of the coalition government being heavily dominated by individuals coming from top public schools (‘Eton’) and elite universities (‘Oxford and Cambridge’). This privileged background renders politicians, in the eyes of respondents, incapable of understanding ‘ordinary’ lives and the social circumstances and tensions experienced within local communities.

Right now, the politicians are like football players in the sense that they are people who [...] live in another world. They’ve got loads of money that I can’t even begin to imagine [...]. (Ernesto, Sant Cugat, ES)

I don’t think they really understand it because they wouldn’t, they live in a completely separate world to what we live in. I think, you know, obviously they know about immigration and things like that ‘cause they know people are coming into the country and they see it as a number though, they don’t see [...] the tension between people I suppose [...] they’ve got like a shielded life, they’ve, you know, you’ve had money, so you’ve, you know, you can choose what you want to do, through education, through, you know, live [...] quite guarded lives, I’d say and they, they’re the ones that are, you know, trying to come out with like rules and regulations about certain things when they don’t really know. (Susan, Coventry, GB)

The notion of the ‘guarded’ lives of the political elite is employed in a literal sense by a Russian respondent, who compares photographs she has seen of other political leaders being approached by the people with the Russian President and Prime Minister: ‘Our Medvedev or our Putin are always with a guard and even children can’t come close to them’ (Raisa, Kupchino, RU). This physical separation of politicians from ‘the people’ is indicative of the wider belief that politicians who come from a different social background do not represent the interests of lower class people (Eufrozina, Sopron, HU) and that the public good would be better served by ‘somebody that’s more for us’. Craig uses the metaphor of ‘blue blood’ to explain the obstacles to people like him entering politics:

Because I don’t, I haven’t got the right blood, my blood ain’t blue, do you know what I mean? And [...] I think that’s something they need to sort out ‘cause I reckon if you could get somebody in there who’s been to a council estate. [...] That’s lived with nothing, do you know what I mean? I reckon a party would go a long way, because they know what sort of things are really affect the poor [...] (Craig, Nuneaton, GB)
Putting it simply, the political class is self-selecting: ‘People that are politicians are people that can afford to be politicians’ (Gemma, Coventry, GB).

‘Out for number one’: The distortion of politics

In the minds of interviewees from across the locations included in the MYPLACE study, politicians are not only self-selected but self-interested and self-serving.

For some this ‘self-interest’ is envisaged as material or financial: ‘all [politicians] think about are their pockets and stomachs’ (Kote, Kutaisi, GE). Politicians are envisaged as doing things ‘for their own profit’ (Masha, Vyborg, RU) and concerned only with ‘filling their pockets’ (Ada, Rīga, LV). They are perceived as pursuing their own interest also in terms of status or position. Thus they act in order to secure ‘greater power’ (Đuro, Pešćenica, HR) or cushy position: ‘politics means a comfy leather chair and giving out orders from that chair’ (Shorena, Telavi, GE). This leads to a utilitarian attitude to politics and people whereby ‘politicians are only interested in our votes’ (Nancy, Bremerhaven, DE-W). Politicians are envisaged as those who ‘look out only for themselves’ (Mirta, Pešćenica, HR), act only ‘for their own benefit’ (Masha, Vyborg, RU) or ‘for themselves’ (Ivan, Trnava, SK).

What is important here is not that politicians are rewarded, materially and socially, for their efforts but the perception that in seeking to serve their own interest they neglect the interests of those they are meant to represent. As Sally puts it ‘they’re out for number one, not anybody else’ (Sally, Nuneaton, GB) or as Nika says, ‘politicians are only interested in themselves and [...] no one worries about the people’ (Nika, Kutaisi, GE). In this sense politicians have ceased to work for the benefit of the public and have lost ‘any noble purpose’ (Kristel, Tartu, EE). This confirms what Hay (2007: 1-2) considers to be a profound shift in understandings of ‘politics’ and the ‘political’ away from the pursuit of the collective good to the enactment of individual interests. This distortion of the meaning of politics is captured succinctly by Una:

A politician is a person who stands for the interests of people and that’s his job. And the fact that we live in a society where that has become distorted, where politics is used as an instrument for self-promotion, for acquiring money and that [...] I don’t accept it. That’s not politics at all for me. Politics is something positive to me. (Una, Pešćenica, HR)

This vision of an ‘other’ politics driven by a striving for the collective good is confirmed by other respondents. For Gyon, ‘If someone is in politics or a political party, he should listen to the voice of public and people because everything he does should be aimed for the people’ (Gyon, Rimavska Sobota, SK) while Cvijeta calls for politicians to ‘unite and work for the welfare of citizens and not [...] for themselves’ (Cvijeta, Podsljeme, HR). It is encapsulated in Ntaizi’s understanding of democracy through the concept of ‘public good’:

Democracy contains the concept of commons, the concept of public good. This means the seamless and direct participation of the majority of society in the management of public issues. (Ntaizi, AR, GR)

‘A way to get rich’: Politics, power and corruption
Once the fundamental principle of politics as the pursuit of public not private interest is undermined, it is a short step to perceiving the whole system as corrupt. Respondents’ perceptions of corruption reveal most starkly the distinction between individual wrong doing (intentionality) and systemic problems. At the individual level, respondents perceive politics as ‘a way to get rich’ (Oleg, Kupchino, RU). Politicians are said to ‘steal’ (Astra, Podsljeme, HR) and be motivated by the principle, ‘I came to power and I will now abuse this power’ (Dana, Vyborg, RU). In the UK associations of corruption relate primarily to politicians’ misuse of expenses; this must be read in the context of a series of high profile scandals and a fundamental reform of the system of expenses claims in the UK which have embedded the notion that politicians exploit the privilege of office. Thus Melanie explains ‘that politics is seen in quite a negative light’ because ‘you hear about them laundering money or, erm, buying second houses or money going missing or, touching up the female workers and stuff like that’ (Melanie, Nuneaton, GB). These scandals also lead Darrell to conclude, ‘I don’t think you ever get a fully honest politician now, it’s, a lot, everyone says it’s corrupt’ (Darrell, Nuneaton, GB). Narratives of respondents in Spain are very similar; as a result of widespread media coverage of cases, people in public office are perceived as open to ‘the temptation’ of corruption (David, Vic, ES) while the wider system fails to punish those who succumb (Paula, Vic, ES). This leads to the sense that power will always corrupt:

I think that anyone who comes to power will get corrupted. I’m sure because a builder will come and will say, ‘Listen, I’ll pay for an all-expense paid trip to the Maldives for you if you re-zone this land.’ I’m sure that everyone gets corrupted. And then, no party, I don’t believe in the integrity of anyone. (Eric, Sant Cugat, ES)

Similarly in Croatia, Estonia and Finland, widespread media and public discussion of cases of corruption and other criminal acts of former leading politicians (including the former Prime Minister who was on trial in Croatia at the time of research) had shaped highly negative opinions about individual politicians or parties. As Kim spells out, this cannot but undermine trust in politicians and politics more generally: ‘There have been cases of corruption, which have been substantiated as well, during the last few years. I’m sure that it has decreased trust in parliament and these politicians.’ (Kim, PK, FI).

Individual abuse of power in this way comes to define the whole political system, expressed in respondents’ immediate association of politics with ‘corruption, lies and so on’ (Richard, Rostock, DE-E) or ‘corruption and stealing’ (Yan, Kupchino, RU). As Lhda spells out: ‘I associate Greek politics with a state of corruption and clientelism [...] with what else? People that came into power and embezzled state money, public wealth’ (Lhda, NF, GR). Such clientelism is identified in the UK system too:

 [...] Lib Dems, Conservatives, Lib Dems, Labour, all of them, they ain’t out for the average person, they’re out for the rich people that pay, really pay them, do you know what I mean, like? Give them little back-handers. Cause it’s blatantly obvious back-handers does happen in our politics, do you know what I mean, it’s just not as well-known as other countries. We’re hypocrites, like our country, our government are so hypocritical, look at what David Cameron’s now, he’s gone off selling our planes and stuff to countries where, it’s a known fact what they’re doing to their own people, do you know what I mean? (Craig, Nuneaton, GB)
It is also implied in eastern Germany where the discussion of corruption is mainly related to the questioning of the practice of lobbying:

I’m not a friend of the FDP at all. Like it all started once being social and liberal. But I think that nowadays they just follow the money [...] It’s a bit like in the American system. I believe they are guided by lobbyists. (Thorsten, Rostock, DE-E).

In some cases, respondents extend this critique to what they consider to be the too powerful influence of business and financial institutions on politics.

I feel that states have some power but companies have even more power nowadays. You know, that banks are not allowed to fall and states support the banks, because they play an important role in the economy and the whole system would be crashed. [...] The companies are really powerful in the world and I think it almost could be better to vote for companies instead of states. (Ismo, Kuopio, FI)

This, for Kristijanko, destroys the very meaning of politics: ‘this is the worst thing, when corporations start to strongly influence the state - then really the purpose of politics disappears’ (Kristijanko, HR)

At this systemic level, capital is seen to be intertwined with politics in a way that has a corrupting impact. This is particularly clearly articulated by respondents from Spain. Pere complains that politicians no longer care about political ideals but are ‘at the beck and call of the banks’ (Pere, Vic, ES) while Ernesto sees it as undermining democracy itself.

It’s a democracy, but it’s not a real democracy. We are all under the yoke of capital, capital marks what [the people] want the politicians to do, and the politicians do everything to continue on top and that people rot. (Ernesto, Sant Cugat, ES)

In both Croatia and Spain, politics is seen as being overdetermined by the economy: ‘the national sphere is totally controlled by the economy, there is nothing that can be done’ (Manel, Vic, ES). For others, this economic power is wielded from outside the country. Thus for one Greek respondent financial debt means that Greek politics is subservient to the interests of other countries:

I think the government does nothing to deal with social problems and only tries to serve the interest of other countries, for example of Germany, and I think the government is just a tool in the hands of bigger countries. (Garyfallos, AR, GR)

A respondent from Hungary also sees the EU and IMF as defining the scope of political agendas offered nationally:

I also believe that the politicians have their hands bound also, because the IMF, EU bind their hands. But if they are well aware that they have their hands bound, they should not promise things that they know the EU would attack. (Klára, Sopron, HU)

However, only in rare cases – mostly found among respondents in Hungary – do these concerns about the intertwining of political and economic power lead to more elaborate
'conspiracy theories' involving the influence of, international powers such as the Freemasons, oil companies and Israel (Lujza, Sopron, HU).

It should be noted, finally that respondents also occasionally refute widespread views that politics and politicians are corrupt. Lasse noted proudly that Finland was in the ‘top 5’ of countries in terms of scores on non-corruption (Lasse, PK, FI) while a respondent from eastern Germany argues, ‘I don’t think that Germany is very corrupt like for example Egypt [...] Basically, you’ve got the opportunity to more or less vote them out of office, if someone is in power who you think is incredibly corrupt.’ (Gülcan, Jena, DE-E). Others consider that it is ‘understandable that corruption is widespread in a large country’ like Russia (Natalia, Vyborg, RU) or simply an unavoidable element of democracy: ‘[…] corruption is something that follows democracy. Not all the people are perfect, they can sometimes succumb and that is understandable. It isn’t like I approve, but I can understand.’ (Dean, Podsljeme, HR).

'Politicians think that politics is giving out promises': Politics as the art of dissembling

Another almost universally negative perception of politicians is that they are, at worst ‘liars’ and ‘hypocrites’ and, at best, skilled in the art of dissembling.5

The most common complaint is that politicians fail to fulfil promises they make prior to election (Manda, Pešćenica, HR; Venta, Rīga, LV; Jana, Jozef, Trnava, SK; Ríta, Coventry, GB; Duncan, Nuneaton, GB; Kote, Eva, Kutaisi, GE; Daniel, Jena, DE-E; Dominik, Jenea, Nils and Nora, Rostock, DE-E; Hunor, Ózd, HU; Ismo, Aira, Kuopio, FI; Petr, Vyborg, RU; Eric, Sant Cugat, ES, Myrana, NF, GR). This mode of engagement with the electorate appears insulting to their intelligence for one respondent since it is obvious that the country does not have the financial capacity on which such promises could be made: ‘My opinion about politicians is that they say a lot, of which less than the half is true. Or they say things that they simply cannot fulfil [...] because the country does not have the financial background to do it (András, Ózd, HU). Where strong intention is imputed to politicians then over-promising may be expressed as 'manipulation' by politicians (Alla, Daugavpils, LV; András, Ózd, HU). However, for others exaggerated promises have become systemic in politics:

That’s how they [politicians] think [...] they are supposedly taking care of people, while everything is actually very different. Politicians think that politics is giving out promises [...] I’ll go there, make a promise. (Bidzina, Telavi, GE).

This means that ‘being honest in politics is very difficult’ (Serafima, Kupchino, RU) and leads to a ‘rift, between the government and people […] a kind of distrust has arisen’ (Ivari, Tartu, EE) which political parties have failed to address by making the people believe in them (Viviane, Lumiar, PT). This is spelled out by Vincent talking about his disappointment with the coalition government:

[...] they’ve not done nothing for the country – they said they were gonna rebuild the economy, they said they were gonna get everyone working, they’re gonna rebuild the country – gonna rebuild Great Britain [...] they’re all mouth and no action, d’ you know what I mean. (Vincent, Coventry, GB)

5 The only countries where such statements were not recorded in interview narratives were Denmark and western Germany.
Across Europe, young people thus understand politics as a kind of ‘game’ or ‘performance’ (Madis, Rīga, LV) in which politicians dissemble to gain votes but do not keep their promises:

 [...] there are lot of hidden games in politics for sure [laughs]. They make promises and they collect [support] but there’s no visible results at the end of the day. (Ursula, Kuopio, FI)

This sentiment is repeated by respondents from southern Europe: ‘politics in Portugal is seen as a game, a strategy game’ (António, Barreiro, PT), while in Greece “The way things are nowadays, politics means that certain people follow a specific strategy’ (Sissy, NF, GR).

The media is often implicated as a key actor in the ‘game’ of politics (Riku, PK, FI). Niilo complains that televised parliamentary debates are too theatrical and would prefer ‘people [...] tell their views in proper way [...] they should leave this sort of acting out’ (Niilo, PK, FI).

Indeed, Inga notes that, although she had been impressed by the ideas of a particular presidential candidate whom she had heard on television, she had no confidence in what she could take from that:

I understand that all this is just like a game in order to get to the top and to become leader. I don’t know what ideas he has in fact because I don’t know whether to judge on things that are written or what he says on TV. What he said, I liked, but these are just words not deeds. (Inga, Vyborg, RU)

Alla sees politics as a show or game in which scandal surrounding an individual is milked for PR purposes (Alla, Kupchino, RU) while Lauri also compares politics to the reality TV show ‘Big Brother’ and suggests that this dramatisation of politics has made politicians more reactive in their approach, paying attention only to those issues in the public eye at the moment and not addressing long-term problems (Lauri, PK, FI). In the UK respondents suggest that the importance of the media to political success means that politicians recognise the ‘importance of image’ and learn to ‘say what they think the electorate want to hear’ (which is interpreted as manipulative and lacking in conviction). One concrete example given concerned how the Deputy Prime Minister had appeared to tailor how he described a new policy on parental leave to different social constituencies:

When they were announcing the other week about the split paternity slash maternity leave [...] How you can now divide it between, however you like [...] between both the parents and Nick Clegg [...] had an interview on every news channel going and it seemed to differ what he said depending on the news channel. I mean I know that you’ve got different audiences [...] on different news channels like one may be more working class or whatever. (Cara, Nuneaton, GB)

This undermines the authenticity of a party and its messages as well as leading to the questioning of the integrity of politicians.

If you think about the ways they [politicians] talk - these are rehearsed speeches. [...]There is something missing and often that is a sort of authenticity or consistency. There is something fishy in it. (Atte, Kuopio, FI)

Integrity is further questioned in Spain and Estonia by the failure of politicians to take responsibility (e.g. resign) for mistakes they make and a broader impunity embedded in the
political system. In former socialist countries (Estonia, Croatia), integrity might also be compromised if politicians had connections to the former communist regimes.

‘Useless talk’: Politics as the art of doing nothing

The almost universal dismissal of politics and the political is a product not only of its resignification as a sphere of self-interest rather than collective good, but is linked also to the challenges of globalisation that mean political actors themselves have decreasing capacity to effect change (Hay, 2007: 5). This is expressed in the belief that politicians literally ‘do nothing’. Thus, in Hungary, parliamentary representatives are described as ‘on iwiw [Hungarian social media site], play solitaire’ (Helga, Sopron, HU) whilst in parliament and the Croatian president is characterised as redundant: ‘[…] we don’t need the president. I don’t even know what our president does and why we have him at all’ (Jurkan, Podsljeme, HR).

More common is a concern that politicians are ‘all talk’. Thus politicians in Slovakia, Russia, Finland, Denmark, Latvia and Hungary are all described as engaging in ‘useless talk’ (Niina, PK, FI) that ‘never solves anything (Barbora, Rimavska Sobota, SK). In relation specifically to youth issues, for example, Otto notes:

They could do something to improve the lives of young people. They talk plenty about these issues but if you think what kind of effort they really put into these issues. That is another story. (Otto, Kuopio, FI)

One respondent goes so far as to claim politics creates rather than solves social problems (Liba, Rīga, LV).

‘The same shit in different packages’: Political parties

The perception that political parties are ‘all the same’ is almost universal (absences are confined to Greece and eastern Germany6). However, the declaration that ‘[parties are] the same shit in different packages.’ (Reetta, PK, FI) has two dimensions, which are sometimes, but not always, distinguished by respondents: a descriptive statement that there is little to differentiate parties in terms of ideology or policy; and an evaluative statement implying that they are ‘all as bad as each other’. In this subsection responses along both dimensions are outlined although extensive discussion of the implications of the blurring of ideological distinctions between parties and associations with particular ideologies as well as recognition of ‘left’ and ‘right’ in politics are discussed in Sections 3.1.3 and 3.1.4.

In Croatia, just over half of interviewees explicitly stated that there are no longer any significant differences between the major parties: ‘There are no significant differences between the parties, they all think the same. […] And in fact I think the biggest problem is that there are no differences.’ (Petar, Podsljeme, HR). In Estonia there was a widespread view that parties in the country were largely similar although respondents differed on the question of whether this was a good or bad thing: for some it was positive because it meant a change of ruling party would not lead to major change; for others the similarity restricted

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6 In Denmark, however, references to the lack of ideological differentiation attribute it to the lack of knowledge of respondents rather than being an accurate descriptor of the political spectrum.
political choice. In Georgia too the view was expressed that ‘all [political parties] have the same position, there is not much ideological difference between them.’ (Nata, Kutaisi, GE). In Spain, a number of respondents noted that the major political parties were becoming similar in terms of the content of their policies, especially economic policies, and that although they acted differently publically, they ultimately worked together to put forward similar policies. Among UK respondents, the policy areas identified as being ‘the same’ across parties were immigration (Tanya, Coventry, GB) and foreign policy (Tariq, Coventry; David, Nuneaton, GB). Some respondents did not identify any ideological or policy differences between parties or any clear right-left political spectrum (Barry, Cara, David, Nuneaton, GB). This led Cara to suggest that in the future coalition governments would become the norm (Cara, Nuneaton, GB). This growing similarity was explained by the fact that parties recycled ideas from the past and from each other or because the possibility for ideological distinctiveness was reduced by the fact that politicians came from an increasingly narrow social pool (David, Nuneaton, GB). In Russia, ideological differentiation was not talked about in detail but a number of respondents noted the absence of any ‘alternative’ politically to Putin: ‘Maybe that is why Putin is still the president. Because there is no one who could say anything in contrast.’ (Natasha, Kupchino, RU).

In terms of the evaluative dimension, respondents were often short and not very sweet: ‘Same scum’ (Astra, Podsljeme, CR). Respondents in Hungary identified ‘good and bad in all of them’ and that ‘all say the same just with a little different garnish.’ (Odett, Emma, Sopron, HU). Respondents in Spain viewed all parties and their representatives in public office as equally susceptible to (and often equally guilty of) corruption while in the UK parties and politicians were considered to be necessarily the same because ultimately they are motivated by money: ‘[…] I just feel they are all the same. They all just want one thing, a pay check at the end of the month.’ (Rachael, Nuneaton, GB).

It should also be noted, however, that some respondents in some locations emphasised that parties were not ‘all the same’. This was particularly true of respondents from Estonia, where policy differences between parties were discussed (Karmen, Tartu, EE). In Latvia it was also noted that ‘different parties promise something new, different and that’s why they differ’ (Anatols, Daugavpils, LV). Such views were also evident among respondents from Finland and the UK although in latter case this was a minority position (Tariq, Umair, Krys, Taminder, Vera, Sonya, Coventry, GB) — more thought parties were ‘all the same’.

‘The political is absolutely a positive word’: Positive evaluations of politics, parties and politicians

There are, however, positive evaluations of politics in general and more specific positive statements about parties and politicians.

Positive evaluations refer to the recognition of the importance of politics: ‘[…] politics is important for your life. In the sense that it influences you, it influences you a lot.’ (Ernest, Sant Cugat, ES). For Reeta too, ‘the political is absolutely a positive word, nothing negative in the word. A person who makes it happen […]’ (Reetta, PK, FI). Indeed, respondents from the locations in Finland were much more likely to evaluate politics positively than other respondents. Aila describes politics in Finland as characterised by ‘transparency’: ‘you can
see who are making the decisions and what they decided and you are able to have an influence on such issues to some extent’ (Aila, Kuopio, FI). Direct self-identification as a 'political person' is found only among respondents in Finland also. For example, Otto explains his positive associations with 'politics' thus: ‘Well I don’t see any negative about it because I try to be a political person myself and I am committed and have participated in [political party] activities. So it [political] is a positive term not anything negative.’ (Otto, Kuopio, FI). Despite the general view that politics was 'dirty' expressed in Georgia, there were also some positive evaluations of politics. One respondent credited politics with being responsible for attaining freedom, another associated it with healthy competition and debate, while a third compared it to the game of basketball and argued that politics too can be played with dignity.

Unlike with negative attitudes, positive associations with politics and politicians do not coalesce around clear focal points that are articulated across the participating countries. Thus, positive associations are often related to specific parties that respondents express their closeness to or support for (Denmark, Russia). Respondents might also express admiration of, or support for, individual politicians, past or present (UK, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Russia, Denmark). In the UK, when positive statements are made about specific politicians, it is local politicians who come out best and this is linked to an ability to see a direct response to approaches made to them. Somewhat ironically, this admiration confirms that politicians do not always work above board:

She [deputy] is very kind. We know her from primary school. She is a friend of our mothers. She always notifies us when cops do raids so that we know and they do not get us. She gives advice, help free, just a kind woman who it is now rare to meet.’ (Natan, Kupchino, Russia)

The most frequently mentioned positive association is that politicians 'deal with social issues' and 'take care of people'; a direct refutation of the narrative noted above that they 'do nothing' and are unable to solve social problems. This quality is mentioned as evident among parties and politicians by respondents in locations in Slovakia, Russia, eastern Germany, Georgia, Finland, Estonia and Denmark suggesting a clustering of the significance of this social protection function of the state in Nordic and post-socialist countries: ‘[The positive thing] about politics is that politicians as well as parties in general try to deal with issues politically and to take care of people.’ (Zezva, Telavi, GE). UK respondents also see politicians as 'doing their best' to resolve current problems: ‘I think the government are trying to do things to try and help the situation like trying to get unemployed people back into work’ (Rosemary, Nuneaton, GB).

Politicians are credited sometimes with being prepared to take on more responsibility than the ordinary person (Estonia). And respondents in Finland and Greece note that they cannot be seen as the only ones to blame for current problems (corporations and financial institutions are also implicated) and that the people who elect them must also take responsibility: ‘[...] we voted for them, we gave our support to these political parties all these years, and these politicians. [...] so we are responsible as well.’ (Violeta, NF, GR).

Parties are also seen positively if they 'say what they think' (Denmark, Hungary, UK, Estonia, eastern Germany) although these evaluations are more likely to be made in relation to small and often radical parties and is thus discussed in Section 3.4. Countering the strong discourse noted above that parties and politicians act out of their own self-interest and no
longer work in the public interest, a small number of respondents believe that they 'work hard' (Kaija, PK, FI) and 'on behalf of us' (Keijo, PK, FI): 'I would say that they take a lot of good decisions and they work hard for a better society.' (Riku, PK, FI). This is something mentioned exclusively by respondents from locations in Finland with the exception of one respondent from Spain who describes how he was brought up to think of politics as oriented towards improving the wellbeing of all:

When I was younger, politics was defined to me as a group of people that has the capacity of leadership, of decision-making, that is intelligent, knows what they are doing [...] and that we all vote for those whom we think would do this best. (Andrea, Sant Cugat, ES)

In this vein, there is a small group of interviewees who consider politicians 'wise', 'clever' or highly skilled in their profession (Denmark, Hungary, Georgia, UK) and even motivated by good intentions not self-interest:

And it’s a shame because I’m convinced that there are very competent politicians, who believe a lot, who want to build a better world. There are a lot of people who enter politics with the best of intentions. (Adria, Vic, ES)

Finally, it is worth noting here that in talking about ideal or admired politicians, respondents identified ‘passion’ as a positive attribute: ‘If someone wants to be a politician they should have passion. Passion for their country, for their ideas. Not fanaticism, just passion’. (Afroxilanthi, AR, GR). This is reflected also in positive characteristics associated by UK respondents, with politicians from different ends of the political spectrum: Margaret Thatcher; and Tony Blair. Both were said to have demonstrated strength, commitment to ‘doing something’, ‘trying their best’ and ‘passion’ even when the policies they implemented were seen to be ‘wrong’: ‘Blair had fight [...] he was passionate about his job’ (Craig, Nuneaton, GB). The populist mayor of Zagreb was also praised for his feistiness: ‘With our mayor Milan Bandić, you can see for sure that he may not be the most educated person [...] but with him you can see that toughness and combativeness.’ (Dodo, Pešćenica, HR)

Interestingly, expressions of what constituted the ideal politician or party focused, on the one hand, on this notion of strong and firm leadership and ability to be ‘tough’ and act in the interests of the majority when necessary (EE, UK) and, on the other, on the capacity to be caring towards people (EE, FI, HR, RU):

Well, politics should be more socially oriented, I mean that they should be more for the people and their needs, I don’t know how to say it. I think that we should care more for the people, for the sick and for people in need of help [...] (Đuro, Pešćenica, HR)

The ideal combination of these qualities is articulated by Alina: ‘He has to have a strong core, not only a proper view on things. He has to be strong, because money, power, they corrupt. He should stand out.’ (Alina, Kupchino, Russia). Other positive qualities mentioned include: having new ideas (FI, CR, PT); being broadminded and sophisticated (EE); honesty and transparency (EE); being just and mindful of other people (EE); being calm, stable and balanced (EE); and being a ‘real’, authentic, person (GB).
3.1.3 Standing up or opting out? Politics, engagement and disavowal

I feel like many people of my age; a complete disaffection with politics, at least with that which surrounds me [...]. (Andrea, Sant Cugat, ES)

Young people across Europe have disassociated themselves from formal politics. This disassociation is reflected in a clear decline in electoral and other forms of traditional institutional political participation (Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Mair and van Biezen, 2001; Norris, 2003). While this reflects a general population trend, the withdrawal from formal politics has been especially intense among young people; a number of studies have shown that the youngest generations tend to vote less (Kimberlee, 2002; Wattenberg, 2006) and to participate less in formal political organisations such as parties and trades unions (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). In this sub-section of the report, the responses of young people to disaffection with formal politics are considered. It starts with a brief consideration of interviewees' own statements on whether this disaffection is a particularly youthful phenomenon before considering three broad responses to it. The first is ‘apathy’, or more accurately, a declared lack of interest in public affairs and/or a sense of absence of personal efficacy concerning the political process (Wattenberg, 2006; Blais et al., 2004) which may also be expressed as an ‘apolitical’ position. Secondly, it considers evidence of a more strongly articulated ‘disavowal’ of politics that might constitute, in itself, a ‘politics of youthful anti-politics’, consisting in a refusal to care about institutionalised politics while ‘unintentionally acting very politically by depriving politics of attention, labour, consent and power’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 158). It considers here the significance of the apparent loss of purchase for young people of distinctive political ideologies. Finally it considers the embracing and reclaiming of politics as a third response of young people who are not ‘apathetic’ but ‘engaged sceptics’ (Henn and Foard, 2014: 362). Activism itself is considered in detail in Section 3.2 of this report; here, therefore, the discussion is confined to general attitudes reflecting an interest in, and embracing of, politics notwithstanding critical attitudes towards its current constitution.

Politics: no place for the young

The decline in young people’s engagement in institutional activities has been explained as a consequence of the political system being unreceptive to young people’s demands or being perceived as such by them (Marsh et al., 2007; Henn et al., 2005). MYPLACE interviews confirm that young people feel that ‘youth is underestimated in politics, only old people sit there’ (Vaclav, Trnava, SK). The same sentiment is expressed by a UK respondent who, when asked what she visualises when she calls politics ‘boring’, explains, ‘I’m thinking like all the old people in the House of Parliament, or Commons […] or whatever it’s called, just doing nothing, just sitting there talking really’ (Fiona, Nuneaton, GB). Thus, the very fact of young people being more present and visible in politics would make politics more attractive to young people. This is because young people engaged in politics are seen to be more willing to state their ideological positions (Erja, Kuopio, FI), more collaborative and ‘open-minded’ (Otto, Kuopio, FI) as well as more realistic and ‘grounded’ than those who have been in politics a long time (Felix, Nuneaton, GB). However, there is also a suggestion that the current generation of youth has become ‘distant from politics’ because in contrast to older generations who feel themselves to be part of events happening at the time, ‘we, today, think that the policy is already defined and built, and I think that our generation feels no
 obligation to participate’ (Luís, Barreiro, PT).

‘It’s like “whatever” for me: Apathy, indifference or apolitics?

[...] our generation largely lacks any interest, [they are] apathetic, they are not interested in anything and then they hide their own lack of information with that cynical attitude (Una, Pešćenica, HR)

As is evident from the earlier discussion of negative associations with politics and the political, part of the problem is that politics appear ‘remote and irrelevant’ (Kimberlee, 2002: 90) or overly complex and populated by a professional political elite concerned with pursuing a narrow self-serving agenda (Henn and Foard, 2014: 367).

This study confirmed that many young people declared themselves ‘disinterested’ in politics. Classically, politics is described as ‘boring’ (Gianna, Nuneaton, GB; Keijo, PK, FI) or ‘kind of dusty’ (Ingeborg, Bremen, DE-W). Respondents often state simply that they are ‘not interested’ in politics (Graça, Lumiár, PT; Rati, Telavi, GE; Dodo, Pešćenica, HR; Matej, Pešćenica, HR). Many respondents admit that they are uninformed about politics, in some cases indicating that lack of interest and lack of knowledge constitute a vicious circle:

No. I haven’t voted and probably won’t vote in the near future. I’m not interested. All those parties we have, I don’t have a clue which is which. No need to explain to me, I don’t get it. And when I’m not interested in it, I don’t like to know anything about it. So it’s like ‘whatever’ for me. (Nelli, PK, FI)

A respondent from Spain also described his first association with the term politics as being ‘indifference’ (Marc, Vic, ES). Politicians, however, are also criticised for failing to talk about youth issues more during election campaigns; ‘There are many young voters who are considering whether they will vote or not. It would be easier to find one’s own party if they would say something in debates about what they think about young people.’ (Esa, Kuopio, FI). One Russian respondent criticises other young people, declaring ‘[...] people should know about and understand what they are living for. They should understand politics, how our government is formed, and they should know history. It seems right to me. Not for everyone to be like a flock of sheep who are ruled by the shepherd.’ (Natasha, Kupchino, RU).

More frequent, however, are complaints that politics is difficult to understand: ‘[...] politics, I don’t get it. I cannot follow how it works’ (Dieter, Bremen, DE-W). Respondents in Finland described politics as ‘a bit difficult' (Kari, PK, FI) and ‘complex and a bit hard to understand' (Anne, Kuopio, FI) while Ersh, from Greece, admits that he gets 'confused' by politics and 'cannot make sense of it.' (Ersh, AR, GR). Sometimes respondents recognise that this is because they themselves lack political knowledge (Miriam, Rimavska Sobota, SK; Rita, Vyborg, RU; Belo, Rimavska Sobota, SK) or information (Lali, Telavi, GE; Lida, Kuopio, FI; Nastya, Kupchino, RU; Irina, Kupchino, RU).

Others, however, feel distanced from the world of politics by the language in which it is articulated. This is something expressed particularly strongly by UK respondents who say that the language and terminology of politics are off-putting, obfuscate rather than illuminate political process and debate and prevent young people from getting involved.
I don't know, I think the language of politics, much like the language of anything, it can be, erm, it can be damaging, I think it stops some people from getting involved, if they don't understand the terminology, I think it can make it quite difficult, for some people, to interact with it. (Pam, Coventry, GB)

Politicians 'use so many big words' (Ella, Nuneaton, GB) and a language that 'isn't really connecting with' young people (Emily, Nuneaton, GB). Beth also says that politics is 'quite complicated, I don't understand a lot of it [...] it's not made easy to understand from the beginning with younger people' (Beth, Nuneaton, GB). And Chloe had stopped watching the news because 'I don't really understand. Like, when they talk all political' (Chloe, Nuneaton, GB). This sentiment is echoed but more critically by a respondent from Russia: 'There isn't one politician who talks in normal language. They use their own language that nobody can understand. It makes you sick to listen to such talk about nothing.' (Nastya, Kupchino, Russia). This is echoed by Noora, who notes:

Political means to me to talk so that you can't make any sense of it [...] they don't say anything straight. [...] It's something meaningless. [...] It can be interesting, if it's about issues in your own life, but you can't really do anything about it by yourself. Especially if you don't understand what they're talking about. (Noora, PK, FI)

Young people noted that disinterest in politics could stem from lack of time to engage (Lasse, PK, FI; Angela, Kupchino, RU) or simply fatigue. Emma, for example, noted that the on-going crisis had turned people off: ‘people are tired of this political and economic battle. This spoiled everything.’ (Emma, Sopron, HU). Others noted that they were ‘already sick of seeing TV news’ although ‘you can’t escape what is happening’ (Viviane, Lumiar, PT). Respondents in Georgia also complained that politics was discussed so excessively in the country that it had the effect of turning young people off.

Finally, young people withdraw from the political system because they see ‘no hope’ in it: ‘Basically I have zero hope for the political system’ (Periklis, NF, GR). Croatian respondents also state that they ‘don’t see anything good in our politics’ (Beti, Podsľjeme, HR) or judge that ‘This politics isn’t going anywhere, only downhill’ (Luka, Pešćenica, HR). Moreover, some respondents express no confidence in participation having any impact. This is encapsulated in Esther’s dismissal of politics as having no meaning for her:

INT: Do you want to tell me more about that? What does ‘politics’ mean to you when I say that?
RES: Nothing, it genuinely does not mean anything to me, I don’t, if I could put a meaning to it, I’d, I’d put the meaning to it politics, politics is a load of rubbish, that, that is what it is to me. It’s rubbish.
INT: Rubbish in what sense? That it’s [...] 
RES: There’s no point in, in a party vote, there’s no point voting on anything, there’s no point doing, I genuinely believe there is no point and even if you feel so strongly about something to write to write to an MP. I don’t think your point will be put across or even considered, I think literally your letter would be looked at and thrown in the bin, that’s it, there’s no point. (Esther, Nuneaton, GB)
'Radically unpoltical'? Disavowal and anti-politics

A striking feature of the apparent 'disinterest' in politics by young people is the passionate way in which 'indifference' may be declared. Interviewees often expressed their first impressions about politics emotionally and accompanied by negative gestures and the use of coarse language: 'When I hear the word politics, first what crosses my mind is something very bad. That is sad, but ok. Definitely something very bad crosses my mind: bastards, vermin, thieves [laughs] and so on.' (Mirta, Pešćenica, HR). Politics was described as 'bullshit' (Sebastian, Coventry, GB) and politicians crudely dismissed as 'assholes' (Evka, Rimavska Sobota, SK) or 'a bunch of money stealing arse wipes' (Jan, Nuneaton, GB). Perhaps most damning of all, Aris declares, on behalf of his whole generation, 'we despise politics as a profession' (Aris, NF, GR).

One way of understanding this contradictory picture in which young people express strong, sometimes passionate, views about something they claim to have no interest in is through the notion of 'anti-politics'. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 158) envisage youth (dis)engagement as the practice of a 'politics of youthful anti-politics', consisting in a refusal to care about institutionalised politics while 'unintentionally acting very politically by depriving politics of attention, labour, consent and power'. This notion of the disavowal of the political is helpful for understanding the articulation of attitudes towards political institutions and actors although it simplifies a more complex picture; young people do more than 'simply stay at home' as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim envisage (2002: 159). Farthing (2010) reworks the notion of anti-politics to suggest young people are 'radically unpoltical' while engaged in a new 'politics of fun' based on a transformative agenda, a radically revised 'target', and new forms of participation including active rejection. This is supported by evidence that when they do engage, young people are more inclined to do so in unconventional politics - street politics, life-style politics and symbolic action – and this is considered in relation to MYPLACE interview data in Section 3.2.

The expression of 'youthful anti-politics' is seen by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 157) as predicated on the experience of 'living under the preconditions of internalized democracy' and there is some evidence from the MYPLACE study that it has more purchase in established democracies than, for example, in post-socialist states where (as demonstrated below, see Section 3.1.4) democracy is seen by young people as very much still 'a work in progress'. The UK provides a classic example of this. Jan, for example, has strong opinions on politics yet says politics is not discussed in the house because: '[...] we're a very anti-politics family [...] I think the government, they've completely messed the whole entire country up. Very strong views on that as well [...]’ (Jan, Nuneaton, GB). Krys is highly critical of the formal political sphere and says ‘I'd always be very tempted to vote Monster Raving Loony, just because they're hilarious [...] they are very funny, they do take the mick out of politics quite a lot and there's good reason in doing that.' (Krys, Coventry, GB). However, Krys is also attracted to smaller, independent, parties, such as the Greens because he feels he could 'trust' them more than the main parties. Respondents in Spain also said they had followed smaller parties (e.g. the Pirate Party) (Andrea, Sant Cugat, ES) and thought that such parties might have 'more solutions or more ideas' (Ariadna, Sant Cugat, ES). In contrast, the disavowal of politics among respondents in Russia, where democracy felt still insecure, reflected a strong sense of feeling trapped by a system that respondents felt they had little capacity to change. Inga had already grown 'sick of it [politics] because 'nothing ever changes' (Inga, Kupchino, RU). For Veronika, this had made her feel detached from
politics: 'I am very detached from it all. I understand that one person comes to power, then another, but basically, nothing improves. Everything is as usual.' (Veronika, Kupchino, RU). For Semen this is explained by that same 'self-interest' ascribed to politicians above: 'The people who are in power at the moment are comfortable there so why would they change anything?' (Semen, Kupchino, RU).

This raises the question of whether there is evidence that the rejection of formal politics is an active political identity. Ismo suggests that young people opt out of formal politics not ‘for fun’ but a reason:

There is a lack of trust between those who are running the system and citizens. I think that we are near the edge now because there are more and more excluded young people. My view is that this tells us something. It doesn’t mean that people are scum and they get out from the system for fun, but there are other reasons why people get out and behave like they behave. (Ismo, Kuopio, FI)

In the UK case, indeed, ‘non-political’ was the second most frequently spontaneously self-ascribed political identity among respondents and many of the people explicitly saying they are non-political actual declare at the same time that they would definitely vote, have strong opinions about the government, or consciously avoid talking about politics because it is divisive (not because they are not interested in it). This position would appear, therefore, to be an active identity rather than reflecting always a lack of knowledge or interest.

Being ‘non-political’ was a self-description among UK respondents that came second only to that of ‘floating voter’, a description reflecting that respondents had no fixed party loyalty and voted differently at national and local elections, and at each national election, based on how they perceived policies and programmes would benefit them as individuals rather than any ideological allegiance. This raises the question of the role of political ideologies in young people’s embracing or disavowal of politics.

‘This ideology doesn’t fit into Georgian reality’: Political ideology as past its sell-by?

Self-ascribed political identities were infrequently recorded in interviews. Reference to political ideologies were more common although primarily because respondents were prompted to reflect on conventional understandings of politics as taking place on a ‘left’ to ‘right’ or ‘conservative’ to ‘liberal’ ideological spectrum. While reflections on this are interesting in and of themselves, and useful for triangulation with MYPLACE survey data, interview data are considered here primarily in relation to whether ideological distinctions still have a purchase for young people and if so whether strong ideological positioning is something that attracts them to, or dissuades them from, political engagement.

The ideological debate that generated most reflection across the respondent sets in each country concerned the left-right spectrum. The responses generated are uneven in their coverage but suggest that knowledge of distinctions between left and right and belief that they retain relevance are strongest in those contexts where there are also high levels of satisfaction with democracy, namely in locations in Denmark, eastern and western Germany (Ellison et al., 2014: 331). However, even in these field sites young people consider the distinction to be not as clear cut ‘as I was taught in school’ (Madeline, Bremerhaven, DE-W) or not as a linear spectrum but ‘more of a horseshoe [...] ’cause I think left wing and right wing in reality they’re not that far, far, not that different.’ (David, Nuneaton, GB).
Where distinctions between left and right were recognised, the ‘left’ was associated positively with: favouring workers (EE, FI); prioritising social welfare and helping those on social support (EE, FI, SK, RU); anti-capitalism (FI, PT); international solidarity (FI); standing for freedom and democracy (DE-E, HU); antifascist values (DE-E), liberal values and the tolerance of difference and equality for all (FI, RU, HR); social justice, fair wages and support for equality (DE-E, GB); support for eco ideas (FI). Negative associations with the ‘left’ related to its association with: the former communist regime in the country (DE-E, HU); opposition for the sake of opposition (DE-E); and nationalisation and subordination of individual to common good (PT). Positive associations with ‘the right’ are rare but include its association with: equality of opportunity but not necessarily reward (GB); and traditional values and support for the church (HR). Negative associations include: support for the rich over the poor (FI); conservatism (DE-E, SK) including intolerance to sexual minorities (FI); individualism (FI); and xenophobia, Nazis, nationalism, dictatorship of the Third Reich and violence (DE-E).

Non-recognition of the relevance of distinctions between ‘left’ and right occurs: where respondents understand what left and right signifies but believe the political spectrum is no longer divided in that way; and where respondents are not acquainted with, or feel they do not understand, the distinctions between left and right.

Those respondents who are familiar with the distinction between left and right suggest that this differentiation is either inappropriate to their context - in Estonia there isn’t really strong, concrete left and right-wing [parties] (Juhan, Tartu, EE) – or that the distinction used to be meaningful but a process of ideological slippage means that, today, ‘an unambiguous assignment is very difficult’ (Brunhilde, Bremen, DE-W).

But we’ve got, I think we’ve got to a situation with politics where apart from party members you haven’t really got people who are left wing or right wing [...] I think everyone, from the people who run the country I think, everyone wants a bit of everything. [...]That this policy from the left wing might be correct but so is this policy from the right wing so I don’t think there’s any need or any place for left wing and right wing anymore. (Cara, Nuneaton, GB)

Moreover, those who are able to distinguish ideological positions point out these often do not match particular policies or positions on issues or parties and politicians themselves are inconstant and shift between ideologies; left or right thus become dislocated signifiers. This was particularly strongly expressed by respondents in Estonia who suggested that ‘liberals’ also implement left-wing ideas and that even where difference between ideologies is clear in theory, in practice everything is mixed up:

[...] if pushed, then, based on their ideology, I like the Reform Party but [...] often what they do doesn’t match their ideology very much. It seems to me that the most ideological [party] – in terms of actually doing what it claims it will in grand declarations - is the Social Democrats [...] (Juhan, Tartu, EE)

Moreover, ideological labels are broad and fluid; thus even two ‘liberal’ parties can be very different (Mart, Tartu, EE). In this context, respondents conclude that it is better to judge political parties on their actions rather than ascribed labels.

More frequent and more widespread, however, are statements that despite ‘trying to understand the difference between the left and the right, [...] it is very difficult for me’ (Alla,
Kupchino, RU). This basic sentiment is repeated by respondents from locations in many participating countries (EE, LV, DE-W, SK, RU, HR, GB) and a number of teams found respondents recalled their inability to answer this question during the survey interview or were eager to move on from the question for fear of embarrassing themselves by revealing their lack of knowledge.

I couldn't even tell you which political party is right-wing and which one is left-wing, and I don't even understand that whole idea of left-wing, right-wing, I know it was at some point explained to me in school, but I don't remember it, it was very confusing, I still find it confusing (Melanie, Nuneaton, GB).

Being liberal is most often described as meaning being positioned centrally between right and left (FI, RU, GE, SK). However, in some cases it is equated with a more ‘right-wing’ position (EE) and minimal role of the state (FI):

[...] I see liberal as the absolute centre. And I would place myself there: I’m not left-wing, I’m not right-wing. I despise Communism completely and National Socialism completely. Yes, I’d actually say that I’m a convinced Liberal. (Fabian, Jena, DE-E)

In other cases it is seen as being, in its origins, more left-oriented: ‘I would say that most of my, my politics fall in the, like, left, left-wing, kind of, I get called a bleeding-heart liberal quite a lot, so [laughs].’ (Pam, Coventry, GB)

In post-socialist societies there was a greater tendency to associate ‘liberalism’ with tolerance (towards sexual, ethnic or religious minorities) and ‘free views’ (SK, RU, GE). However, for some, universal tolerance of minorities had become obligatory in such a way as to be oppressive to the majority. This is referred to by one respondent as ‘liberal fascism’:

[...] today you have to be liberal. [...] you can’t be an ordinary citizen. You have to be something special. You have to be in some kind of opposition to that which is considered as a convention, as ordinary, normal. Whether it’s your sexual orientation, your religious orientation [...] even if it’s an attitude like – you have to give your opinion, you have to be an activist; you have to be for animal rights. Today, if you say, ‘I’m not interested in animals and their rights’, you are immediately viewed as a murderer, a violent person, a butcher, as a person with no heart and so on. That’s liberal fascism. (Barbara, Podsljeme, HR)

Conservatism is mentioned in the narratives of respondents in around half the countries (GB, EE, SK, GE, HU, FI, RU) and is described as being more oriented towards tradition and ‘roots’ and less towards innovation or change (SK, HU, RU).

Communism is mentioned by respondents from locations in five countries (EE, FI, LV, PT, RU) where it was often associated with the Soviet Union and ‘dictatorship’ (Leo, Daugavpils, LV). However, in one case, there was a complaint that communism was falsely equated with the Soviet Union: ‘Communism is linked to the Soviet Union in Finland as well as hating of Russians [...] how many people are really interested in knowing that this ideology could mean something else totally?’ (Atte, Kuopio, FI). One respondent was a member of the Portuguese Communist Party and an elected member of the parish assembly (David, Barreiro, PT) and a number of Russian respondents had positive associations with communism (e.g. free social services, job opportunities) and said they had ‘nothing against communism’ (Tolya, Vyborg, RU). Others however, rejected communism as an ideal that...
was ‘already dead and buried’ (Nuno, Barreiro, PT) and unrealistic because ‘everybody [...] is egoistic and looks primarily after themselves’ (Alex, Jena, DE-E). Two respondents from Coventry in the UK identified themselves as a ‘socialist sympathiser’ (Pam, Coventry, GB) and a former member of a workers’ revolutionary party (Umair, Coventry, GB). Anarchism is also mentioned by respondents from Finland, Russia and Estonia although with negative associations that it signalled ‘disregard for values’ (Atte, Kuopio, FI) and drinking and lack of work ethic (Vadim, Kupchino, RU). More positive comments are made in relation to a broader anti-capitalist, anti-corporatist or anti-consumerist ideology. One eastern German respondent argued that the financial crisis had made clear that capitalism needed to be tamed: ‘[…] the economic order, which means the capitalist order has to more regulated’ (Peter, Rostock, DE-E). A Finnish respondent described her own engagement in anti-consumerist practices:

I began to dumpster dive a few months ago. [...] I try to find different kinds of things, but food mainly. [...] Dumpster diving can be a lifestyle. You try to find everything for free, but for me it’s more about food. [...] Mainly it’s about my life principles and ideologies. I don’t like the food industry and, for example, meat production and how much money and natural resources it takes and then a big part of it all will end in dumpsters and waste tips. It’s totally unbelievable. I’d rather stay out of it or try to minimise it.’ (Anu, Kuopio, FI)

There were also expressions of support for Green movements and animal rights/vegetarian movements (FI, PT, EE, GB), pacifism (FI, GB) and self-identifications as feminist (GB), and ‘patriot’ (GB). Populism was mentioned by just two respondents, being identified with particular national parties but without any declared empathy or antipathy towards it (FI, LV).

The most general conclusion that might be made is that ideologies have little purchase for young people. Indeed, talking of liberalism (which he associated with tolerance towards sexual and religious minorities), one respondent makes clear its irrelevance in the Georgian context: ‘this ideology doesn’t fit into Georgian reality’ (Misha, Telavi, GE). This does not mean that ideology is rejected altogether, however. For one respondent in Croatia, the problem is even posited as one of too little rather than too much ideology: political parties can be attractive to young people as long as they avoid becoming just part of the party administrative structure and end up confined to ‘carrying out that non-ideological party rotten politics.’ (Markica, Podsljeme, HR). In Greece too, it was suggested by respondents that those pursuing politics must have strong beliefs and be passionate about what he believed in: ‘If someone wants to be a politician, he should have passion. Passion for his country, for his ideas. Not fanaticism, just passion’ (Afroxilanthi, AR, GR). This passion was felt to be more tangible, or rather more directly translatable into action, among local politicians (Ursula, Coventry, GB) and more in evidence in smaller parties ‘which really believe in things they do [...]’ (Tara Peščenica, HR). Thus among respondents, there are still those who refuse to accept the distorted version of politics as ‘an instrument of self-promotion’ (Una, Peščenica, HR) and hold out for a ‘positive’ version of politics free of the stifling constraint of party discipline (Niilo, PK, FI) enacted perhaps by a new kind of political party with a clear message and more holistic vision:

This is maybe a wild idea but it would be interesting if there were totally new political parties which would have some message and holistic vision of what they
want. I am actually a little bit annoyed that current politics and parties are so inflexible. It’s difficult to get new parties through there. (Rasmus, PK, FI)

‘It became more interesting when I was allowed to vote’: Embracing politics

The final response to the disaffection with politics found among respondents is a renewed interest and embracing of politics. This narrative was a partial one and found mostly in locations in western and northern European countries participating in the MYPLACE research and very rarely in post-socialist locations.

As noted above, respondents in Denmark, Finland and eastern and western Germany were most positive about politics. In Denmark, a number of narratives of how respondents’ interest in politics had been triggered were generated, ranging from catastrophic global events (such as 9/11), through awareness of questions of social justice and insecurity in relation to the economic crisis, to the personal experience of everyday racism and having one’s own citizenship application turned down. Being directly affected by politics and feeling that one could input into it – coming of age to vote, for example – were major triggers for engagement.

[...] I think that I’ve always been interested in it [politics]. [...] I followed all elections on the TV and it became more interesting when I was allowed to vote. (Erja, Kuopio, FI)

Since Socrates entered the government [...] I have been examining more deeply what is going on. Before, I was younger, I didn’t care much. Now, I am soon going to suffer in my skin, as my mother is suffering today, with all these measures. Therefore, I have to worry about it. (Gustavo, Lumiar, PT)

Carlos, also from Portugal, said he had suddenly developed an interest in politics when he went to secondary school, realising that if he did not take an interest then ‘what other people choose is what will be. If I have active participation, I will also be able to have a choice in the matter. And from there I started to get my life, my active political life [...]’ (Carlos, Barreiro, PT). This desire to make a difference is echoed by Taminder:

[...] I think if everyone just stood back and they were like nah, I don’t think so then I don’t think anything would help but I think, I think my generation’s a bit more, they, I think my generation is a bit more stubborn [...] they’ll want to get their point across so I think there’s more likely chance of there being a change rather than people being like, being told what to do [...] (Taminder, Coventry, GB)

Taminder goes on to say that even voting can make a difference and respondents from Spain argue that, as students, ‘the best we can do is vote for the political parties that represent us’ (Antonio, Sant Cugat, ES) while Lluis argues that while not technically obligatory, voting is a moral responsibility (Lluis, Vic, ES).

The impact young people seek to make need not be large. Kari says that when he got the opportunity to participate in political activities in his home town, he simply chose not to ‘stay at home and complain when it’s possible to do something’ (Kari, PK, FI) while Anu sets out also a modest ambition:
I feel that what I really want to do is that I want to make an impact on society but I like to do it at the grassroots level. Even though it is just about improving the lives of dozens of people it is what I want to do. I’m not the kind of person who wants to shout my voice to the whole wide world. (Anu, Kuopio, FI)

3.1.4 ‘This democracy is a mask’: Understandings of democracy

The MYPLACE survey data suggest young people in Europe invest at best half-hearted ‘consent’ in the democratic system as they encounter it today; overall mean satisfaction ‘with the way democracy works’ across the full survey sample was, on a scale of 0-10, just 5.01. In the survey, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with democracy in their country of residence, thus these findings are profoundly contextually shaped; the object of satisfaction is in each case different since it varies according to the very different constitutions of democracy across the 14 countries participating in the project. In this section of the report, we explore what lies beneath this ‘could do better’ verdict on democracy through interview data that resituate these attitudes in their respective contexts. We consider, first, young people’s general understandings of ‘democracy’ and the key characteristics with which it is associated. We then outline alternative forms of democracy discussed by interviewees, focusing in particular on their understandings and evaluations of ‘representative’ and ‘direct’ democracy. This is followed by the exploration of some of the underlying understandings of what makes ‘good democracy’ including questions of consensus and contestation in the political system and potential support for ‘technocratic’ forms of government. The fourth subsection of the report outlines where and why young people are satisfied with the democracy they experience, while the fifth details the criticisms of democracy that young people make. This subsection includes the denial that ‘democracy’ is a reasonable description of the current regime in which young people live. While the latter might be best understood as a radical critique of existing democracy in favour of greater democracy, in the final section we explore evidence also of the rejection of democracy per se and willingness among interviewees to contemplate non-democratic forms of rule as a way to escape the contemporary political malaise.

An empty signifier? Defining democracy

Given the apparent lack of interest in ‘politics’, young people were remarkably forthcoming in interviews in their views on ‘democracy’. The desire to live in a polity which they felt expressed the will of the people is thus important to them, even if the means of getting there – ‘politics’ – appears a ‘dirty’ business from which they would rather distance themselves.

Perhaps the most immediate association with democracy for interviewees is with ‘freedom of speech’ or, more accurately, the right to voice your opinion. This is an association that cuts right across countries with very different political heritages and current constitutions of democracy as is evident by the small selection of illustrative definitions of democracy below:

Democracy is participation and that people can be heard. I think that's incredibly important. Freedom of the press [...] is also part of democracy. In other countries, you are almost killed if you write something that does not suit those
governing. (Hans, OC, DK)

The freedom of expression, even though I think that it’s not as wide as it should be, but the fact of being able to have a different opinion than others and not risk one’s life is very important. (Adria, Vic, ES)

You’re allowed to express your opinion freely and vote however you want and work as what you want and basically go anywhere where you want to go. Of course, always within the boundaries of what’s legally allowed. (Gülcan, Jena, DE-E)

[…] we all have a right to vote and […] a right to live without discrimination. I don’t know, that’s democracy to me, that everybody has their voice and their opinion, and without discrimination. (Eva, Podsljeme, HR)

I think democracy means for me the right to have free speech in the country; the right to choose what you want to do; the right to choose how you live your life; the right to choose how your human rights affect you, basically. (Tammy, Coventry, GB)

Democracy? Well freedom of speech surely. Not being afraid to put my signature anywhere […] (Oliver, Tartu, EE)

In each case of course this association may have historical or contemporary reference points. This is most obviously the case in the quote from eastern Germany where the definition of democracy as the freedom of expression of opinion is quickly supplemented by the right to freedom of travel and self-determination in employment, which were restricted under the former GDR regime. In the case of the UK respondent, Tammy references British colonial heritage as she goes on in the interview to compare this definition of a democracy with the repression of democracy in Zimbabwe. In the Danish case, the freedom of the press and the right to publish that which offends implicitly references the political furore caused by the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed in the daily newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (2005-06). Nonetheless the association of democracy with the freedom to express opinion appears a shared value.

A second common definition of democracy defines it as a mechanism for ensuring that the opinions expressed by people in a democratic society matter. This is put succinctly by Mike who defines democracy as ‘that we have a voice in what happens to us’ (Mike, Ózd, HU). More definitively, an eastern German respondent defines democracy as a system in which ‘The people are in charge, that’s what democracy means to me. The people decide, the people have a say, the people have the right to decide and determine and the people has also the right to overthrow.’ (Richard, Rostock, DE-E). Thus democracy is defined as a system in which people are included in decision making or have control. An eastern German
respondent defines Germany as a democratic society on the basis of the fact that ‘[…] there are the elections. Everyone can vote from the age of 18. And there are referenda and so on […] The population has a strong influence, I think, and can have an impact.’ (Karina, Jena, DE-E). For Ernesto, democracy is when ‘the power lies with the people because the people decide who is up there. This is what’s great about democracy. If they who are up there, don’t do it well, change.’ (Ernesto, Sant Cugat, ES). The same sentiment may be expressed in reverse form; democracy is a system that prevents the rule of a single person or social elite. Thus Ella notes that ‘Democracy’s where it’s kind of we’ve not got a dictator have we?’ (Ella, Nuneaton, GB) while an eastern German respondent notes the importance of the Federal Constitutional Court which acts to ensure ‘politics cannot go its own way and suddenly you’ve got an absolute rule by law; to prevent that’ (Felix, Jena, DE-E). One respondent in Georgia defined this more specifically as transparency: ‘Democracy is when nothing is hidden away from people, so that everything is clear for people; when they discuss something and what they do, what they are going to do, people should know, whether they want it like that or not.’ (Bidzina, Telavi, GE).

It follows from the recognition of democracy as the antidote to totalitarianism, that an important element of democracy is ‘choice’. Martina thus defines democracy as a system in which ‘people can choose’ (Martina, Sant Cugat, ES) while Oana calls it ‘people’s choice like, we have the right to vote, democracy by definition, demos it’s people in Latin so […] (Oana, Coventry, GB). In this sense democracy is understood as a form of conversation between members of a polity which allows differing views to be heard and decisions to be made peacefully. In an even more active definition, David (Barreiro, PT) states that ‘Democracy means, above all, people’s participation’.

A third definition of democracy associated it strongly with ‘equality’ (Martina, Sant Cugat, ES; Mike, Ózd, HU). ‘Real’ democracy is defined by Ursula as ‘The kind where all are listened to equally, in a real way, really democratic’ (Ursula, Kuopio, FI). Combining the metaphor of ‘having a voice’ and ‘equality’, Felix says ‘I imagine democracy as everyone having a fair shout’ (Felix, Nuneaton, GB). There is a more problematic association of democracy with equality in post-socialist societies where there was a tendency to define democracy in relation to the past and former regimes and find equality lacking. Thus, reflecting on democracy, a number of respondents in Croatia referred to differences with the previous political system and concluded that ‘we now have more democracy and freedoms’ but sometimes also stated that they felt in some aspects less free than people were during the socialist period because of economic constraints and hardships, less protection from the state and the failure of governments to listen to the people. Indeed, many linked the problems in Croatian democracy with economic inequalities, specifically the privileged position of the rich, the privatisation of formerly public or state goods during the Croatian economic and political transition period as well as general corruption among political elites in the democratic period. In Slovakia also some respondents stated that they felt ‘Slovakia is less democratic than before’, although rarely providing substantive arguments as to how this was manifest. Others thought that Slovakia is currently more democratic than during the state socialist period although felt that the state then had been better ordered and organised. However, an exception is a respondent in Estonia who considers democracy to be a system in which ‘people’s needs would be satisfied’ (Ly, Tartu, EE).

As noted above in relation to lack of knowledge of specific political ideologies, it should also be stated here that some respondents felt unable to define or characterise ‘democracy’,
distinguish it from ‘politics’ or understand what it means. Some who were more informed, however, still failed to define it, either because they felt it was something unreal – ‘utopian, idyllic’ (Andrea, Sant Cugat, ES) or because it was so indiscriminately used that it had become an empty signifier: ‘Democracy is a word that is so misleading because it is used excessively.’ (Adria, Vic, ES).

‘The highest form of democracy is the referendum’: Representative and direct democracy

When young people talk about democracy they reference two main forms of democratic system: ‘representative’ and ‘direct’ democracy.

Representative democracy is understood as the institutionalisation of the voice of the majority. Thus representative democracy is:

What the majority wants, the interests of the majority of the people should be seen, supported […] no […] should be reflected in the decisions taken by those who have been elected by them. (Ernesto, Sant Cugat, ES)

However, respondents also hold critical perspectives on the principle of majoritarianism, referring to it sometimes as the ‘tyranny of the majority’: ‘I don’t think that democracy is the ideal type of governance […] why would the majority be right? […] The majority, how can I put it […] can be easily deceived in some way.’ (Bob, Pešćenica, HR). The same sentiment is expressed by Vadim who lacks confidence in the sound judgement of the electorate in contemporary Russia:

It’s a useless thing when the votes are bribed and the majority wins, especially considering the fact that the majority may include some psycho that came out of a facility, or a con man without moral principles. So the election process puts normal people together with people like that and this is not right, in my opinion. (Vadim, Kupchino, RU)

Julia simply states that ‘what the majority thinks often doesn’t mean that it’s good’ (Julia, Sant Cugat, ES).

Representative democracy is viewed as a system in which the people elect representatives who can take the best decisions on their behalf and thus requires trust and willingness to give up decisions to those who ‘know best’:

I think we look at the person who has the most knowledge, you know, who’s the most knowledgeable person as well as the person with more experience, then let that person, you know, maybe decide, I think that’s the best way, ‘cause if you ask people who don’t have experience or the knowledge you’re deciding they may come to the wrong decisions so I think I believe in you know, [inaudible] the people who are more knowledgeable and more experienced to make decisions’ (Tariq, Coventry, GB)

However, some respondents feel that this principle means that representative democracy is effectively rule by elite: ‘Because there’s a representative democracy, more elitist, that I don’t feel represented in.’ (Hector, Vic, ES). This points to the fact that, as respondents in Denmark noted, the principle of representative democracy requires concordance and trust between politicians and their voters which is threatened by perceived breaches of promise (as discussed in Section 3.1.2). Alberto (Lumiar, PT) also thinks that ‘representative
democracy has many failings’ not least the fact that a high proportion of the electorate abstain from voting.

There is also a view among respondents that representative democracy gives a false impression that ‘citizens can change something’ whilst in practice discouraging participation. Thus, if people don’t vote, they are effectively excluded from democracy (Carme, Sant Cugat, ES) while those who do may effectively be ‘giving up’ real power:

I think that the fact that there’s a representative democracy means that people are more passive, that they don’t want to get involved. That they vote and give up all the power and give it all up to their representative. People are no longer aware of things. There are many people who don’t know what’s happening and vote for a party because it’s the first that they hear [about], and that’s not good. (Guillem, Sant Cugat, ES)

In Estonia, too, respondents suggested that representative democracy fails to give opportunities to participate and provides very limited possibilities for people to make changes (Jüri, Tartu, EE) while João (Lumiar, PT) defines democracy as the ‘false sensation of people power’.

Finally, representative democracy was seen as a system in which the interests of parties dominate over the interests of voters (EE) and democracy is effectively constrained as politics becomes confined to ‘what each party chooses for us to do’ (Sofia, AR, GR).

It follows that notions of ‘direct democracy’ tend to focus on its capacity to allow people’s voices to be heard more: ‘[…] we should have more straight democracy. There should be more public voting so that decisions would be taken together.’ (Anu, Kuopio, FI). When talking concretely, often respondents refer to the appeal of referenda: ‘For me, the highest form of democracy is the referendum’ (Libor, Trnava, SK). The Swiss model of democracy in this regard is often referenced (EE, DK, DE-E): ‘I like this Swiss model, that the whole population is really asked about fundamental political questions.’ (Thorsten, Rostock, DE-E)

There is also a sense that everything is pre-determined, so even if the people are consulted it is only about details; fundamental principles are deeply embedded and not open to question.

I think it is important that societal issues are also discussed and supported by the people. And sometimes I think that’s not happening very much. Instead, politicians determine the direction and this is deeply rooted and they have to stick to specific things and frameworks that we as a society haven’t shaped that way. (Mona, Jena, DE-E)

This may even take place in everyday sites of democratic decision making where, for example, workers are not consulted on forward planning of budgets (Olli, Kuopio, FI). Elin also notes that decisions are often taken ‘over the heads’ of young people: ‘[…] the youth of today, we would like to have something to say in many cases. We do not like it when decisions are being taken over our heads. (Elin, OC, DK). Igar, is more sceptical, however, believing that a lack of interest among the population might mean that even if ‘they try to lead the country in a way that all people can have voice in it, in the end the power of the politicians will prevail. […] it would be useless to bother people with questions, if they are not interested in it.’ (Igar, Ózd, HU)
Direct democracy also implies more popular participation. Guillem describes the classical Greek model which ‘forced people to participate’ as his ideal society (Guillem, Sant Cugat, ES) while Gemma calls for ‘a more participatory democracy, as [...] the decisions that are made - I don’t think are really because the people need or want them’ (Gemma, Sant Cugat, ES). One means of facilitating this more democratic conversation, it is suggested, is the Internet and support of alternative media (DK, DE-E).

However, respondents can also express a high degree of scepticism about the capacity of ‘the people’ to govern. This is a narrative that is much more frequently articulated by respondents from locations in post-socialist countries. In Slovakia, ‘governance by the people’ was characterised as ‘huge chaos’ (Veronika, Trnava, SK). Most usually concern was voiced on the grounds that ordinary citizens lacked the specialised knowledge necessary or even basic information about politics and economy to make good decisions (HR). Thus people were felt not to understand their political choices well enough and acted more responsibly in exercising their democratic rights (Simmo, Tartu, EE). Others harboured fears that engrained political culture might prevent democracy developing: ‘We were in slavery and then we became independent, but we have not really moved forward like we wanted to, because a criminal mind set has destroyed our country.’ (Mamuka, Kutaisi, GE). One Russian respondent felt that the public was too quick to blame political leaders for problems and failed to take responsibility themselves (Kostya, Vyborg, RU) while in eastern Germany there was a fear that there was still a popular desire for a ‘strong leader’ who would act without consultation:

[...] there are still a lot of people who simply say: okay, it’d be cooler if we had a kind of leader. A strong personality who says which way to go and doesn’t send everything through all committees before they finally say ‘yes’ and ‘amen’.
That’s scary. (Dorothea, Jena, DE-E)

In one case, a respondent was critical of the country’s ruling party for capitalising on this desire for the people to feel ‘listened to’: ‘[of the Reform Party] they tend towards populism, [...] they like don’t have any ideology, they do things that people could love’ (Juhan, Tartu, EE). In Denmark, also, respondents noted that parties – such as the Dansk Folkeparti – exploited the disappointment in the population with the cutbacks in public welfare provision and the generally higher expectations among the population than politicians are able to fulfil. However, in other cases, when respondents consider directly the question of populism, they recognise it as an effective form of politics (DK) and take a pragmatic position that big parties would always attempt to win voters: ‘Populism is a necessary evil of democracy’ (Branimir, Pešćenica, OC).

For others, direct democracy does not only raise the threat of populism but is simply unlikely to be effective (DE-E) or workable:

I would see democracy as, where everyone has a say in how [...] they run and I think everything has to be equal [...] we all know full democracy can never be achieved but I think, I think indirect democracy is probably, it’s a good idea. Direct democracy is very impractical but I see it’s where the highest level of where you can get like equality and everyone’s opinions being viewed. (Umair, Coventry, GB)
Consensus or dissensus? The role of debate and deliberation in the constitution and reclamation of democracy

Rancière argues that the legitimisation of democracy that has followed the collapse of ‘totalitarianism’ in Europe has not increased attachment to the institutional mechanisms of democracy but, on the contrary, ‘the victory of so-called formal democracy is accompanied by a noticeable disaffection with regard to its forms’ (Rancière, 1999: 96-7). He points to the importance of contestation for the vibrancy of democracy; when the institutions of parliamentary representation were being contested by generations of militant socialists and communists, they were cherished and protected more vigilantly (1999: 97). The disenchantment with politics, politicians and parties among MYPLACE respondents was discussed in Section 3.1.2. In this section, we consider whether there is evidence in the narratives of respondents that traditional democratic parties have lost their appeal to the electorate who can no longer distinguish between them in the ‘stifling consensus’ that has gripped the political system (Mouffe, 2005: 66) or for Rancière’s claim that what they miss from politics is genuine ‘contestation’ (1999: 96-7).

While respondents did not address alternatives to representative democracy in more detail - through the direct discussion of deliberative or radical democratic models, for example - narratives often touched on some of the core questions underpinning these alternatives. In this section, we consider these formative processes of democratic policies by drawing out respondents’ reflections on the relative desirability of consensus or contestation as the primary driver of politics, that is, whether the public good is best served by consensus building through compromise. We do this partially through the more concrete discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of multiple parties or a single party system and whether democracy is enhanced by having parties that are ‘similar’ to one another, and can work well in coalition, or absolute majority rule of a single party with a distinctive ideological agenda. We also consider specific reflections on the professionalisation of government and support for ‘technocratic’ forms of government.

Politics as a no conflict zone: Consensus and cooperation

As discussed above, interviewees often complained that politics appeared as meaningless argument. This perception is reflected also in more abstract statements on the political process as a pointless fight between often a small number of main parties: ‘[…] our democracy looks like a quarrel of immature boys more than a real […] real and developed democracy’ (Kristijan, Pešćenica, HR). The Croatian context – the experience of a difficult transition to a new political and economic context and relatively new democracy scarred by war in its early years – may explain why Croatian respondents largely eschew any notion of politics as a necessarily ‘antagonistic field’. Indeed, in Georgia, a country also affected by military conflict and violent overturns of government in its democratic transition, there was a similarly strong negative association between differing political opinion, tension and conflict. A particularly stark example of this during the run up to the 2012 parliamentary elections was noted in Section 3.1.1 and tension and conflict had become strongly associated with elections and government change (Koba, Kutaisi, GE). In some cases this led to a strong emotional aversion to contested opinions: ‘Of course there should be one opinion, a different view is no good – it will cause debates, so it would be better for
everyone to share the same opinion.’ (Tsisa, Kutaisi, GE). However, this desire for politics as a ‘no conflict’ zone is far from confined to post-conflict societies. Reflecting on her ‘ideal society’, Taminder imagines it as characterised by ‘no fighting, there’d be no arguing and everyone would get a chance to have their say’ (Taminder, Coventry, GB). This desire for the avoidance of disagreement and conflict is often expressed at the very individual level. Thus Ulla avoids participating in political discussion to avoid dispute:

> I haven’t participated so often because I don’t like it when people argue and dispute with each other. I think that this is the reason why I really can’t, dare, or am not able to say my views, well unless [...] I know that my opinion won’t cause any debate there. (Ulla, Kuopio, FI)

Respondents from the UK noted also that disagreement was divisive and a reason to not raise political issues and potential disagreements should be had face to face rather than in chat forums to avoid sinking into insult. They suggested that it was always best just to ‘agree to disagree’ if you did not understand or accept somebody else’s point and to avoid discussion of religion or politics with strangers ‘because there’s a lot of emotion that goes with that’ (Sebastian, Coventry, GB). Emily also avoided the discussion of contentious topics even with friends: ‘[...] I, try and keep that as much to myself as possible really, because I think, everyone’s entitled to their opinion, and I can’t say that they’re wrong, because that’s their opinion, but then also I don’t want to get into the conversation where they’ll tell me I’m wrong. Because I’ll get a bit heated and just be like, ‘no, don’t’. ’ (Emily, Nuneaton, GB).

At the level of government, contestation between parties is often considered to be divisive and indicative of the struggle for power rather than the pursuit of principle (HU)

> INT: So, what do you see from parties?
> RES: That they fight against each other, and try to make people believe that they are better. That’s it, nothing else.
> INT: So that they fight against each other. And do you like this fight?
> RES: Not really, because if it was true, what they say, than they would not fight against the other but for their own point.

(Sára, Ózd, HU)

Thus, in a number of countries, respondents call for parties to cooperate and work together to resolve issues. Age says ‘it would be better if all parties could cooperate with each other and think something through together’ rather than continuing the current situation when two parties try to implement something and the others try to obstruct what they are doing (Age, Tartu, EE). For this to work, it is suggested, that it is better if parties were quite similar in their outlook since parties that were too different would find it difficult to cooperate with each other (Kreete, Tartu, EE). However, other respondents believed that diverse coalitions could work if the parties assembled were committed to cooperation: I think that there should be more parties. But also that the ideas [...] I mean that the parties that are assembled should be capable of getting together (Irene, Sant Cugat, ES). While in the extreme conditions of crisis in Greece, it was felt that distinctive ideologies could be put aside temporarily although not necessarily abandoned:

> I would prefer parties to cooperate because we have a common goal, there is not something different as used to be the case. The main issue here is ending
the crisis. If we achieve that, we'll see which ideology will prevail. (Maroula, NF, GR)

In the UK views were divided between those who thought that in principle having more than one party in government broadens the range of opinions included and should produce better government, less dominated by conflict or less ‘radical’ in promoting their own policies, and those who believed that differences of opinion are essential to the political process and that differences between parties are essential to ensuring people have real democratic choice. This debate was particularly vibrant in the UK context because at the time of research a coalition government had been formed in the UK for the first time in post-Second World War history. This led to widespread discussion of whether compromise and consensus produces better government than a majority government that has greater ability to enact policies included in the party’s pre-election manifesto. Opinions on the coalition vary and reflect both a frustration with the fact that coalition governments mean internal conflict and recognition of the importance of having different opinions in parliament. Thus, for some, the coalition signalled an unacceptable compromise on the part of the junior coalition partner, which inevitably caused tension: ‘you’ve got two different parties and you’ve got people who are for each party, and then you’ve got parties who are not doing what they say they’re going to do, so everybody’s angry at them’ (Ursula, Coventry, GB). For others, what emerged was a fake consensus in any case as the two parties’ opinions and agendas are too far apart to produce real consensus. Thus Carly says that she doesn’t think the current coalition government is working ‘Because you’ve got too many opinions going and then they try different things and it doesn’t work.’ (Carly, Nuneaton, GB) while Vincent dismisses the coalition government as ‘just one big act’ as they seek to appear ‘as if they don’t disagree’ (Vincent, Coventry, GB). Despite the problems, however, some respondents felt that coalition governments would be increasingly the norm in the UK:

I think there is problems with having a coalition, ‘cause you do get conflicting opinions but I also think that it is very important that multiple opinions are heard in parliament so I think we are getting closer to the point where we are going to have more and more coalitions because there’s so much varied opinion. [...] in terms of [...] people running the country, I don’t know necessarily whether they’re ready for it as such but I think it’s gonna happen whether they’re ready or not. (Cara, Nuneaton, GB)

Respondents in Spain, went even further, arguing that governments elected with an absolute majority were in danger of amassing too much power and that this had anti-democratic implications since the public could be disregarded without repercussion.

Winning the elections is a completely antidemocratic concept: the elections shouldn’t be won or lost, the elections are a process in which everybody wins, and everybody is assigned a part of the society to represent. (Adria, Vic, ES)

Indeed this was also recognised as a potential danger within a two-party system; in contrast ‘If many different [parties] are together then they have to know how to cooperate with each other. This I like - they have to overcome things, have to discuss.’ (Oskar, Tartu, EE). Thus ‘true’ democracy is characterised as the overcoming of petty conflicts for the common good through discussion:
Politics as ‘an open and honest conversation’: Differentiation and contestation

Discussion and debate are also central to narratives that emphasise the importance of difference and contestation in the political sphere. Thus in similar vein to those seeking consensus, one of the Danish respondents suggests that politics is ‘an open and honest conversation’ [...] discussion, what is right and what is wrong, what to agree on’ (Anton, OC, DK). A Russian-speaking respondent from Estonia views competition in the system as signifying ‘democracy’: [it is] interesting to listen to debates when they take place – when different parties discuss problems among themselves’ (Alek, Ida-Viru, EE). The difference from the consensus-seekers it would appear is that respondents relish debate involving multiple and potentially conflicting opinions rather than fearing discussion will end in dispute. Thus some respondents report that they 'like hearing the opinions of others' even if they rarely change their own opinions afterwards (David, Vic, ES). Others go further, not only passively accepting competing ideas but actively pursuing a policy of open-mindedness to other ideas: 'I try to understand others, though. People who think differently than I do, I try to understand them, but it’s complicated because the views that we hold are very different.' (Monica, Vic, ES).

These respondents, believe that democracy is a system that should be able to accommodate diverse positions and allow these to be represented unhindered: ‘Each person has some ideas, and they vote depending on these. I think that everybody has the right to be represented.’ (Cristina, Vic, ES). The accommodation of people’s very ‘different ways of thinking, different points of view’ is echoed by Sara (Sara, Barreiro, PT). However, views on how representation is best achieved vary. For some, it is the range and diversity of parties that matter. Thus respondents in Estonia complained that recently the number of parties passing the electoral threshold had decreased which had reduced choice and thus the quality of democracy (Jüri, Tartu, EE) while Aapo does not see multiplicity and diversity as preventing collaboration:

[...] I think that the more [parties] we have, the better it is, or it’s great that there are more than just one or two. From my point of view, the multi-party system is a good thing. There will always be differences and then there will be debates as well. Maybe they can make progress together then. (Aapo, Kuopio, FI)

Barbora notes simply that ‘I think more is better’ (Barbora, Rimavská Sobota, SK) while for Boris and Ursula it is the competition of parties that improves the outcome of democracy for people (Boris, Rimavská Sobota, SK; Ursula, Coventry, GB).

For others, it is the degree of differentiation between parties that improves democracy; complaining that parties in the UK are quite ‘same-y’, Gemma argues that ‘[for] people to have real choice and it be more democratic, it would be better to have differences’ (Gemma, Coventry, GB). Thus a respondent from Croatia complains: ‘There are no
significant differences between the parties, they all think the same. [...] And in fact I think the biggest problem is that there are no differences.’ (Petar, Podsljeme, HR. Respondents from Estonia also comment that having distinguishable parties is good for the political system as they provide more alternative choices for the electorate (Ly, Ida-Viru, EE). In Georgia, despite the conflict and tension that characterise the political system, it is felt that ‘Different views, positions are necessary, everyone should not be thinking alike, it’s obvious that having diverse [political parties] would be preferable.’ (Elene, Kutaisi, GE). Julia also notes that while a lot of people had been worried when the radical CUP had entered parliament, fearing it would mean greater division, she had seen the increased diversity as a positive development (Julia, Sant Cugat, ES). And Monica recognises that the multiplicity and diversity of parties simply reflects the ‘many nuances’ of thinking among the electorate (Monica, Vic, ES).

‘Expert control of society’: Government without parties or Presidents

One solution to the problem of parties was making them redundant through the establishment of a parliament ‘made up of smart people’ and a speaker for that parliament who ‘will represent the Parliament, will be just the Parliament’s voice’ (Marina, Kupchino, RU). This form of professionalised, technocratic government also received some support from respondents in Denmark who thought it reduced the risk of political populism and would constitute a form of ‘expert control of society’ (Ida, OE, DK). In Croatia one respondent also accepted this notion of an oligarchic or ‘elitist’ democracy:

I think that is ok [...] I mean it doesn’t prohibit anyone’s opinion or expressing those opinions. I think it’s still democracy. But, simply, you emphasise the knowledge of professionals. I wouldn’t want to decide about the question whether we should have nuclear power plants if, I mean [...] I’m not a physicist. (Anđela, Pešćenica, HR).

A similar case was made by James who argued, ‘you wouldn’t accept medical advice from a stranger off the street [...] so why do we have all these non-educated people in the fields of whatever trying to decide on political events?’ (James, Coventry, GB). Respondents from Estonia and Spain also suggested their support for technocratic forms of government on the basis that the existing system meant those in office were often incompetent in a particular sphere they were appointed to (Mart, Tartu, EE; Iker, Sant Cugat, ES).

While there is no clear evidence from MYPLACE interviews for strong commitment to radical democratic interventions, respondents raise questions about the importance of the process of debate and deliberation in the constitution and reclamation of democracy. While some argue – in line with deliberative democratic approaches - for more horizontal, inclusive and substantive debate with the aim of achieving consensus, for others the essence of democracy lies in the legitimate expression of multiple and clearly differentiated opinions and that ‘dissensus’, not consensus, lies at the heart of politics (Rancière, 2011: 1).

‘Denmark is the most democratic country in the world’: Positive evaluations of democracy

Reflecting findings in the MYPLACE survey, satisfaction with democracy is highest in locations in western and eastern Germany, Denmark and Finland (see Section 3.1.2). In
interviews, pride in their democratic system was articulated by respondents from locations in Denmark and western Germany:

I believe that our election system and our political system are matured and democratic. (Brunhilde, Bremen, DE-W)

I heard just yesterday that Denmark is the most democratic country in the world. I think we just became number 1 yesterday or the day before. (Hans, OC, DK)

In contrast, respondents from post-socialist locations often qualified the nature of democracy, describing it as ‘quite solid’ (Bob, Pešćenica, HR), ‘pretty democratic’ (Levani, Telavi, GE) or a ‘limited’ or ‘partocratic’ democracy (Dajo, Trnava, SK). Positive evaluations of democracy were rarely recorded in interviews with respondents from the Mediterranean countries - Greece, Spain and Portugal - which were clustered in the bottom third of the survey location sites in terms of levels of satisfaction with democracy. The exception is a grudging acknowledgement that the Spanish national polity was democratic although rather inflexible: ‘At the state level, at the level of Spain? Yes. I think that it could be more robust and less rigid, but yes, I consider it to be democratic.’ (Oriol, Sant Cugat, ES).

In the UK evaluative statements about the level or quality of democracy were often expressed through comparisons with other countries where the UK was placed higher than Soviet Russia and North Korea, but not as advanced as the Netherlands which was cited as an example of ‘a proper democracy’ (Krys, Coventry, GB). Thus often it is concluded that democracy is far from perfect but the lesser evil: ‘Democracy is one of the worst systems ever but it’s the only one we’ve got that actually works, to an extent, without causing an absolutely massive repression that [...] completely stunts the growth of our civilisation.’ (Krys, Coventry, GB). This is confirmed by Antonio who suggests democracy has proven to be the most effective political system over time: ‘I think that democracy is the best solution, and this has been demonstrated throughout history, because the dictatorships have fallen, and communism has also fallen.’ (Antonio, Sant Cugat, ES). Jana concurs that democracy constitutes ‘the most fair way in which people can decide’ but it is not foolproof; as evident from the rise of National Socialism, she says, ‘the majority is deceived by some [...] wrong beliefs’ (Jana, Pešćenica, HR).

**Criticisms of democracy: An east/west split?**

In contrast to positive evaluations of democracy, criticisms of democracy are extensive. These narratives are also very clearly demarcated between: post-socialist societies where, at best, democracy is considered to be insecure or more accurately, still ‘a work in progress’ and, at worst, the existence of a democratic state is denied completely; and the rest of the participating countries where minor imperfections or limitations to ideal versions of democracy are noted by respondents.

**Democracy as ‘a work in progress’: Post-socialist societies**

The most common narrative of democracy among respondents from locations in post-socialist societies posits it as remaining a ‘work in progress’. This is often reflected in references comparing the current system with that of the past or evaluating ‘progress'
towards democracy.

In Georgia, the former socialist system was described as more democratic than the current one (Zura, Telavi, GE) while in Croatia one respondent noted that although there were limitations on freedom of speech under the socialist system:

 [...] I think that a lot of things functioned better in the former system, especially regarding the rights of the workers, because the state was organised socialistically and I think, it may sound strange, I think that people had more rights then, at least where some sort of security is concerned, security of their work places, and so on. Today, they can talk a lot but practically have no influence to vote on something, change something [...] (Branko, Pešćenica, HR)

Kristina is more critical of Slovakian democracy: ‘[...] I don’t think there is democracy in Slovakia. I think, sometimes it is much worse than under communism.’ (Kristina, Rimavska Sobota, SK). Hungarian respondents were the most demonstrative, however, declaring that such was the continuity between old and new elites, the country today constituted a ‘covert dictatorship’ (Tamás, Sopron, HU) or, under Orbán, a ‘kingdom’:

INT: Is there democracy now in Hungary?

RES: I think, in Hungary, it is a kingdom. Since Orbán came to power, and put the Crown on his head, and took a photo with all party members, and has two-thirds of the deputies in Parliament; that is exactly the situation he wants. The two-thirds passes it for him. (Aba, Ózd, HU)

Exceptions here are potentially locations in Latvia and Greece. In Latvia although the tendency to compare with past regimes was evident, respondents were more cautious of taking nostalgic positions: ‘Well, my mum says, that during the Soviet times it was better. We’ll, probably, it is like that, I don’t know.’ (Ada, Rīga, LV). Greece, in contrast, is the one non-post socialist country where this nostalgic discourse was located:

I think nowadays things are worse than under the dictatorship. Then they knew that the situation was not legal. [...] Today we have a disguised form of dictatorship. It is not called that, so people think that everything is done by the politicians in a legal way [...] when you are convinced that the situation you are living in is legal, it is more difficult to feel that your freedom is restricted and do something about it. (Efh, AR, GR)

This is perhaps unremarkable given that Greek locations showed the lowest rates of satisfaction with democracy overall in the MYPLACE survey. Persefonh sums this up:

We live in a worst state, of ‘underground’ dictatorship, and we are not conscious of it, because in the past it was clear, there was dictatorship! We could not get out of our homes! We could not speak freely! Now we are deprived of our right to free choice. (Persefonh, NF, GR)

In Slovakia, respondents often conform to wider discourse on Slovakian democracy which recognises the establishment of ‘a sort of democracy’ but that there is still a long way to go. Some recognise the existence of democratic standards and values such as freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom of choice compared to the previous regime and conclude that although they are living in a democratic society, they are still working on something that could become a mirror of a western type democracy.
I am sure that it is more democratic because some 50 years ago it was not democratic. Even 25 years back the regime was just over. Now, it is more and more democratic but it slowly starts to regress again but still, if I look back to ´90s I could call it a hybrid regime. (Bobo, Trnava, SK)

In Croatia respondents say that democracy is ‘definitely improving, but it is still quite slow. It’s on a low level.’ (Rajko, Podsljeme, HR) while in Estonia it is recognised that democracy is something that the country ‘strives for’ (Ly, Ida-Viru, EE) although there remain ‘many shortcomings’ (Siim, Tartu, EE). In Georgia respondents considered that the country had made ‘a step towards’ democracy but that there is still some way to go: ‘It’s democratic, we are headed towards democracy. I cannot say that there is no democracy but there is much to be fixed to become a pure democracy.’(Erekle, Kutaisi, GE). In Russia also democracy was characterised as emerging ‘step-by-step’ (Alisa, Kupchino, RU).

A second strong narrative exclusively found in post-socialist locations was the characterisation of the polity as ‘not democracy’ or in some way a ‘fake’ or ‘pseudo’ democracy. This is captured figuratively by one Georgian respondent who, claiming that democracy does not exist in Georgia since people do not rule but make a choice and then politicians rule for them, declares that ‘this democracy is a mask’ (Zura, Telavi, GE). Another Georgian respondent argues that ‘There is no democracy in Georgia today and you know why? I should have ability to openly name the party I support and not be afraid that somebody’s watching and my relatives will have problems because of this.’ (Shorena, Telavi, GE). In Croatia too, the polity is described as ‘not democracy’ because ‘coerced choice is not democracy’ (Tara, Pešćenica, HR) while Astra argues that ‘if you have half of the people unemployed, well, you’re not democracy’ (Astra, Podsljeme, HR). In Russia, the system is described as a ‘one-party system’ since the opposition is suppressed (Yan, Kupchino, RU). In Slovakia respondents also declare ‘there is no democracy in Slovakia’ often following up by referencing the fact that although people are equal in general, some are ‘more equal than others’ (Tomas, Trnava, SK). In Estonia respondents also say that there is ‘no democracy’ or that Estonia is a ‘deceptively democratic state’. In Latvia, one respondent feels that ‘[...] politicians themselves do everything to minimise the participation of society in political processes’ (Brencis, Rīga, LV) while Ludis (Daugavpils, LV) says Latvia ‘is not a democracy’ because ‘Russians are oppressed’.

Some respondents question not only the presence of democracy in their particular country but that it can exist at all: ‘Democracy? Democracy, democracy [...] hmm, theoretically, to be honest I don’t know if something like that exists.’ (Belo, Rimavska Sobota, SK). When asked what democracy means to him, Csele simply replied, ‘There is surely no such thing’ (Csele, Ózd, HU). For Anna, ‘democracy doesn’t exist anywhere in the world’ and if it does, it is more likely to be found in America than Russia (Anna, Kupchino, RU). Perhaps the most poignant response however is that of Hrvoje:

Democracy to me [...] uh, well. There’s a great picture on the internet. An airplane in flight - a Hercules bomber - and [sarcastic laughter] they are bombing, dropping bombs. And the caption on the picture says: ‘we are going to democracy the shit out of you’. So [...] democracy is a term nobody holds onto, it’s a deceit, a deception for everybody. (Hrvoje, Podsljeme, HR)

There are two exceptions to this rule. The first is that of eastern Germany where respondent narratives are closer to those of western German respondents than other post-socialist
countries in terms of showing a general trust in the political system and being proud of their
democratic system: ‘I think that we’re one country where we can be proud of our
democracy.’ (Daniel, Jena, DE-E). For this reason the more limited criticisms of democracy
found in eastern German narratives are discussed below rather than here. The second is the
presence of ‘nostalgia’ for a former regime envisaged to be more democratic in the non-
post-socialist context of Spain: ‘When they made the Republic, for example. When each
party had very concrete ideals, and they followed it to the letter. And when they really
represented the voice of the people and its voters.’ (Cristina, Vic, ES).

Imperfect democracy: non-post-socialist narratives

Criticisms of democracy outside post-socialist states tend to be more specific and contained
rather than constituting wholesale rejections of the current system as constituting
democracy. This is expressed succinctly by Angel:

Yes, we live in a democracy that perhaps is not complete or perfect [...] Of course, when
are you going to get to a perfect democracy? It’s a democracy that tries to continue
improving, but I believe that, yes, it’s a democracy, although it gets some things. (Angel,
Sant Cugat, ES)

Before considering the most common of these specific criticisms, it is worth noting
the exceptions to this rule. One respondent dismissed Finnish democracy as ‘a joke’ (Aki,
Kuopio, FI) and UK respondents questioned whether the UK and USA are really the models
of democracy they appear to be on the surface. Respondents from the Mediterranean
countries also used the post-socialist terminology of democracy as ‘false’ to describe the
polities they live in (Pere, Vic, ES):

Our democracy is a false democracy. I think democracy is as utopian as
communism. Democracy will never exist from the moment that there are some
deputies and there are people supposed to make decisions for us. They do not
make decisions for us, they make their decisions [...] Democracy does not exist. I
think, they say that it exists but does not exist. (Margarida, Lumiar, PT)

We don’t have democracy because nobody asks me about the things that have
to do with my life, I don’t think I have the opportunity to express my opinions
like in ancient Greece where a form of direct democracy existed. What we have
is so-called democracy and the only thing that reflects that is the fact that we
vote every four years. So we have democracy for half hour and then what?’
(Mihos, AR, GR)

In most non-post-socialist countries, however, shortcomings in democracy are more minor
and often relate to the processes of decision making. A common problem identified is that it
is complicated and inefficient: I respect it [democracy] a lot, but then it is sometimes
difficult if people are really disagreeing [...] sometimes I feel that democratic decision-
making is extremely slow.’ (Riikka, PK, FI). Respondents in eastern Germany call for the need
to speed up the process of implementation of policies and be ‘more direct, tackling direct
problems and trying to solve them.’ (Emil, Jena, DE-E) while Spanish respondents criticise
inefficiency in political decision-making where criticisms are directed both at the nature of
decision-making (institutional lag and general disregard for political inefficiency), as well as
at the individual politicians (Gemma, Sant Cugat, ES). Spanish respondents also complain that ‘there’s no transparency of the current democratic system’ (Jan, Sant Cugat, ES). This lack of transparency is noted also by respondents in locations in eastern Germany and Estonia.

A potentially more fundamental critique of democracy relates to concerns that the democratic ‘moment’ is limited to elections. There are a number of criticisms of the electoral process. The first concerns the lack of accountability of politicians after elections, reducing citizen participation to once every four or five years.

[…] the only thing we have is that we vote in the elections. And what else? That’s it. We don’t vote for anything more […] they decide so many things in Parliament and, I don’t know, in all these places […] (Victor, Sant Cugat, ES)

The second concerns elections as an imperfect tool of democracy. As one respondent from the UK notes, referring to the US Presidential elections happening at the time of research: ‘[…] the problem with democracy anyway is that, you know, nothing, nothing’s ever truly democratic. I mean if you look at the American election tonight, you know, that’s, that’s going to be decided by one third of America’ (David, Nuneaton, GB). A third criticism was that current electoral systems benefited larger parties producing a ‘hidden bipartisanism in a multi-party system’ (Gerard, Vic, ES).

But, clearly, the problem is the electoral system in Spain, because it’s poorly put together because it clearly benefits the dominant parties. A lot of people talk, like me, because we’re going to vote for Izquierda Unida [United Left]. If not, we’re not going to achieve anything. (Ernesto, Sant Cugat, ES)

In the UK the first past the post system was also criticised for restricting real choice to three parties and for being unfair since ‘one party could have more votes across the country, and still, and like not win’ (Gemma, Coventry, GB). All of these criticisms were found also among Croatian respondents, where one respondent suggested that the accumulation of these deficiencies meant: ‘[…] you can choose, but you can’t choose between that which you want, but between the choices which are given to you, I mean in that sense that is not democracy’ (Tara, Pešćenica, HR).

Another substantive critique relates to the confinement of real decision-making within democratic systems to a narrow elite or ‘powerful few’. Hector calls forms of representative democracy currently in operation as ‘elitist’ and in which ‘I don’t feel represented’ (Hector, Vic, ES). Sissy (NF, GR) calls democracy ‘a selective democracy. Democracy for some people.’ Oona feels that the opportunity for people to have any impact is very limited since ‘it’s a small group that makes those decisions in the end’ (Oona, Kuopio, FI). David (Lumiar, PT) finds the system in Portugal to be ‘not democratic’ because ‘political power is only for some and not representative of the will or ideas of the people who vote for politicians to represent them’. Cara provides an example from her own experience of engaging in a particular issue of local policy, when she came away disappointed with the capacity of residents to affect decisions made:

They’d made, yeah as though the meeting was irrelevant, it was going to happen whether or not people agreed with it. Which, to an extent, I think you have got to make decisions regardless of what people think but I think people’s opinions should always be taken into account because at the end of the day the
government’s job is yes, alright, you’ve got to enforce some things upon the population but you’ve also got to look at what the population think and act upon that. (Cara, Nuneaton, GB)

Adria sums up democracy, in which elections are almost the only point of engagement with people, as a political system that ‘tries to give the impression that the citizen can do something’ (Adria, Vic, ES). For Oswald (Bremen, DE-W) ‘the current democratic system is not that democratic anymore. I call it post-democracy.’

Membership of the EU is also considered a constraint on national democracy in a number of countries. This was a narrative that was particularly strong among UK respondents who complain that the EU reverses decisions made by national governments and that the EU ‘dictates to us’:

Yeah, yeah ‘cause the EU overturn everything man, do you know what I mean? It’s just stupid things like, I don’t think it should happen, do you know what I mean? I think we should have a lot more control over our, control over our own policies, instead of like oh well, we’ll have to look at the EU for this, oh, we’ll have to look at them for that [...] We should have more control over our own country, it’s ours at the end of the day. (Craig, Nuneaton, GB)

One respondent from the UK even refers to Angela Merkel as ‘a dictator’. The language of dictatorship appears also among respondents in Estonia who suggest that as long as Estonia is dependent on the EU, it will dictate what the country can and cannot do. Finnish respondents also note that ‘more decisions are coming from EU. I think [Finland] is changing, it is not anymore [so democratic.]’(Riitta, PK, FI). In Spain, the EU is criticised for its lack of transparency in decision-making processes, as well as for the bureaucratic (i.e. unelected) nature of large segments of the organisational system (Rosa, Sant Cugat, ES).

One exception here is one of the new member states, Latvia, where joining the EU is seen as having been important in developing democracy in Latvia (Vits, Daugavpils, LV).

Finally, one of the strongest criticisms of contemporary democracy is the perceived influence of the business elite on politics and the consequent corruption of politicians. As this is discussed extensively above (see Section 3.1.2), here it is noted only that, in terms of the spread of concerns about corruption across locations, the interviews largely confirm MYPLACE survey data. The survey created a single measure of ‘cynicism’ based on agreement with the statements ‘Politicians are corrupt’ and ‘The rich have too much influence over politics’ and found generally high rates of cynicism across the survey sample. Locations in Mediterranean countries of Greece, Portugal and Spain were the most cynical while lowest cynicism was found in the two Danish and Finnish locations. Interview data confirmed this pattern as well as the high rate of cynicism in Croatia identified in the survey.

Support for non-democratic systems

In this final section, we consider whether beneath the tangibly tepid support for contemporary democracy, lies some evidence that young people would be willing to contemplate non-democratic forms of rule as a way to escape the contemporary political malaise. The MYPLACE survey data found some evidence of this. Using a scale for attitudes to the democratic system (based on positive and negative evaluations towards ‘Having a
democratic, multi-party system’ and ‘Having an opposition that can freely express its views’) negative attitudes towards the democratic system were found to be clustered in locations in post-socialist European societies. This pattern is repeated in support for ‘autocratic principles’ of government (a scale constructed on the basis of attitudes towards ‘Having a strong leader who is not constrained by parliament’ and ‘Having the army rule’). However, the survey also indicated pockets of dissent from democracy across the European space. In the UK locations, for example, ‘Having a democratic, multi-party system’ was positively evaluated by less than two-thirds (62.7 per cent) of respondents while more than half (56.1 per cent) saw a strong leader, unconstrained by parliament, as either a ‘very good’ or ‘fairly good’ form of government.

The interview data confirm both this clustering of support for non-democratic systems as well as the surprising results for the UK. Thus preference for a one-party rather than multi-party political system is noted only by respondents from locations in post-socialist societies. In Slovakia, five respondents considered a one party system to be preferable, arguing that it is ‘better to have one party than many smaller ones’ (Belo, Rimavška Sobota, SK). Respondents from Estonia suggested that multiple parties fuelled the tendency discussed above for parties to make promises they do not fulfil. In Estonia and Hungary it was argued that it was better to have one good party than many bad ones.

INT: And [...] is there a need for more parties or would one do?
RES: One would be enough, if it did things right. More parties, more debate.
INT: And if there were more parties, do you think it would be better if they agreed, that debate is harmful?
RES: Well, now, there are more parties, and they agree. So it is just as if there were only one party. I think, one would be enough if it did things right. (Márk, Ózd, HU)

One Latvian respondent was so disillusioned with the current system that she noted that ‘I think that even authoritarian regime is better than the government we have right now.’ (Lote, Daugavpils, LV). In Russia and Hungary respondents felt that multiple parties split the country at times when unity was needed. Thus Gelej would be happy ‘if there was one party, that would really tell the truth [...] a strong-handed group who unite the interests for the sake of the whole country and for one goal’ (Gelej, Ózd, HU). Marina also sought a single, clear direction:

 [...] it’s better when there is only one [party]. Because when many of them are competing, they just make a fuss and do not propose any methods, only multiply discussions. And the country moves in different directions – one party, then another one [...] When there is one party – at least there is a clear direction. (Marina, Kupchino, RU)

One eastern German respondent also felt that a form of enlightened despotism was potentially acceptable:

If there’s really somebody reasonable in power who’s got a clue, does his job properly and isn’t too selfish, I mean dictators are usually self-serving by nature; but someone who’s really concerned about the country, about the people in the country, I can imagine that it’ll work. (Klaus, Jena, DE-E)
Potential support for authoritarian regimes was expressed also in the desire for a concentration of power (‘to get things moving’) often envisaged as being enacted through ‘a strong leader’. Thus Dean wishes Croatia had a leader like Vladimir Putin:

[...] I am not a big supporter of democracy. [...] as a nation we’re not mature enough for democracy [and] it would be better for us if we had someone like Putin, maybe a bit more radical. I wish that a person like him would take over and all the power would be concentrated in one person. Because now it is divided too much and you have to agree with everybody and that is what got us into this situation. (Dean, Podsljeme, HR)

The strong leader narrative was particularly potent in Croatia where several respondents expressed support for some form of single, strong leader or authoritarian system that would centralise power in the state and kick-start an improvement in the economy. Thus Tara is willing to accept ‘some kind of semi-dictatorship’ (Tara, Pešćenica, HR) if it improved things, while Barbara thought the only way to bring order to the state was to place power in the hands of a single person supported by the army: ‘[...] to be honest, I think that in order to bring order to this state, I think we need some kind of [...] a regime where one person is in power [...] Um, with a big role for the army [...]’ (Barbara, Podsljeme, HR). Her afterthought that such a person ‘should be extremely well educated’ conjures a vision of some kind of enlightened despotism. Respondents in Hungary also felt that a good leader might have to be not only determined and respected but also sometimes ‘cruel’ in order that ‘after that, everyone would accept that he was right. And from that, it could be seen, how great a leader he is.’ (Karl, Ózd, HU).

A number of respondents from locations in the UK argued for stronger political leadership. Identifying this as a characteristic of Margaret Thatcher as a positive leader - ‘a very strong hand at the wheel’ - Cara, compares her leadership with politicians today: ‘I think now politicians are too worried about what people think of what they’re gonna do. Whereas if something needs to be done, it needs to be done at the end of the day [...]’ (Cara, Nuneaton, UK). In terms of alternative non-democratic systems, some UK respondents advocated the replacement of parliament with the monarch as the highest authority. Darrell advocated ‘Not the government, let the Queen make the final decision, like we, like it used to be in the old days’ because unlike politicians, she would be motivated by the fact that ‘she loves her country’ (Darrell, Nuneaton, GB). Recognising that an unelected leader would mean you would have no way of voting them out if they did things that you did not approve of, Barry maintained nonetheless that:

I’d still rather have one person in control instead of a bunch of random fuckers that just abuse everyone. A king and a queen I believe should still have respect for the people, listen to the people, that, you know, parliaments don’t do that, they just do what they fucking want. (Barry, Nuneaton, GB)

It should be noted also, however, that, more widely, respondents downplayed the importance of leaders in terms of their own political choices and were critical of the way the media turned leaders into ‘celebrities’ and made image the most important factor in elections (Gemma, Coventry, GB). Thus respondents claimed they chose parties on the basis of their programme, ideology or wider constituency rather than leaders (EE, PT, DE-E, GR): ‘I could never vote for a certain party because of its leader. I think this way of thinking is focusing too much on the person’ (Iris, NF, Greece).
3.2 Political participation

In this section references by respondents to informal and formal political activities are considered. The discussion is confined to those actions viewed as ‘political’ by interviewees - such as voting, joining a party, demonstrating, signing petitions – and thus does not include volunteering, joining civil organisations or taking part in individual charity events.

3.2.1 Participation in formal activities

It is a widely shared view in the academic literature that people and especially young people dissociate themselves from formal politics (Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Mair and van Biezen, 2001; Norris, 2003). Evidence shows that they tend to vote less (Kimberlee, 2002; Wattenberg, 2006) and are less likely to participate in formal political organisations such as parties and trades unions than older generations (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). MYPLACE survey data show that the picture is more complex, however. Over the whole survey sample, 71 per cent of eligible respondents reported that they had voted at least once; a figure that cannot be understood as indicative of widespread youth ‘apathy’. Moreover, this rate shows great volatility across locations, reaching 80 per cent in Podsljeme (HR), both Danish locations, Kuopio (FI), both eastern German locations, Agenškalns (LV) and Vic (ES) while falling as low as 39 per cent in Nuneaton (GB). The decline in youth participation in formal political activities is frequently discussed alongside the hypothesis that young people tend to engage increasingly in alternative, non-institutionalised, informal types of political participation (Norris, 2002; Marien et al., 2010; see also Section 3.2.2 below). The findings of the MYPLACE interview data, however, suggest that these tendencies do not result in a dramatically increased participation in all research locations and that young people also have negative experiences with these activities. Experiences of participation in such non-conventional politics is discussed in the following subsection, in this subsection attitudes to, and experiences of, respondents in relation to the two main forms of formal political participation - voting and participating in formal political organisations – are discussed.

3.2.1.1 Voting as a ‘civic duty’ or ‘I would vote “against all” if that were an option’

The most general and widely accepted manifestation of political activity is voting in referenda and elections – mostly national ones. Respondents spoke about such participation as positive and enjoyable. For some ‘it is a privilege.’ (Libor, Trnava, SK) and for a significant proportion of the respondents, it is the only acceptable and legitimate way of participating in formal politics: ‘I like to vote, but I don’t like participating in a political party.’ (Joan, Vic, ES); or ‘[…] voting is the only political activity in which I participate.’ (Grigory, Kupchino, RU). The fact that some respondents do not even regard it as a political activity - ‘Is that politics?’ (Sveta, Kupchino, RU) - indicates its special position among forms of political activism.

There are several reasons for this positive attitude. The most frequently mentioned reason is a moral one; it is a quite widespread opinion that voting is a civic duty.
Yes, civic duty. Because if you don’t go, you lose interest in those who govern you. Even, if you, well, your candidate or candidates for deputy don’t win, you’ve done your civic duty […] (Denis, Daugavpils, LV)

Voting is also regarded as a right that generations fought for, especially in the case of women respondents: ‘Especially as a woman, I feel that other women have fought and died for my right to vote, so it’s my responsibility to get my lazy ass to a polling station and like do the research and stuff.’ (Pam, Coventry, UK). A more practical and critically motivated variation of this attitude is that, by not voting, one loses the right to complain. This opinion is the most widely represented one across locations: ‘[…] if you don’t vote you don’t get to complain’ (James, Coventry, UK). In the Latvian dataset, respondents also argued that since they have fulfilled their duty to vote, they have a right to expect politicians to fulfil their promises (Ozoliņš, 2013).

I liked it because many people say that they don’t vote, which I don’t understand, because at the end of the day they complain about politics. About what they [politicians] do wrong. I think it is important to participate in elections to prevent the wrong parties from getting into power. So you can say: 'I played my part in establishing the government as we have it now.' (Jennifer, Bremerhaven, DE-W)

Respondents from the locations in Greece also showed heightened willingness to participate in elections (Koronaiou et al., 2013) because it was an important right that they still had despite the crisis:

I heard some guys saying ‘it’s too far, I will not go to vote’, but I could not accept that. I couldn’t, because of my conscience, to accept that they give me the right to choose, to vote and I am not taking advantage of this opportunity. At least, despite all the other things that have been abolished, I still have the right to vote and express my opinion!' (Euthalia, AR, GR)

Voting is also regarded as a moral obligation because it appears to be one way to prevent extreme parties gaining more influence:

I ALWAYS vote. But I only vote against right-extremists. So I don’t vote for any specific party because I really like it that much. I just vote against the rightists. Very strict. To prevent extremists, no matter whether they are right- or left-extremists, that’s all crap [laughing]. The point is just that it should stay straight in the middle. That’s why I participate in elections. (Rosemarie, BREMEN, DE-W)

Another reason is a generational one – reaching the age limit of 18 and being eligible is a milestone in a young person’s life, a symbol of being a full member of adult society:

Well I must say that I looked forward very excitedly to getting the right to vote and go vote. I always said that I will know who to vote for and I would vote for him or her […] then since I got the right to vote it has been very difficult, it has been very difficult to choose my own candidate. (Kaija, PK, FI)

Voting is seen as a civic duty also sometimes because respondents have been brought up that way. Indeed, parents are frequently mentioned as influencing the decision of the interviewees to participate as well as their party preference.
I participated because my mother asked me to go and vote for this or that. But since I’m not interested in politics, it is difficult for me even before the elections to listen, let’s say, to the speeches or debates of various politicians. (Leo, Daugavpils, Latvia)

And finally, as respondents argue, voting in a general election is a quite simple way to have a voice, and does not need much investment of time or energy.

I usually go vote, we have enough time for it, you don’t need to sit or wait there for an hour. It is just two or three minutes. I choose whom I want to vote for and I cast my vote, nothing happens to me and this is the only way you can change anything. It does not cost you anything. (Belo, Rimavska Sobota, SK).

And it is still a way to influence political decisions, even for those who generally do not take part in political decisions.

In general, the only thing someone like me can do is to vote in elections. I can’t see myself being involved in politics and making a change, so the most I can do is to vote for someone I support and trust to get the job done. (Dato, Kutaisi, GE)

Voting out of civic duty is not linked to any ideological position and, indeed, voting can be practiced without desire or hope to change society or any open support for a particular political party, organisation or issue. It is, moreover, a motivating factor regardless of the current political situation. This is reflected in the fact that ‘civic duty’ is cited as a reason to vote commonly across all research sites; there were no significant regional differences between the datasets. Where voting is understood in this way – as a civic duty, supported by parents and as a sine qua non of democratic system – it can be undertaken without profound engagement and negative attitudes to political parties have less of an impact on young people’s willingness to participate.

Nevertheless, negative attitudes towards the political elite and mistrust in politicians can also influence the voting behaviour of young people. Interviewees – although in fewer numbers than those who expressed positive views – argued against voting, usually as a way of justifying their absence from elections. The most commonly cited opinion reflects a general rejection of political parties: there is no party to vote for.

RES: [...] I would vote ‘against all’, if that were an option.
INT: Why?
RES: Because there is nobody worthy. (Igor, Kupchino, RU)

Abstention from voting, nevertheless is not necessarily the result of an apolitical attitude. In such political environments, where a relatively high value attributed to political participation is accompanied by critical attitudes towards the political sphere, (UK, Greece), respondents suggested that their non-participation in elections is a deliberate action or message: ‘I think that political participation is of great value and that’s the way I participate, but in the current situation I believe that if all citizens didn't vote as part of a well organised campaign, this would be very effective’ (Manolis, Argyropoli, GR). This attitude was more clearly manifested in spoiling the ballot paper, which is regarded as a form of expressing interest in political affairs and a strong opinion but at the same time, rejecting the legitimisation of the political elite.
But I’m torn, because most of my friends, most of the people my age won’t vote any more, like, erm, they won’t even spoil ballot papers, which I think is preferable, to me, like I would rather someone walked to the polling station, ruin a ballot paper as protest, than just not vote. (Pam, Coventry, UK)

This kind of rejection of participation in elections is explained by respondents as a result of the fact that there is no real difference between parties, i.e. ‘they are all the same’ (see Section 3.1.2).

No. I don’t, I won’t vote. I know what they say, like oh yeah, they fought to get women’s rights to vote and stuff like that - don’t bother me, does not interest me in the, in the slightest. I don’t, I really don’t find that even if I do vote my vote’s gonna make a difference to who, to who gets what or who does what and stuff like that and what they’re gonna do with it, with that power and they’re gonna [...] I don’t think it influences it. (Esther, Nuneaton, UK)

However, not all respondents, who decided not to vote, wanted to articulate a clear message of disavowal. Sometimes, in more apolitical milieux such as Croatia, Hungary or even in relatively politically engaged ones, like Finland or the UK, some respondents sought to distance themselves from the political sphere and all political activities by claiming simply that this was ‘none of their business’: ‘I really, really don’t care, I’m one of them people that just don’t care, unless it affects me directly’ (Gianna, Nuneaton, UK). In the following quote, the respondent expresses a trajectory in which she first distances herself from the political field by turning against the established political elite and showing preference for an anti-establishment party but later, in bitter desperation, turns away from politics altogether.

RES: I don’t think I am the one who has to solve these problems. Let others solve them, who are interested in it, but they should leave me alone. I don’t care.
INT: You would not even vote?
RES: No. [...] I tell you honestly, I don’t, because if this [party] wins that will be a problem, if the other wins, [something else]... Then why? I don’t see the future of it. Well, OK, Jobbik. Not long ago, I thought that Jobbik would be good. But now I don’t feel like that. I have nothing to do with them. I don’t want to live here in Hungary. I don’t even like Hungary. (Adri, Ózd, HU)

Passivity during elections is explained also sometimes to respondents’ own lack of knowledge or understanding of politics (see Section 3.1.3).

### 3.2.1.2 Participation in formal political organisations

Another traditional form of political participation discussed by respondents was taking part in the work of formal political organisations, such as political parties or their youth sections or organisations. As demonstrated in Section 3.1 of this report, MYPLACE qualitative data confirm that young people largely dissociate themselves from formal politics. Participation in formal political organisations was discussed, therefore, largely in response to questions or prompts by the interviewer rather than spontaneously and usually in negative terms. Even in the most active regions, such as Finland, Denmark and Germany, young people had only limited experience of how political organisation might work; but even this limited experience was much more than that of respondents from Eastern and East Central Europe.
Most frequently, when asked about this form of activity, the reaction of respondents was to distance themselves. Nevertheless, the rejection of participation of formal political organisations shows various patterns within and between regions.

**Negative opinions – ‘I always avoid that’**

The most frequent reaction, when respondents were asked about their experiences of participating in formal politics was to distance themselves from it. Often this was expressed as a blank rejection rather than articulated as a principled opinion: ‘I always avoid that [...] I didn’t want to have anything to do with that.’ (Vanick, Rimavska Sobota, SK); or ‘I cannot imagine myself being part of a political party’ (Mirta, Pešćenica, HR). These opinions are quite widespread across the whole dataset although more frequently encountered in regions that might be characterised as more generally politically passive. In these locations, such attitudes were also expressed in less nuanced forms; since negative opinion reflected a more blanket rejection of the political system, respondents did not feel any need to explain the reasons for declining to work with parties. Even supporting parties was criticised: ‘it is better to keep your distance, the problem is that people believe too much in a certain party, as if it were God, they cling on to such a belief’ (Lujza, Sopron, HU). For this respondent joining any party would not be legitimate.

However, especially in more active milieux such as in locations in Denmark, Finland and Germany, where respondents frequently expressed satisfaction with the country’s democracy, even inactive respondents were inclined to explain their passivity: ‘I considered becoming a politician, but then I found out how much mudslinging there was and how little respect there was for politicians in the media, then I said, I didn’t want to’ (Bente, OE, DK). Here, the respondent seems to excuse herself for being passive, and offers a narrative in which she was first open to politics but subsequently was turned off engagement in this sphere. Similar examples of such explanations are detailed below.

**‘I rarely agree a hundred per cent with a party’**

Other respondents did not exclude joining a particular party in principle, but had not found any that matched their ideology or views: ‘I’m left, I’m right, I’m in favour and against some decisions, that’s basically it, I cannot exactly place, identify [myself] precisely in the ideas of any party.’ (Sofia, Lumiar, PT). Elisabeth articulates this as feeling that it is difficult to choose any party ‘because I rarely agree a hundred per cent with a party’s or a person’s programme’ (Elisabeth, Bremen, DE-W). Others found that their own views changed so fast that there was no point joining any party: ‘my opinion changes sometimes so quickly that I would not have time to change the bank payment’ (Patrick, OC, DK). These opinions express an ideological distance from parties but not a general rejection of the idea of participating in the work of parties and being involved in the representative system. What appears to discourage respondents is that joining a party marks a clear declaration of belonging to a political community and requires commitment to a stable pattern of activities that young people, for whom individual values are important, might find too constraining. This may be an important reason for why voting is a much more acceptable form of participation than membership of, or activism in, a single party.

I don’t participate because I haven’t found any party that completely agrees with my ideals and what I believe. If I found one, maybe I would participate. Due to
my personality, I wouldn’t commit myself totally, but I would participate, I think.
(Carme, Sant Cugat, ES)

No power

Another reason for rejecting participation in a political party is a practical and rational one; some respondents claimed that youth organisations of parties have no real power, they have no opportunity to influence decisions and thus they cannot change anything.

[...] well for political participation I would say, no, while in terms of dealing with specific problems then there has always been voluntary work [...] I cannot see the way for young people [to participate], like if we take the most common political image, like youth sections, should they then participate in discussions? Youth sections in Estonia are very different than say in Lithuania, for example, where the Mayor really discusses with youth sections like youth related political issues (Vello, Tartu, EE)

A similar opinion was found in Croatia, where Astra claimed that a young person like her coming from her social background could not have any influence on the politics of the party.

Well maybe I wanted to at the time, but then I saw there is no need to and that, my uncle, dad, there is nothing we could do [...] only rich people participate because they can contribute. Those who can bring some kind of benefit. I can’t do anything useful there. (Astra, Podsljeme, HR)

These young people do not express criticism of the representative system in general, nor the ideological foundations of particular parties, they are just highly sceptical about the effectiveness of their own participation in them due to generational or class inequalities. Such opinions must be seen therefore alongside sharply contrasting views detailed below that joining a party is the only way to influence political decisions. Similar doubts about the effectiveness of political actions are also found in relation to other political activities, such as signing petitions, participating in demonstrations, etc. and are discussed below.

'Stigma'

Other respondents spoke about the fear of negative consequences of political actions. This might be expressed in the form of just a general reluctance to reveal their own (political) ideology: ‘[…] I don’t like to express my credo to others’ (Franz, Bremen, DE-W). However, it also took a more articulated form. Joining a political movement requires an open identification with a community and its ideology, that young people might regard as dangerous and thus they preferred to avoid identifiable political participation. In Denmark, for example, respondents indicated that they feared that registration with a party might lead to data being stored, which later might prove to be a stigma (Yndigegn, 2013: 48) while, in Russia, Petr was afraid of getting involved in something ‘dodgy’.

I was basically raised like that – if you feel that it’s kind of dodgy, and some bad things can happen out of it, then why go there? It’s better to go somewhere where it’s proven [to be ok]. (Petr, Vyborg, RU)

The fear that a certain political action might become dangerous is expressed more strongly in relation to demonstrations and internet activities (see below). What is important to note here is that even joining legal political parties and movements, can be regarded as risky while, in case of radical movements, respondents fear direct consequences, such as losing
their job. This is expressed in the interview with a serving soldier in Nuneaton (UK) who is nervous at first even of stating which party he had considered joining:

INT: Have you ever thought about joining an organisation or movement that, that has similar views about the threat?
RES: I would but because of me job I can’t.
INT: You can’t, okay. Have you, have you, have you looked at different movements then?
RES: Without a doubt, but...
INT: Which in particular?
RES: Oh, fuck, the BNP.
INT: The BNP?
RES: Generally, just ‘cause they’ve got the best idea, I reckon, fair enough there’s one issue with them I’ve got and that’s the fact that they basically want to make us border control, the army itself. [...] But I’d accept that, to have an English country. (Barry, Nuneaton, GB)

Another respondent, in Croatia, was a member of a political party, but refused to name the organisation: ‘I am active in politics. I am a member of a political party, which I don’t want to mention now.’ (Rajko, Podsljeme, HR).

‘People want to make a career’

One of the most frequently mentioned and overarching criticisms of contemporary politics is that politicians are corrupt. This criticism also has an impact on young people’s willingness to participate although not always in negative terms.

I think that young people today who get involved with politics, are looking for a job for the future [...] and I speak from personal experience and the people I know and have met. [They] are seeking political office, not wanting to change something, but wanting to make a career. I think this is the big problem, those who follow the path of politics are people who want to make a career, looking to the 'pot' and not wanting to make a difference and modify what is wrong. (Tiago, Lumiar, PT)

While Tiago criticises young people for joining political parties in pursuit of their own interest rather than in order to make a difference to the wider community, the career opportunities that come with joining political movements are welcomed by some:

I received advice that [...] in searching for a job it would be more than helpful to become a member of a party. [...] You're not a bad person because of that. (Barbara, Podsljeme, HR)

'I really have no time'

Another obstacle to joining a party can be that young people have other priorities in their lives and they cannot find the time to take part in the work of a political organisation. Being an activist is time-consuming, and needs to be done at the expense of time spent on social life, leisure or education. One respondent from Finland explains non-participation thus: 'It is probably because I am into [sport] and I have many hobbies and so I do not have time to other things or take part in.' (Kai, PK, FI). Some respondents had been active for a certain period of their lives but later had to abandon it due to other obligations: 'It just tuned to
dust, and it was not because my views changed or anything, but then I got a job, and there were just a lot of things in my life right then' (Kate, OE, DK). Pere explains dropping out of activism as due to a combination of factors:

But after 4 or 5 months [...] no, maybe I lasted a year. Because I was already busy because I was studying and working and there was a lot of infighting and I didn’t really get the whole idea of such a pure democracy very clearly, what with Carretero [leader of a faction of ERC. Left, Republican and Catalan party, in favour of the self-determination of Catalonia] and the new people that were coming in. (Pere, Vic, ES)

This problem can be even harder, when there is a great distance between the venue of activism and home and/or the respondent has to work.

Sure, I got up at 6 in the morning, left for Granollers, arrived here [in Vic] at 3, had lunch, and then went to work until 8 or 9. Then I had to go there and do whatever I had to. But I also had school work. And it was complicated. If in addition, you meet a girl, and I don’t know what, of course, you don’t have a social life. You don’t have anything. (Pere, Vic, ES)

Yeah, right. Because I go to university in the morning and if I don’t have anything planned in the afternoon [...] I study. But yeah, usually they call me to babysit or to teach a private class [...] which is good for me, but I just don’t have any time. (Ariadna, Sant Cugat, ES)

Similar stories were told by other respondents from Finland (Keijo PK, FI) and western Germany (Madeline, Bremerhaven, DE-W). This obstacle, again, hinders political participation of those young people who do not reject political parties and working with them per se, but whose other priorities in life mean they either do not start or have to stop active political participation.

'There are people who are much better prepared' – generational aspects

Lack of self-confidence can also hinder political participation. Young people might have the feeling that being a politician requires special skills that they do not possess:

No, basically because, well, really I think that there are people that are much better prepared for this than I am in this field. I am politically active, and I know how to develop arguments, but I wouldn’t know how to defend myself with even half the arguments that Albert Rivera [leader of Ciutadans, new centre-right Spanish nationalist party] uses, everything that he defends... Or instead of Albert Rivera you could put in the name of any other politician. I have never seen myself as being in politics. (Angel, Sant Cugat, ES)

This is linked sometimes to the opinion that politicians have to be highly skilled professionals and politics is a very complex realm (Sections 3.1.3 and 3.1.4). This creates a vision that politics is distant from young people. It should be noted also here that the interviewee above did not attribute negative labels to participation or politics; he was active but expressed the belief that he lacked the skills to be a leader. Nick from Coventry (UK) had similar doubts about how effective he would be as a politician: 'But I don’t know how, how productive I’d be, perhaps, you know, speaking in the House and getting my point across and things like that'.
Another variation of this opinion is that politics is not for young people without a profession.

However I don’t like it when people get involved in parties when they are so young in order to be [...] What I mean is that you need to have a profession and then join a party, but not [...] be in a party as if it were your whole life, I don’t know. (Julia, Sant Cugat, ES)

In Russia, one respondent did not even justify his absence by his lack of skills, but simply his age: 'I am still too young, to tell the truth, to go deeply into politics' (Mark, Vyborg, RU). A similar opinion was expressed in Nuneaton (UK), where Melanie was afraid of not being taken seriously because of her age.

Positive opinions

A small group of respondents recounted their experiences with active participation in a political party.

Yes and I was candidate in [election], even though it was not really political elections. [...] So yes, I’ve participated in activities and I don’t have anything bad to say about it. (Otto, Kuopio, FI)

A small number of respondents were enthusiastic about their participation: 'Politics is my hobby and my life. (Bohdan, Trnava, SK); or 'Youth Forum, any kind of actions, I participate.' (Martin, Podsljeme, HR). In Denmark, respondents expressed also that from inside, party life was fascinating (Yndigegn, 2013: 42) while, in Spain, one respondent described the positive effects of party membership:

Altered, no. It has simply enriched me. Now I know more than before when I wasn’t a part of JERC [Youth Left Republican Catalan party]. There are points of view that you have to take into account and they are interesting. (Cristina, Vic, ES)

'The only way to influence'

The opinion that it is necessary to be an active member of the political community is expressed occasionally by respondents: 'You cannot modify anything if you are not in the system' (Oana, Coventry, GB). Similar positions were taken by respondents from Bremen (western Germany), who shared the opinion that the only effective way of participating in the decision-making process and representing their own opinions was participation in a party. 'It would be inadequate just to talk with friends about parties. I would like to participate and be a part of the party’s opinion expression and opinion formation'. (Ronny, Bremerhaven, DE-W). Only a very few respondents answered the question 'What do you feel someone like you can do to improve the situation you have described?' with reference to participation in parties. On such person was Jens, who responded that the best response was ‘to e yourselves in some groups’ (Jens, Jena, DE-E). More usual was to answer this question with reference to more general definitions of political participation:

Participating, I mean being in institutions, organisations and associations, being active, educating yourself, finding information, like I said before [...] I don’t know, being a bit active. (Berta, Sant Cugat, ES)
'Accident' or 'Planning'

Some respondents reported having joined political movements accidentally by attending a party event. Leonóra had thought about joining the Socialist Party, for example, after coming across them in the Youth Park and learning that ‘They have a special club for women’ (Leonóra, Ózd, HU). Another respondent, in Finland, got drunk at a party and ended up being recruited to a political party, and a similar story happened in Denmark (Yndigegn, 2013: 50). However, these commitments rarely proved strong enough to sustain active engagement.

"...I got involved [in the Youth of Social Democrats] when I was 14 years old, I was drunk, because I got T-shirt of Tarja Halonen. [Laughs] I still have the T-shirt because I like to remind myself about how little it demands from a young child to, oh my god, get into party activities. That was enough. I still got mail from them until around 2010, 2009.’ (Elli, Kuopio, FI)

In refutation to the previous opinion, other respondents described how they had given a lot of thought to the decision to join a party. 'I thought about it and for some time I had wanted to participate in a party'. (Resi, Bremen, DE-W).

'Politics is more ideology for me than acting'

For a small circle of respondents, joining a political party was not motivated by any aim of impacting on society but was more a symbolic expression of identity.

"...Well, not so much. It is politics I’m a bit interested in. I’m a member of Youth of The Finns so I follow to some extent all these things.

RES: One year, I guess.

INT: Okay, what made you join the Finns?

RES: Well, it was, at least in my case, the right ideology that they follow. (Risto, PK, FI)

Sometimes, strong ideological affiliation is accompanied by the rejection of acting according to the expectations of the organisation.

"...The [Leftist] party has tried a lot to persuade me to get involved. I was [a candidate in an election]. [...] even though I say I’m Leftist however I do not perceive myself as a Left Alliance person. So, after all, politics is more ideology for me than acting in some party organisation and according to their rules and habits. (Erja, Kuopio, FI)

In this way, the respondent avoided the formal, highly bureaucratised, hierarchical organisation culture of a party, and its pressure to be a member, and approached political activism from a more individualised perspective (Saari, 2013: 33)

Another respondent, in refutation to the opinions above, spoke about how she had expected to find a forum for political discussion and opinion formation but had been disappointed when participation, for others, seemed to be more about identity formation (Yndigegn, 2013: 49):
But I resigned at a fairly early age. Because [...] I think people were too idealistic and not realistic enough in fact. And therefore, I did not really get anything out of it. [...] It was more about having an identity for young people, I think, and having a political opinion, more than being about debate and new thinking [...] (Elin, OC, DK)

Patriotism

Joining a political party might be motivated also by a strong patriotic feeling of being morally obliged to help the homeland also in this way.

INT: Would you like to join some party in the future?

RES: Of course, I’d like to. I have thought about it, and still do. Some people see it as a baby talk, some think that it takes lots of time, and I will be busy with it 24 hours a day, but frankly – I love this country, and I will be with it until the end. And I would like to change something [...] and it will be in the party, I will be proud that people said ‘Thank you’ to me and to my party. Thank you for doing this and that. (Vika, Vyborg, RU)

Only certain activities - individualised attitudes

Contemporary research on forms of youth political activism has shown that individual attitudes determine the political behaviour of young people (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Horvath and Paolini, 2014) and political individualism has challenged or (re)shaped traditional forms of political activism (Hay and Stoker, 2009). As seen above (‘Politics is more an ideology for me than acting’ and ‘I rarely agree to a hundred per cent to a party’), being fully committed to a political party and following it in all actions can be too constraining for many young people. Many of them choose more individual forms of participation. They might join certain activities that they agree with (most frequently a party rally, or sometimes collecting signatures for a petition, or campaigning for a certain candidate), or join a party only for a short period, sometimes even without being formally members of the party or its youth organisation. Such experiences were encountered among respondents from Finland, Denmark, and Spain. The Danish dataset showed that even membership in a political party is not a lifelong commitment, but young people frequently join them for a short ‘test period’ and which they make a decision, in a similar way as they make consumer decisions. Spanish respondents (Isabel, Rosa) claimed that they would join only a local organisation of a party that they felt was close to them, but would not join the party itself.

So, I went to the assembly of Parallel, I was in an assembly of the CUP in Parallel, in Poble Sec, and I didn’t like at all the three people who [...] I kept thinking that I wouldn’t vote for them in our town. But those from here I do like. I was passing by and I had colleagues who lived there and they said, ‘come to a meeting of the CUP’, and I did. And it was good. (Isabel, Sant Cugat, ES)

Alternatively, they might take part in the electoral campaign of a local candidate while refusing to be involved at higher levels.

At the local level I’m with the JERC, I think this is political activity. Related to this what we do, or what I did: putting up posters when elections come, distributing flyers, speaking with people [...] On election day you work all day at the electoral college, also going to vote. (...) I joined JERC but more to be involved at a local
level. Because when they say ‘come to the national congress’, I don’t really want to do that. [...] I was there because I wanted to be in an organisation at the local level in which I can do something for Sant Cugat, something in which I believe in [...]. When you climb up the levels, you may or may not agree with things and that I don’t like so much. (Rosa, Sant Cugat, ES)

Being active in local politics might also mean a more direct action, where respondents could feel that they are achieving something. This suggests that there is some confirmation of the mistrust of political parties (see Section 3.1.2) even among those young people who are members of the organisation.

**Trade unions**

Trade unions were only occasionally mentioned by respondents, which indicates either that they have very limited experience with them or that they do not regard trade union membership as political. It might not be coincidence either that respondents from Denmark and Finland, where these organisations have strong positions in the welfare system, were most likely to recount experiences as members of trade unions. However, their experience is mostly limited to passive membership, and their motivation is rational and related to the benefits offered by the union.

RES: Yeah, I am a member of a trade union. I joined it right away. At the same time I joined the [name of city] professional organisation. So, yes, I am in both of these two.

INT: But have you participated some way in activities?

RES: Well, in events. Nothing else.

INT: Okay, what made you join [...]?

RES: [Laughing] That talk about benefits and everything. There are such clear benefits, all the discounts and so on. These were really things they tried to sell, these unions. [...] No, I don’t have any ideology or anything like that. It is more about benefits. (Ilkka, Kuopio, FI)

Nevertheless, their opinion about trade unions is quite positive, especially when compared to political parties.

[...] I am a member of a trade union, it is deducted from my salary. But I do not participate in activities, although I have thought about it. [...] But I’ve been thinking that maybe trade union activism would be that kind of thing, my own thing, maybe in the future rather than party politics. Maybe it is more trade unions. (Kaija, PK, FI)

The reason for this positive approach is that trade unions seem to be dealing with real problems, unlike political parties, which are often criticised for 'being far from ordinary people' (see Section 3.1.2) and insensitive to their problems. In contrast, 'Trade unions are very social. It is also really good when it comes to community and community feelings. I think it is fine' (Ida, OE, DK). Their positive image is also supported by the fact that some respondents in Denmark expressed worries about new developments in people's attitudes towards trade union membership, specifically that they are resigning from classic trade unions and opting for cheaper 'yellow ones' (company managed trade unions, which are not independent): 'It is perhaps a slippery slope; it saves some money now, but in the end it
undermines, how to say, the conditions of the employees. That is also something that concerns me. How it is going to develop.' (Finn, OC, DK).

3.2.2 Participation in unconventional politics

Besides declining participation in formal political activities, it is has been widely argued in the academic literature that young people opt to participate in alternative forms of political activity such as in online forms of participation (Norris, 2001), political consumerism (Stolle et al., 2005) or non-institutionalised activities in general (Norris, 2003). Evidence of this has led some to refute that young people are ‘apathetic’ as a ‘myth’ (Brooks and Hodkinson, 2008). Others, however, criticise the ‘apathy as a myth’ argument on the basis that they simply avoid confronting the reality of the ‘particularly troublesome phenomenon of youth apathy’ (Furedi, 2005: 40).

In the following section different forms of ‘grassroots’, ‘ad-hoc’, ‘single issue’ activities are analysed such as taking part in demonstrations, critical/political consumerism, signing petitions and internet activism; these activities can be interpreted as short-term, cause-oriented repertoires as opposed to citizen-oriented actions (Norris 2007; Moeller and de Vreese 2013). In this subsection of the report, how young people take part in these activities is outlined and their experiences and opinions of them – in particular whether they regard these political activities as more attractive than formal ones – are discussed.

3.2.2.1 Demonstrations, rallies

Participating in political demonstrations is a widely accepted form of political activism. Across all research locations, a significant proportion of respondents spoke about positive attitudes to or experiences with demonstrations making it one of the dominant opinions and the most frequently expressed attitude towards unconventional politics.

I think it’s a good thing that people speak openly about their opinions and we have freedom of speech and democracy after all. I think it’s normal that things like this happen. In my opinion, there should be more, so the state would hear what people think of issues like these. (Lembit, Tartu, EE)

‘Raising your voice’ or ‘bringing about change’

The inner need to express opinions and identities frequently motivates young people to participate in rallies. This does not necessarily mean that these young people believe in the effectiveness of a certain action; frequently it is a metaphor for ‘standing up’ (Mirta, Pešćenica, HR), not being ‘inert’ (Hrvojka, Pešćenica, HR). For one respondent from Croatia, where locations are among those with the lowest belief in the effectiveness of legal/nonviolent activities (Zurabishvili et al, 2014: 181), participation in rallies may act simply to show you exist: ‘their voice is heard and they show people, how to say, that they exist, that they are here’ (Didi, Pešćenica, HR).

Respondents on the other hand, frequently mentioned demonstrations as a way in which they can influence or change things in society although only if they were sufficiently large, commanded long-term commitment and put forward socially significant demands.
INT: What do you think, can these kinds of protests bring about change and have an effect?
RES: They can, of course, but only if they really work at it. To make it work you have to have a large number of people. (Natalia, Vyborg, RU)

On the other hand, Kristijan emphasised the importance of the emotional context for the effectiveness of an action: ‘If it is some protest from the heart, if it isn’t just drowned in some ideology, then I believe it can have […] more impact.’ (Kristijan, Pešćenica, HR).

Marti also stressed the importance of taking part in demonstrations, otherwise ‘you have to be that peasant who eats potato peelings’, and criticises Estonians who ‘do not find time for that […] if 10 per cent of the people who say something about these issues on the Internet showed up at meetings, there would be a big crowd!’ (Marti, Tartu, EE).

**A major obstacle: no information – no opportunity**

Very high participation rates were reported from western Germany (Bremen and Bremerhaven), where almost all respondents had experience of participation in demonstrations This is mostly due to the active political socialisation activities organised by schools where as part of civic education students are taken to demonstrations about education by their teachers. In Greece, almost half of the respondents had taken part in the Indignants movement. High participation rates were reported also from Denmark and attending demonstrations was a frequent practice in Spain, Portugal, and the UK.

Nevertheless, in Finland, young people reported in both sites, that there were no local demonstrations organised or, they had no money to travel to Helsinki to take part in the larger rallies.

INT: No, I haven’t participated. There’s been no reason and only a few have been organised here. But I would have participated, thinking about [names city], when there was that high school demonstration. That’s the kind of demo I would have gone to for sure, yes against huge schools for masses. Absolutely if I was student in that school, yes I would have gone there.
INT: But no need to participate here?
RES: Not here, there has not been any need here. But yes I would be ready to go for some issue that was very important to me. (Kaija, PK, FI)

The extent to which lack of opportunities impedes young people’s participation is also significant. Similar problems were reported from almost all of the post-socialist region - Estonia, Hungary, Russia and Slovakia - but while in Finland roughly half of the respondents still had experience of participating in at least one demonstration, in Hungary hardly respondents had taken part in one. Thus demonstrations were discussed in terms of a hypothetical option rather than a reality, particularly in Ózd, where demonstrations were mostly organised by the Jobbik party and its paramilitary organisation, the Hungarian Guard.

There was a demonstration for university students, that I would have joined, but I had no opportunity, because I had no money to travel there. Or, if it was in Sopron, I was at home [at the time] so I had no opportunity. But I would have joined that one. But I would not join other demonstrations, for instance, calling for resignations or something. Those not. I would rather abstain from those. (Lujza, Sopron, HU)
This was also evident in Estonia, where participation was low, in general, but especially in the less urban site, Ida-Viru county. In Russia, a lack of information was also mentioned as an obstacle. Croatia and the eastern German sites are exceptions; taking part in demonstrations is more common there than in other post-socialist sites, probably due to the fact that they are situated in, or close to, cities, where important political decisions are made. The Georgian locations seem to have also a distinctive political climate within the post-socialist bloc. Interviews suggest that young people have a strong belief that peaceful demonstrations are an effective tool to change: ‘I can’t do anything alone. I might go and attend some demonstration in support of [minorities].’ (Dali, Telavi, GE). This confirms MYPLACE survey data indicating that the two Georgian locations show the most optimistic views about the effectiveness of non-violent collective actions (Zurabishvili et al, 2014: 182, 190). However positive evaluations do not necessarily mean frequent participation; only a small number of demonstrations were mentioned by respondents.

Even if positive attitudes towards demonstrations are widespread and a significant proportion of young people believe that they can have an effect, these attitudes do not necessarily translate into activism. Demonstrations are grassroots activities but also need significant preparational work and masses to participate; participation, for even motivated young people, is thus dependent on the opportunity organised by a third party. Participation is thus dependent opportunity structures; in research locations situated far from city centres, respondents had fewer opportunities to participate in demonstrations than those who live in a capital city.

‘I won’t change anything on a protest’

A prevalent attitude to peaceful demonstrations is scepticism about what can be achieved through them. Even in Georgia, where young people have very positive views about the effectiveness of non-violent action, there is some criticism of demonstrations in the form of calls for more tangible, material support to be provided to socially vulnerable populations. In other locations, many young people express greater scepticism. A large proportion of such statements are quite general denunciations of such actions as useless: ‘Can you explain to me why people go? 300 people in Red Square: what did they want to say?’ (Mark, Vyborg, RU).

Some respondents, especially in locations in the post-socialist region of Europe blame their own societies for being passive and/or not being able to organise successful demonstrations while describing other countries’ political participation positively.

We don’t have the kind of country where rallies can solve problems, as they can abroad [...]There, people really listen, but here, it’s just a cry for help that gets a bit of attention. Politicians say, ‘yes, yes, yes’, and then that’s it. (Anna, Kupchino, RU)

Another respondent ‘admires’ France, because ‘their people are ready to turn the country upside down, because they wanted [...] to make them work for two more years [...] and they completely blocked the entire country, caused chaos’ (Branko, Pešćenica, HR).

Frequently, these opinions are rooted in experiences of well organised political demonstrations ultimately having no impact on a decision-making process.

INT: Have you participated in demonstrations?
RES: Yes.
INT: So tell me something more about that.
RES: I was in the Gorila protests.
INT: You were there?
RES: Yes, in Prešov. It was very cold but it was worth it, because I learned something new and I saw politicians live. Well a lot of people came there but I do regret that we cannot see any results. (Evita, Trnava, SK)

Here, the respondent paints a clear picture of dissonance between the positive experience of participation in an anti-corruption rally (in spite of the cold weather) and negative sense that the event had had no impact on the decision. Similar narratives of frustration and loss of faith in activism were recounted by respondents in western European locations (for example in Denmark or the UK). After participating in anti-war protests over a number of years, for example, Sonya concluded that

[...] no matter how much we protest, they will have their own agenda, they will do their own thing, but we, you know, we used to go to these marches, walk around London, meet other people, listen to the kind of speeches that they would give but really, you know, after the last sort of four, five years, I’ve thought it doesn’t really have an influence, you can sign the petition, and it, and it still, and it’s as if it doesn’t matter [...] (Sonya, Coventry, GB)

In Bremen Benediktus gave a more nuanced explanation of the reasons why political elites do not take into account these voices:

RES: Well, it is definitely kind of frustrating, because my impression is that it is never very successful. But I think it is still better to demonstrate than do nothing. [...] INT: What do you think are the reasons for demonstrations not being successful?
RES: I guess there are different factors, but in education politics for instance, a demonstration of a few hundred or thousand people does not impress politicians too much, so they do not want to change anything. Or ‘Stuttgart 21’ didn’t bring the success wanted, because there are simply things or economic interests which are more important for politicians than people’s opinions. (Benediktus, Bremen, DE-W)

Less frequently, respondents criticise participants in demonstrations for expecting a quick results while other alternative forms, such as the Indignants movement, prove that more persistent activities can be more effective.

Yes, I took part in some of the demonstrations. My opinion is that they were quite useless, in the sense that they didn’t lead to any results. They didn’t produce any practical solutions. [...] But I think there are several collectives with very interesting proposals. And now the law on precariousness will get discussed in the Assembly, because the Precarios Inflexiveis is proof that perseverance will pay-off. We also sometimes want very fast results, but look, it takes a little longer. (Alberto, Lumiar, PT)

Another opinion is that demonstrations are just a ‘show’, that they dramatise the situation in vain and the role of the participant is just that of an observer: ‘I know someone who also by chance got involved in a rally in the summer. He went, listened, then left. They’re all for
show, these rallies.’ (Anna, Kupchino, RU). These views are connected to opinions noted above (‘Bringing about change’) that suggest only demonstrations with committed participants can be effective.

The absence of such opinions among respondents in the two Spanish locations is notable; this confirms MYPLACE survey data, that trust in the effectiveness of demonstrations is among the highest in these locations (ibid.: 190).

'Childish'

Another relatively frequently mentioned criticism of demonstrations is the lack of constructiveness of participants. The following opinion, recorded in Denmark, is an example of a directly contrasting opinion to those suggesting demonstrations are an important part of democracy:

I also think that I have experienced that there have been times where it has been a little too childish, and where I think ‘hey, you know what, you are perhaps a little too adult to be involved in this’. (Eli, OE, DK).

Here, the respondent refuses to take part in political activism because it is not a ‘grown-up’ enough activity. Other respondents criticised protest movements for not proposing constructive ideas (Yndigegn, 2013: 52). A Croatian respondent accused student protests (at the Philosophy Faculty) of resembling ‘anarchy’: ‘I don’t know, no one even knows what they are fighting for there.’ (Jadranka, Pešćenica, HR). A respondent from one of the Slovakian locations simply thought there were better ways of expressing criticism:

I can imagine a better way of expressing yourself, rather than going to some protests or demonstrations. I don’t want to be considered as a negative part of society. I think there are other ways of expressing [things]. (Duro, Rimavska Sobota, SK)

These opinions criticise demonstrations and protest movements in general for only expressing dissent and not offering real solutions. As such they temper opinions note above (see ‘Raising your voice’) that understand demonstrations as an important part of democracy and freedom of voice.

‘No demonstrations’ – ‘I am not a fighter’

A relatively small proportion of respondents categorically reject the idea of joining a demonstration. Mostly, these opinions express a general distancing of oneself from the role of being out on the streets to fight against something: ‘I am not a fighter’ (Malike, Coventry, GB); or, ‘I am not the type to go demonstrate’ (Dodo, Pešćenica, HR). Some answers can also be interpreted as disavowal, for example, Ursula states, ‘I wouldn’t ever protest because I don’t believe in that at all.’ (Ursula, Coventry, GB). Similar opinions were recorded in Croatia, Estonia, and Russia. Others refer to the pointlessness of demonstrations to justify their absence: ‘No, no demonstrations. I know there are many petitions and actions but as I said, it is always only a bubble and nothing is solved.’ (Lucy, Rimavska Sobota, SK)

Sometimes this restraint is more nuanced and is about the negative image of marching together in a faceless crowd. This individualist approach can be accompanied by criticism of, and sense of superiority over, those who join them.
Protesters are people who have nothing to do; the faceless crowds, despairing that they can’t fit in with the ‘rhythm of life’, they want money, adrenaline. Those who go to rallies don’t do anything. (Anna, Kupchino, RU)

A variant of this opinion is that the crowd is always erratic, ‘try to avoid them because of the crowds. If there is a crowd it is unruly…’ (Alina, Kupchino, RU).

**Strikes**

Strikes are a very rarely mentioned form of protest. In general, respondents expressed solidarity with those who take part in them and want to achieve better conditions. Such actions were frequently mentioned by Slovakian respondents, where teachers had taken strike action frequently. In other locations, respondents had less strikes on their horizon. One respondent in Finland had supported one ‘wildcat strike’ and had not wanted to be a ‘strike-breaker’ (Lasse, PK, FI). The only exception was recorded in Portugal, where respondents had negative opinions about strikes, especially when undertaken by public transport workers.

If you look at the number of strikes and demonstrations, what you see is that the end result is just more debt. I mean, look at public transport, when they do strike it’s a boatload of money that the state must fork-out to the companies. (António, Barreiro, PT)

Another respondent claimed even that strikes ‘undermine’ the country due to the extra expenditures and, unlike demonstrations, cause problems for other people ‘If you want to do it at the weekend, then I am less against it.’ (Cátia, Lumiar, PT).

### 3.2.2.2 Attitudes to violent political actions

‘I avoid’

The most frequently mentioned reason for aversion to political demonstrations lies in their sometimes dangerous nature, i.e. personal experience or media coverage show that they can easily turn violent. This evokes concerns about physical safety usually a fear that the police might attack all participants not only the violent ones, use tear gas or arrest people.

I didn’t because mostly at protests there is some disorder and there are mainly people who fight and that, simply, […] I avoid. […] such big crowds I avoid because there is always a pearl [i.e. someone ready to provoke conflict] among them. (Dragič, Podsješe, HR)

If it were against animal abuse, I would surely go there, because I would know that the people who gather there are not there to overturn cars or set fire to rubbish but for other purpose. It might not be registered, but I would go there, so it depends on the people. But if it would be a revolt against the government, I would surely not go there, because I know what will be the end of it. People would beat each other, violence and vandalism, and I don’t want that. I do not want to get into trouble for anyone else. (Lucilla, Ózd, HU)

These opinions can be translated into those that refuse taking risk for a political goal (see below).
In general, violence is rejected by the vast majority of respondents in all locations; this constitutes almost a universal consensus. Joining violent actions seems legitimate for only a small circle of respondents and is mostly a hypothetical option in very special cases (defending one’s own life or family).

‘I hate violence’

Besides fear of physical danger, violence can be rejected for several other reasons. Firstly, respondents may express a more general aversion to aggression, since it ‘destroys assets’ (Branislav, Trnava, SK) and constitutes pure vandalism: ‘there are some pathetic minded people who just used that as a platform to gain attention and just cause havoc which was you know, ‘Thank you, well done for that’. No need.’ (Imran, Nuneaton, GB). Violence is also widely rejected from a general, moral point of view: ‘Violence is not acceptable in my opinion. Peaceful rallies are ok. But other rallies cause destruction and other people, peaceful people, suffer because of it. It is never acceptable.’ (Natalia, Vyborg, RU).

Frequently, interviewees just make a negative, emotional statement requiring no further explanation: ‘I hate violence’ (Anthi, Argyropoli, GR); or ‘Fascism [...] these people want war, but I think they should join the army, if they want to fight’. (Sonya, Vyborg, RU). This opinion is strongly present in the UK as well, ‘the EDL, they’re just football hooligans, that’s all they are. Evolved football hooligans, you know, they’ve kind of moved away from football and they’ve found a new cause to get aggressive and angry about.’ (Nick, Coventry, GB).

‘Otherwise, anyone with the biggest gun can decide’

Secondly, albeit less frequently, respondents stress that it is against the principle of democracy to conduct disputes violently: ‘I think that in a democracy you have to argue your case. Otherwise, anyone with the biggest gun would decide’ (Bente, OE, DK).

‘Illogical’

Finally, violence is regarded as counter-productive and illogical, it can present the cause in a negative way. ‘Maybe they achieve something in that they provoke the police, but I don’t think they have any influence on politics.’ (Vera, Kupchino, RU). This opinion is particularly present in the Spanish locations where respondents recounted how radical demonstrators provoked situations so that peaceful demonstrations were turned into violent rallies.

No [...] They’re the plague, they’re scum. The worst you can have. Doing damage to the people that are trying to change the system that you don’t like. There isn’t anything more absurd. And why? Because they’re so frustrated that they don’t know what to do. What do they want?! Their justification is that they want people who protest peacefully to become more radical and then change things through force, because if it’s not through the use of force, things don’t change. This is their foundation. But in reality the only thing you’re doing is crushing a well-organised demonstration, not sending any real message and creating a sentiment of frustration. It’s completely illogical. (Andrea, Sant Cugat, ES)

No. I think that certain acts undermine part of your argument. Burning dumpsters, destroying businesses and all that. Also, you’re motivating them. You do this, and later you see Tele5 [private TV channel]: ‘the protest in Barcelona ended as always’. And the point is lost [...] (Martina, Sant Cugat, ES)
Similar opinions about the counterproductive nature of political violence were recorded in the UK frequently:

I don’t think it’s justifiable. I think being violent just gives a reason, just gives it like the government or whoever you’re protesting against, more reason to stay firm because if you’re violent then you’re just like giving out the image that you’re thugs basically. (Poppy, Nuneaton, GB)

‘Violence is necessary for social change’

On the other hand, political violence is also legitimised by some respondents, including some who, in the first instance, expressed disagreement with the use of violence in protests but later in the interview suggested that violence was acceptable in certain circumstances (Franc et al, 2013: 29). This kind of argumentation ‘I don’t like violence but’ proves that there is a kind of consensus that violence should not be tolerated. This is derived, first, from the idea of ‘standing up for oneself’ (see above, ‘raising your voice’):

I have a good feeling about demonstrations. They stand up for their rights and opinions. If everyone sits at home nothing can change. They go and try to do something, even when they know there will be police and they put themselves at risk. (Evka, Rimavska Sobota, SK)

A generally accepted approach is that the instinctual defence of family, loved ones and one’s own rights sometimes requires one to take risks and even defend oneself or close relatives with force: ‘[…] I mean, it comes to people naturally and out of frustration and despair and everything […]’ (Jana, Pešćenica, HR). Dabas also says, ‘I would go if I had to fight to defend my family, and such things, I would go.’ (Dabas, Ózd) and violence is tolerated as an individual, automatic, and defensive action.

INT: Is there something that would cause you to take up weapons?
RES: If the lives of my family, relatives, parents, or friends were threatened, yes, I would. (Kostya, Vyborg, RU)

Secondly, violence can be regarded as a means to draw attention to, and thus increase the effectiveness of, an action. This understanding of the impact of violence is reciprocally translatable to views of demonstrations as ineffective (see above ‘I won’t change anything on a protest’) while refuting those cases where respondents found violence counter-productive (see above, ‘Illogical’). In this sense, a violent demonstration is a tool, a rational action, through which respondents believe that violent actors consciously try to cross the threshold of public attention and, in this way, manipulate the media.

And sadly, mostly due to how the media operate, unless you’re doing something to get noticed by them, they won’t really give you the same time of day. I mean, there have been, talk about the Ukraine for instance, people have been making polite protests about the legalisation of prostitution in Ukraine, possibly longer than I’ve been alive, no coverage, nothing. You get one group called Femen, who take their clothes off and make the protests naked whilst kicking a riot policeman in the face, all of a sudden they’re over every country’s paper. So you have to kind of look at like, maybe it’s necessary to play a system like our media with the sensationalism if you want to get your message across. So yeah, sometimes I would say it was acceptable, but never at like at harm to another person. (Pam, Coventry, GB)
Some Croatian respondents also agreed that ‘violence is often unfortunately one way to send a message’ and that demonstrations should ‘have a stronger dose of aggressiveness and seriousness and poignancy to the message being sent’ (Branko, Peščenica, HR). These practices were criticised by Spanish respondents (see above, under ‘illogical’).

A third reason to accept violence can be more than calling the attention of the media to a certain cause: ‘if you can only do it through violence, you have to do it with violence. It would be worse if you didn’t.’ (Matvei, Vyborg, RU). Such views suggest that reaching certain goals violently is legitimate. In this, violence is justified and built around the premise that tolerating the existing situation is even more unjust than changing the situation violently; the situation is already violent, therefore it is just to use force to change it. This idea is described in the most sophisticated form in Spain, where, due to historical reasons (terrorism, civil war) and occasionally present violent demonstration tactics together with police repressions, political violence is more embedded in the public discourses and young people are able to reflect on them and set them in social context.

Thus, as a last resort, it’s justified. There are great achievements of humanity like the end of absolutist regimes that have come about through violence, and maybe they couldn’t have been done in any other way, I don’t know [...] or at least, at that moment, there was a feeling that nothing more could be done. But if there are other ways, I believe, that now there are. (Adria, Vic, ES)

For some respondents from the Spanish sites, violence is tolerated or legitimate if committed not by individuals with indiscriminate targets but by large groups with specific goals. In this sense, violence is a large-scale intervention, the only way to stop another greater violence, which is a structural one – i.e. leaving people in deep poverty and homeless. Structural violence is viewed as widespread in society although often goes unrecognized by people. These opinions are close to the idea of revolution (which is discussed below).

For me, it’s very violent, I think. I mean, leaving someone without a home is much more violent than painting graffiti, from my point of view. And those who leave people without homes don’t have any problems, right? There’s no law against that. So, a system that doesn’t introduce laws against injustices, for me, is violence. (Carme, Sant Cugat, ES)

Finally, some respondents suggest violence may be committed ‘for fun’. This is reported always with criticism; no respondent claimed that he or she would engage in such activity just because it is exciting. These opinions were cited by respondents in the UK locations.

I think it’s quite a sensitive subject, for a lot of British people, the EDL. Because they have some valid points to make, yet they take it way out of context, erm, you know, I'd say a majority of them are just there for the laugh, you know, to cause trouble, to get drunk to be, you know, to try and assert themselves over other people, to say, "well no, these are our rights, we are British, blah blah blah..." And, I think most of them are a bunch of idiots. (Nick, Coventry, UK)

In some locations, stopping extreme (right wing) groups also falls into this category (Croatia, Spain, Russia). It should also be noted that tolerance towards political violence appears to be characteristic of only some locations, such as those in Spain, Croatia, Russia and Hungary.
In other locations no tolerance towards political violence was expressed. For instance, in Denmark, one respondent took part in one violent demonstration on an environmental issue (Yndigegen, 2013, 51), but would not do that again while in Bremerhaven, non-violent illegal actions are more tolerated ‘as long as nobody gets hurt’ (Walburga, Bremerhaven, DE-W).

**Taking risk: ‘I don’t want to get into trouble for nothing’**

In most of the cases, statements about the option of taking risk can be linked to the metaphors discussed already in this section of the report. The majority of respondents in all locations would not risk his/her own safety for a political goal, these opinions can be translated into the metaphor ‘I avoid’ above. In most of the cases, what is referred to is taking part in violent rallies or street protests in general.

RES: I try to keep away from these. I don't want to get into trouble for nothing.
INT: But when you were interested in Jobbik, you were attracted by them, didn't you want to take part in one of their demonstrations?
RES: Not really, because they can get violent. (András, Ózd, HU)

Some respondents, especially in Croatia, Russia, UK, Estonia, Slovakia and Hungary did not exclude the hypothetical possibility that they would heroically risk their own safety for a higher goal. These statements can be very strong: ‘I could definitely do anything to make it better for me and for all of us. And if everyone was behind me and if everyone would support me, let’s do that, I would do that.’ (Hrvoje, Podsljeme, HR). Vera is more cautious:

If I wrote some kind of letter to the government saying that they had done nothing as far as everyone is concerned, I would probably be open about it. If I wrote on some official sites I would again be polite and keep a civilised tone. If they didn’t listen to any of those things maybe I would go to or instigate a rally, even an illegal one. (Vera, Kupchino, RU)

Such exceptional cases meriting risk include the protection of the independence of the state: ‘if this risk was really that high that our independence could again disappear’ (Sandra, Tartu, EE). Others would take risks in defence of higher ideologies: ‘I regularly participate in demonstrations where there is a chance that the police will arrest me. I regularly participate in highlighting slogans [...] when it is about the struggle for some higher values that are above the national, I mean, on an ideological level, they don’t deal with materialistic issues, but ideas.” (Marko, Pešćenica, HR). And, as noted above, risks would be taken also in the interests of personal safety, the safety of your family or of someone else: ‘I don’t know what situation that might put me in, they might be carrying a knife or a gun or something like that, and that could put me in a horrendous situation, but seeing people treated unfairly is not what I want this country to be about.’ (Duncan, Nuneaton, GB).

**Revolution and terrorism**

Revolutions are regarded as hypothetical future scenarios, in which present tensions in society escalate to such an extent that change can come about violently and instigated by the masses. This option is mentioned most reflexively by respondents from eastern Germany, Hungary, Russia and Spain. In these cases it is depicted as a positive change: ‘[...] first there would revolution, for which those in opposition would fight. Out of the ruins it would be possible to build a society that would be more or less adequate.’ (Matvei, Vyborg,
RU). Georg envisages revolution today as being realised ‘only through the Internet’ and being ‘fast […] dramatic and hard’ (Georg, Jena, DE-E).

If this vision is combined with tolerance towards violent political actions and willingness to undertake risk, respondents may even express a willingness to participate. Such opinions were recorded in Spain, implicitly: ‘An important change is, for example, to be able to get rid of the government and […] let’s see […] from there we can […] I don’t know, see what happens.’ (Victor, Sant Cugat, ES). More explicitly, a respondent in Hungary notes:

- R: When they want to violate our personal rights, it signals a clear shift towards a politics that cannot be solved in regular ways.
- I: How far would you go?
- R: Almost to the most extreme ones […] I have such a vision of the future. I don’t believe it would indeed happen, but I see a chance for it, if this dishonest politics continues […] the people might revolt and overthrow the government in cruel ways.
- I: And would you take part in this?
- R: Yes, it would be worth it. (Krisztián, Sopron, HU)

In contrast, terrorism, another attempt to violently change the present conditions, is described always in negative terms. In Russia, for instance, a respondent called for more intervention from the state against Islamic terrorism:

- […] to deal with this is absolutely inconceivable. There will always be someone who will strive to take extremist action. There’s nothing we can do about it, but wait for something to happen to flush out all the terrorists. (Stas, Kupchino, RU)

In Spain, some respondents recounted the personal effects of terrorist attacks (by ETA or the jihadist attack in Madrid, on 11 May 2004).

- The attacks of ETA are the clearest, or like personally […]it’s happened here in Catalunya […] I have never had family involved or anything, but just the same, in happening in - what I consider to be - my country, it’s what has affected me most. (Ivan, Sant Cugat, ES)

**Alternative protest forms**

Experiences with alternative protest movements, such as Occupy or the Indignants Movement are mentioned only in certain locations, specifically those in Spain and Greece. Respondents in Greece talked about the optimism aroused from seeing ‘people getting together and being angry. Trying to collaborate and confront a common problem. It was very beautiful’ (Evdokia, Nea Philadelphia, GR). This led to hope that ‘I am not alone in my ideology, that I should not shut myself off and that all of us together could turn around these circumstances. (Periklis, Nea Philadelphia, GR). However, some doubts were also raised about its success and constructiveness:

- I don’t think that anything good came out of it. […] Most of the times I was there I observed a situation that reminded me of camping on a Greek island: clothes, bottles of beer, coffee, cigarettes. I wouldn’t do that, leave my home and camp on the Syntagma square for no reason and I think that those who did it either had nothing better to do or they just wanted to do something and create some kind of tension. (Nadia, AR, GR)
The Occupy movement is also mentioned in the UK dataset, but respondents had no experience of it, mentioning it rather as an example of a non-violent form of protest: ‘But I think in terms of like the Occupy movement and getting their message across, I think sometimes you have to take, erm, like a real, a real stand, and there’s only so far that petitions can take you.’ (Pam, Coventry, UK). Similarly, in Portugal, Precários Inflexíveis is mentioned as a good example of the merits of perseverance (Alberto, Lumiar, PT).

3.2.2.3 Consumer activism

Political consumerism is based on the understanding that in a consumer society, consumers can have an impact on economic and political processes by purposefully and consciously selecting the goods that they buy or avoid. It is widely presumed in contemporary academic literature that this is one of the alternative forms of politics which young people increasingly practice at the expense of traditional political activities. (Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle, 2003; Stolle et al, 2005; Norris 2004). Our data partly confirm this hypothesis.

In general, a large proportion of respondents support the idea of consciously selecting what to buy based on ethical or political principles.

Even though you know that it’s got a much higher price, because the price of all these products is much higher, to the point that I can permit it, well obviously now. Connecting it like this, yes, that is my political idea, or my moral idea is connected with politics or politics are connected with the moral. I don’t know, but yes, the issue of buying does influence in this way. (Oriol, Sant Cugat, ES)

However, the dimension of priority and the rate of politically conscious consumers show variance between regions. In certain sites, for instance Germany (in both former eastern and former western Germany), around two thirds of respondents reported having such preferences while, in Georgia, two thirds rejected or admitted not to being critical consumers. Indeed some respondents were surprised to hear such practices mentioned by the interviewer, responding ‘How stupid is that’. Nevertheless, outright rejections or criticisms of political consumerism are quite rare. Where they occur, they constitute simple statements of rejection: ‘… I wouldn’t boycott anything. What I want, I buy.’ (Jura, Podsljeme, HR). Other respondents, from Spain, claimed that a lot of information was needed to be able to make really conscious decisions (Ernesto, Sant Cugat, ES), or that it is difficult to be consistent (Biel, Sant Cugat, ES).

Price first

The most frequently mentioned obstacle to exercising political consumerism was budget: ‘If I had more money, I would buy Finnish products just because I like to support Finnish workers and so on. Well, as a student like me, you must always stick to your budget.’ (Aleksi, Kuopio, FI). While such statements are found across participating locations, even in Denmark and Finland, in locations with more social problems, (like in Ózd, Hungary, for instance), they dominate the discussion on this topic: ‘I always buy the cheaper food, I want to save money.’ (Adri, Ózd, HU). Nevertheless, these opinions often fall short of rejecting the idea of political; they simply articulate that financial circumstances mean this behaviour is not an option for the respondent. Not buying something is straightforward when simply not purchasing is an option or when the rejected product is not cheaper than the others:
If you’re a student, you cannot really afford that [...] I don’t go to McDonalds as a matter of principle. [...] McDonalds is like a huge American conglomerate and I don’t really know how good the quality of their products is. (Tarmo, Tartu, EE)

The dilemma occurs when the cheaper product is the one that the respondent would reject for ethical reasons.

I can go and buy a six quid one from Sainsbury’s and, which is smaller but is, the chicken’s had a good life and I’ve never, I’ve never, I’ve always looked at it purely from a university student point of view that’s, that’s four pints on Tuesday night, you know, you know, that sort of thing, yeah, so no, I never did it but again I will always, I’ve always said that I would like to be if, if, if, I ever won the lottery tomorrow, then yes, I’d do it. (David, Nuneaton, GB)

Referring to this argument, respondents occasionally describe how they would behave and what kind of ethical concerns they have while apologising for not following these principles because of financial reasons.

**Social issues**

An occasionally mentioned ethical concern is solidarity with exploited workers, especially child workers. ‘I don’t buy Nestlé products. [...] It’s clear that it uses child labour a lot. I’m boycotting that.’ (Erja, Kuopio, FI). In the UK, Denmark, Croatia and Spain some respondents followed the Fair Trade movement or claimed that they would follow it in the future when financial circumstances were better (western Germany). It is conspicuous, however, that among post-socialist countries this opinion prevails only in Croatia, and even there, rather hypothetically:

Well, no, about fair trade and that [...] I think that technically there is no mention if it is fair trade or not, at least I didn’t see [...] but I assume that if I saw something like that, then it would have an advantage. (Rudolf, Peščenica, HR)

Here, the preference of the respondent is clear, just the market does not support it by offering Fair trade products.

A particular variant of this idea is proximity consumption, which is described in the Spanish dataset and constitutes a kind of support for local manufacturers of goods, producers of food, as well as services: ‘I prefer to go to a small restaurant that doesn’t make much, rather than a multi-national. Especially at this time where there are many economic problems and I know that these multi-nationals will never have problems.’ (Sylvaine, Sant Cugat, ES). This idea is closely related to patriotic consumption but the supported community is not a national but a regional one (see below).

**Animal welfare**

Another ethical concern is related to animal abuse and is more frequently mentioned that concerns about Fair Trade and other social issues discussed above. Concerns here reflect the extension of ethical principles to animals or parts of the environment: ‘ [...] I like products that aren’t tested on animals and if I see that something is not tested on animals [...] I will give 50 kuna more.’ (Tara, Peščenica HR). Such opinions were reported from Portugal (Raqel, Lumiar, PT), UK (David and Emily, Nuneaton) and Estonia: ‘I always bought there [referring to a foreign country where she had lived for a short period of time] these [...] which are from hens that can run around outside [...] that are not kept in some 20 cm sized
cages [...]’ (Kristel, Tartu, EE). In Georgia, some respondents, when prompted about this issue, rejected it on the grounds that these animals are already dead. Another rejected the use of animal skin, however:

I’ve seen some videos on the internet which made a huge impression on me – how they skin animals, the things they do to them like bashing in their heads [...] plus I have a dog and love animals very much. Therefore, when I realise that an animal has to die in order for me to feel warm, for some reason I choose to wear artificial leather. (Levani, Telavi, GE)

The vegan movement should be also linked to this form of boycott, since vegans – who were found among the respondent set in the UK, Denmark, Finland, Germany and Portugal, reject the consumption of meat, dairy and living vegetable products.

My case is a bit extreme, I really am, so vegan, do not like, do not consume anything that is of animal origin, or has been tested, or that has been part of an animal, or to which an animal contributed in some way. (André, Lumiar, PT)

Veganism is less prevalent in post-socialist locations but still more frequently mentioned than social concerns.

**Organic production, ecological aspects**

Another important field is environmental protection and buying GMO-free products or products that have small ecological impact. This preference was reported to be quite common in Finland, Portugal, Spain, Germany, Latvia and Denmark. Sometimes these products are also regarded as quality ones. ‘It is also a good coffee. [...] And I do not think I am so economically tied that I cannot allow myself to buy certain more expensive products, and then get something decent’ (Rasmus, OC, DK).

**Patriotism, protectionism**

Supporting the national economy by preferring domestic products is the most common form of political consumerism and is strongly prevalent in the post-socialist bloc. These are promoted occasionally by national campaigns, such as ‘Buy Croatian’ in Croatia. This message makes clear that the consumer supports the local economy and thus contributes to the creation and protection of workplaces.

I would rather buy Hungarian products, if I can, if I have money. It is true that it is more expensive, but I would rather buy them, than the foreign ones, because the multinational companies import their cheaper products, but the Hungarian companies, entrepreneurs are oppressed. (Csele, Ózd, HU)

Sometimes, this practice is linked to an increased trust in the producer and the quality of the consumed good. In Greece, this is regarded as a new phenomenon that emerged after the crisis: ‘During the last year and a half the first thing I look at when I buy something is the expiry date and the second one is if it is Greek or not’ (Mihos, AR, GR). Opinions supporting patriotic consumption were encountered in locations in Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Hungary, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Estonia, Greece, and Latvia.

**Political preferences, boycotts**

While patriotism is a positive preference to domestic products, clearly political reasons can motivate boycotts as well.
I think what’s more important than the issue of fur coats is protesting and boycotting, because by refusing to buy the product of a certain country, you are letting that country know about your protest [...] To some extent I did [have a wish to protest] the [2008 August] war... (Luka, Telavi, GE)

Negative preferences may target products from certain countries, for instance from Russia in Georgia and Estonia, or the USA, or, it might be against certain companies that are linked to rejected political movements, for instance, the Müller chain in Germany (both eastern and western) is boycotted for allegedly supporting the far right NPD.

3.2.2.4 Internet activism

Numerous studies argue that computer mediated communication technologies (CMCs) offer opportunities to revitalise youth political engagement in Europe. On the one hand, the features of internet technology fulfill many of the conditions of a successful political public sphere (Habermas 1991), providing young people with the freedom of speech, expression and assembly needed for a healthy public discourse. On the other hand, this new communicative space may reproduce the exclusionary nature of Habermasian public sphere (della Porta 2013) or, alternatively, be subject to rules and mechanisms that disparage opinions or aggressively humiliate speakers and thus deter participation (Herring, 2001). In 2009, a major EU project on virtual activism by young people – CivicWeb – focused, primarily, on static sources of communication, not on social media, and found that the internet is an excellent source of information for those young people who are already engaged in politics. However, there was less evidence that CMCs helped connect or engage young people who were not already active in politics. (CivicWeb 2009). Our findings, embracing experiences with social media, do not show a significant shift from those of the CivicWeb project.

‘A lot of people could be brought to consciousness’

Young people recognise the potential that the CMCs offer for political engagement, and they occasionally reflect on that.

Generally I think that the Internet is a good media for that. And today almost everyone has internet connection. Here, in the remotest villages they have the Internet, I saw. [...] I think that here a lot of people could be brought to consciousness. (Mak, Podsljeme, HR)

However, Georg is sceptical about those who think that things can be changed ‘over the Internet’: ‘I’m not on Facebook yet because I think this whole smart phone society and writing to one another isn’t good. Others can do that if they want but I am not a fan of it. Although the Internet is my contact point.’ (Georg, Jena, DE-E)

Thus, the tension between the potential power to reach many people within a short period of time and actual practices and preferences is evident in respondents’ views.

‘I press a Like’

The most frequently mentioned form of online political participation is the use of social media sites. In the overwhelming majority of cases this is Facebook although Twitter is also
mentioned by some more engaged ‘savvies’: ‘Twitter is a bit more political and a little more serious where you get some really exciting contributions to the world situation’ (Ida, OE, DK).

Young people use social media to access information about political topics and also for sharing information. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily mean that they share their own ideas, quite frequently they just share articles or images that they agree with and thereby make the content more easily available in their networks: ‘Yes I send bits of news via Facebook. My husband sends news and pictures all the time. I send news’ (Aira, Kuopio, FI).

Another way of sharing ideas and expressing consent is using the ‘Like’ of the Facebook (frequently available on static pages as well).

So, if you come across a page ‘Support this, fight for ...’ I think that it is very exciting to click through and read what it is about, and if I agree, then I press 'Like'. Then it comes up on my page as they continuously update about what is happening, and what they have done. (Frances, OC, DK)

Although this does not necessarily mean that respondents express consent or sympathy towards a certain cause, through this, they can join virtual communities or even express support to existing ‘offline’ ones.

Recently I’ve joined a Facebook page to help the homeless and like there’s, there’s people that actually go out and they give them cooked food every night, and try and supply clothes to them and stuff like that, you know, that’s something that I’d like to do and it’s, it quite upsets me in my daily life, you know because I’m quite a caring person (Susan, Coventry, GB)

‘It only creates passivity’

The phenomenon described in the quote above – where real activism is replaced by vicarious support for them - is described in debates about internet activism as ‘slacktivism’, i.e. comfortable ways of supporting virtually a cause without making serious efforts. However, the popularity of this kind of activity is indisputable and is encountered frequently across almost all MYPLACE research locations. Young people are also aware of this trap:

It only creates passivity in people. Like, you have a feeling that you have done something because you ‘liked’, I don’t know support for the poster for Nice, dead girls, and now you ‘liked’ it and now you done something and you didn’t do anything. Like, what is that? It is nothing. (Melita, Peščenica, HR)

‘I like to criticise someone’

Another activity mentioned by respondents is participating in debates on certain issues of interest. This is practiced by a narrower circle of respondents than ‘Liking’.

INT: Have you participated in discussions or discussion forums?
RES: Yes I write there sometimes if there is a very interesting theme or I want to criticise someone [...] or if I know that something is false information.’ (Erkki, Kuopio, FI)

However, engaging in debates on forums might not always be as democratic as one would assume in such an open communicative space. The anonymous nature of political
discussions and the lack of control (moderation) might lead to such tone of discussions that can repel participants.

As long as I had energy, but the most common ones like Suomi24 [name of city], these are fully without moderation and people may write anonymously. It takes away the principles totally of proper debate.’ (Kari, PK, FI)

A similar opinion was recorded in Denmark, where some respondents also had negative experiences that taught them that internet communication requires certain communication skills as well as that their opinion can be misinterpreted, the tone can turn unpleasant and discussions with unknown persons are often not respectful: ‘If strangers, then it may well be that some are negative and incapable of tolerating criticism’ (Jane, OE, DK).

Engaging in internet debates may also be addictive and lead internet activists to spend too much time on the net following discussions:

In recent months, especially after I moved home, it has probably calmed down, because there have been other things that have been [...] that have occupied me. But usually [...] I expect to return to that [how it was previously] [...] that would mean a couple of hours a day, with a few exceptions, which I use to either explore a current event, or to have some discussion about the same, or just something a bit loftier. (Elin, OC, DK)

Sparse references to this more intensive, engaged form of internet activism were encountered from locations in Finland and Denmark.

Protests

There are also instances, when ‘offline’ and ‘online’ activism is linked to each other. The most relevant example of this was the Gorila protests in Slovakia, 2012. Gorila was the name of an operation of the Slovakian secret service, which, through secretly recorded interviews, revealed corruption scandals exposing high level politicians. The demonstrations were organised on Facebook and took place in multiple cities simultaneously.

INT: Do you see any reason for internet activism? Does it make sense to create a group to lobby for something, where you can express your attitude and expect that people support you?
RES: I believe that it makes sense, for example this was visible during Gorila protests when people joined these groups and actively supported them in the strikes. (Dajo, Trnava, SK)

Nevertheless, opinions about the Internet being useful in organising ‘offline’ activities are rare and are frequently followed by negative evaluation of the effectiveness of internet activities compared to that of ‘real’ activities.

‘It doesn’t change anything’ or ‘escapism’

The most frequent criticism is that using the Internet for political purposes is useless: ‘I think that [...] I say it again I think that it doesn’t make any sense and that it is a waste of time.’ (Ninica, Podsiljeme, HR). Another respondent claimed that ‘Well, I think it does not lead to anything.’ (Kristinka, Rimavska Sobota, SK). Similar doubts about the effectiveness of this tool were recounted by respondents from Estonia, Slovakia, Croatia, and the UK. A respondent from Croatia questioned the reliability of information communicated via the
Internet: ‘What some people publish on social networks is not necessarily true. Let’s say if he said ‘kill the faggot’, he most certainly won’t go there and kill the faggot.’ (Dodo, Pešćenica, HR).

According to a respondent from Estonia, being active on the Internet is only ‘escapism’:

To me, it seems that only people who have nothing to do get involved in it. It seems to me like this [...] they are some kind of obscure activists, it would be better for them to do some work instead – that’s how it seems like to me. (Alexander, Ida-Viru, EE)

‘A person must be active otherwise’

A particular variant of the opinion above is that internet activism is less valuable than ‘offline’ activism.

Activism on Facebook has limited meaning and only for that user not for the whole community. It is simply not enough to click and like it. A person must be active or make it part of his life style and I need to believe in it. Being passive and being an activist are not equivalent. (Ivan, Trnava, SK)

Even if some respondents acknowledged that it can be useful for organising ‘offline’ activities, for them, it remained only a tool for supporting ‘real’ activism, and thus is inferior to it: ‘No, because [pauses] I don’t think the Internet is the best place to do something – even if it helps organising events. I think it’s better to, to participate in real life.’ (Ian, Coventry, GB). Such opinions are more widespread than those detailed under the ‘I like to criticize someone’ metaphor with respondents making positive statements about offline alternatives: ‘I like personal discussions better’ (Cindy, Bremerhaven, DE-W); or ‘it is much better to gather in the streets and protest like that, banners, flyers and so on.’ (Tomas, Rimavska Sobota, SK)

‘I’m very anti-social media’

Numerous respondents simply do not use social media or Internet for political goals. A large proportion of them just claim that they are using the social media and the internet for private goals and do not want to represent themselves in a politically active role.

Not really. I don’t use the Internet for activism. Of course I spend a lot of time on the Internet but usually I only chat with friends or I search for information about what is going on. (Duro, Rimavska Sobota, SK)

Some respondents just feel uncomfortable and refuse to use modern technology: ‘I’m just too scared that like, something’s going to go wrong and I’m going to break my phone or computer or whatever, so I just don’t want to take any chances [laughs]. I don’t really enjoy using modern technology. It just freaks me out.’ (Ruby, Coventry, GB). Others simply reject social media and CMCs and the language of modern discursive communities: ‘I’m very anti-social media, actually, but internet forums, yeah definitely.’ (Tammy, Coventry, GB)

No! Because it annoys me with all the jargon you get, all the crap you get on there of, er, ‘oh fine this person for this’ it’s like, seriously people, I haven’t come on here to sign your petition. (Chris, Nuneaton, GB)

Dangers
There were also respondents who called attention to the dangers of using the Internet for political goals. Some respondents in Denmark were reported to be afraid of future employers searching for the profile of job applicants, and thus, practicing self-censorship (Yndigegn, 2013: 56). In a similar way, others claimed that it is easy to leave traces on the Internet that cannot be removed later.

I try to keep my internet path very clean. So, it should really be something that I'm passionate about before I would leave tracks. [...] One of my Communist friends got me to write my email on a website some time ago, and it still pops up if I google myself. (Sanne, OE, DK)

Similar concerns were raised in Germany and the UK, ‘I don’t really want to get any repercussions from anything I write online [...]’ (Rosemary, Nuneaton, GB)

Another criticism (already mentioned above under ‘I like to criticise someone’) lies in the uncontrolled nature of online discussions, where hate speech can be embraced and supported more easily than in a face-to-face discussion.

It can be taken seriously. But I think that a lot of people don’t know how to use it. Because you find something like that everywhere, someone posts something, maybe something political, I don’t do that, but if you take a look at those things, then you will always find some hate-statements or statements that just say: ‘Yes’, ‘Exactly’, ‘I agree’. But there is nobody who really thinks about what is going on there. And it’s just like that, when there are masses listening to someone, then they don’t think about it. Well, masses are not as smart as a single person and well [...] you have to know how to utilise the internet as political platform. And if you can’t stem it or control it, there is no sense in it. (Franz, Bremen, DE-W)

Hate speech might target groups but also individuals in the form of cyber-bullying. However, despite wide media coverage of this phenomenon, it was mentioned only once (Ella, Nuneaton, GB)

One respondent stressed the lack of transparency of the internet platform which made him concerned about what lay behind the scenes.

[...] petitions that I’m asked to sign, might be a great thing, but I always decline because I never know what's going on behind the scenes. (Duncan, Nuneaton, GB)

3.2.2.5 Petitions

Signing petitions is widely practiced and accepted by respondents. This popularity is due to its non-violent, single-issue nature and relative easiness. At the politically most active sites, its popularity reaches that of voting. In post-socialist regions, the rate is much lower, for instance, in Estonia, 21 per cent (Tartu county) and 8 per cent (Ida-Viru county) of WP5 interview respondents had signed petitions (Allaste et al, 2013: 35). Similarly to demonstrations, this may be a product of opportunity structure rather than rejection; in some locations (especially in post-socialist countries far from city centres), young people just did not have an opportunity to sign them.
INT: Have you ever signed a petition, was there anything like that in school?
RES: No, but I was always thinking about it, that it would be good to take part in such a thing.
INT: Would you even collect signatures to support an issue? What would you support?
RES: Surely - on a subject in which I am interested, that I represent something and I would like everyone to know it. That I stand for a cause. [...] For instance, environmental protection or certain children’s rights. (Julika, Ózd, HU)

Issues of concern
Respondents explicitly mentioned that they had supported the following issues by signing petitions related to them:

- Roma question: in Hungary by Roma respondents
- Environmental issues:
  - Hungary: unspecified and specifically against smoking in public spaces,
  - UK: against a new Tesco’s store
  - Estonia: unspecified,
  - Slovakia: Nuclear hazard
- Children’s rights:
  - Hungary: unspecified,
  - Russia: against slavery of poor children
- Animal rights:
  - Finland: stop fur farming,
  - UK: commercialising meat from wild horses in Romania
  - Slovakia: unspecified
- Education:
  - Estonia: unspecified
  - Finland: closing Women Studies study track
  - UK: against page 3, cutting the EMA
  - Hungary: school leisure activities
  - Slovakia: school leisure activities
  - Greece: against educational reform
- Social issues
  - UK: against closing the maternity ward, and children’s ward at a hospital, for NHS
  - Hungary: higher salaries
- Gender issues:
  - UK: against size zero mannequins, for feminist society
- Political issues
  - Georgia: about the president to resign
- Other issues:
  - UK: Against a bar being closed

From this it appears that environmental problems, animal rights and educational issues are the most frequently mentioned topics, and party politics and politicians only exceptionally appear.
‘Quick and easy’

An attractive feature of this activity lies in its easiness (as opposed to other forms of activism which require more investment, such as joining a party, an NGO, or conducting volunteering activities). Activists are available in public spaces; participants just need to lend their support with their signature.

Yes, I think that signing a petition is something that is very quick and easy. I can’t invest much of my time in something. If someone says, hey look, this is what is going on, I will sign my name. I usually sign because it is quick and easy. (Iker, Sant Cugat, ES)

Or, on the internet, it is even simpler: ‘Yes [laughs] at least on the Internet. It’s so easy there. There are so many of those that, well, you can make an effort via it.’ (Ursula, Kuopio, FI)

Ad hoc

The ad-hoc, single-issue character of petitions allows respondents to form opinions without expressing support to any political party: ‘If the petition says something to me or it is closely related, I usually sign. I like this kind of activity.’ (Libor, Trnava, SK).

Safe

Another positive feature of this activity is that unlike demonstrations, these are mostly regarded as safe practices; there is no need to join dangerous demonstrations, for instance, and there is no need to openly support a cause.

I wouldn’t ever protest because I don’t believe in that at all, and I, yeah, I really, really strongly actually don’t believe in that, but I signed petitions, I’ve signed petitions in the past, yeah. I’ve never quite worn badges for a cause, but I, I mean, I’ll support causes without actually showing it as such, so I wouldn’t probably wear badges and things like that. (Ursula, Coventry, GB)

However, self-censorship also prevails, for instance in Denmark, where respondents felt that by signing, a person leaves a mark in history about an opinion which can be traced. Thus, if the person is uneasy about what such knowledge might be used for, it is better not to sign (Yndigegn, 2013: 52).

‘Democracy in action’

Another positive feature of petitions lies in the belief that they can have an effect in a democratic system: ‘I think they are a way of seeing democracy in action, so to speak.’ (Petar, Podsljeme, HR)

Respondents in Croatia, Finland, and the UK expressed this positive attitude. This belief is strengthened, moreover, when the democratic system institutionally supports this form of participation by setting clear thresholds and outcomes in relation to them.

INT: Have you ever signed petitions on the Internet?
RES: Yes, I have signed to stop fur farming and for supporting animal rights.
INT: What do you think, can you make a difference to things through petitions?
RES: Yes. It is in law that certain number of names must be collected and then it has to be put as a motion in parliament. So, yes, you can make a difference.
think it is great, even if you don’t get enough names - it spreads consciousness about that issue. (Aira, Kuopio, FI)

‘Worthless paper’
On the other hand, some respondents, even in Finland, regard petitions as a ‘useless act without impact’. Similar doubts were expressed in the UK, that even if it is an opportunity to raise your voice, ‘the paper’s worthless, and the people in charge will do whatever they want really’ (Sonya, Coventry, GB)

3.3 Shaping attitudes: History and memory

3.3.1 Topics discussed

Events and periods from the twentieth century constitute the overwhelming majority of the discussion of history by respondents. While, the opening question in the interview schedule gave respondents free range by asking simply ‘What do you find most interesting and/or important about [name of your country’s] past?’, this may nonetheless be a product of the research instrument rather than a reflection of respondents’ interests in history since subsequent prompts to discussion were often associated with events from the twentieth century and possible impacts on respondents’ own lives and families’ lives. Bearing this in mind, it is nevertheless important to state that the most frequently mentioned periods/events proved to be World War II and the Cold War era including the (fall of the) socialist regimes.

Pre-twentieth century history: 'It’s cool'

Notwithstanding the dominance of the twentieth century in respondent narratives, events from Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Early Modern history were also mentioned occasionally as interesting periods, despite the acceptance that they have less impact on the current situation. 'I thought everything after 1800 is insanely boring. That's why I don’t read more history. It doesn't interest me one bit. At the same time, I know perfectly well that it includes some of the most important things that have happened and that are what affects us most now.' (Ida, OE DK). Histories of the distant past can also serve to disengage young people from history due to their escapist quality: 'The Viking age, I think, is super cool. It is just war and heroes.' (Bente, OE, DK). Stories from the Middle Ages or Antiquity can stir one’s phantasy and entertain without requiring active attention to be paid to current problems:

What is most interesting in the history of Finland? Maybe very old times, the Middle Ages are very interesting. When you read about it you can imagine what it was to live in Turku then and you think about it. It feels comfortable not to think where we are right now and what things led to the circumstances of today. These are distant issues and relax me. It's like you are reading about something other than history. (Eeva, Kuopio, FI)

However, escaping present problems are not the only advantage these stories offer;
they are frequently described as events from the distant past, in which the nation, or
the imagined (pre-)ethnic ancestor of the present nation appears in a glorious role.
Examples include: the Viking period; medieval Germany for several respondents from
Germany; early Slav history and the Russian Empire for Russian respondents; the
Great Discoveries (Luís, Lumià, PT); and the era of industrialisation and territorial
expansion under Elisabeth I (David, Nuneaton, GB).

We have forgotten that we have our own culture, which is Slavic, that Slavic
people have never been weak; men have always been strong. A Slavic person is
always a warrior, because these are our roots. We have forgotten who we are
and where we come from. (Kostya, Vyborg, RU)

Thus, for our respondents, these stories may offer an opportunity not only for
escaping from present problems but also for contrasting these glorious epochs with
the present decline.

The nineteenth century and the birth of modern nations play a special role in
narratives of pre-twentieth century events. These periods are frequently linked not
only to questions of independence but also the birth of the modern nations, nation
states and national identities—social objects, to which our respondents easily related
themselves and which also play a central role in numerous national curricula and
historical discourses. Such periods or events included: nineteenth century national
development for the Croatians (Zvjezdana, Pešćenica, HR), eighteenth to nineteenth
century history of the Danish Kingdom, the 'Golden age, where most significant events
took place, constitution, nation-state building, wars' (Ida, OE, DK), the revolutions of
1848, 'the spring of nations' for Hungarian and German respondents, 'I think for
example, most interesting is the time of the foundation of nation states, revolution
around 1848 and all that stuff.' (Judith, Jena. DE-E)

Beyond questions of independence and birth of the nation state, however, narratives
in which events from the distant or pre-twentieth century past are used to explain the
current situation are rare. One such instance linked migration processes of ethnic
groups to current nativist ideologies:

[...] yeah I mean I think the problem I’ve got is because you know I’ve done a lot
of British history like in my first year, like the Battle of Hastings and you, you,
there’s no real sort of, there’s no real sort of nationality of, of, if you think, think
of everyone who’s come over and taken over, you know, the Normans, the
Anglo Saxons, the Vikings, you know, we’re quite an amalgamation which I think
is quite ironic that people, people like the EDL don’t see that like through history
we’re quite an amalgamation of other cultures that have come together [...] (David, Nuneaton, GB)

The centrality of the nation state in respondents’ historical knowledge is even more
pronounced in their narratives of the twentieth century historical events. In general,
historical events are discussed in a national framework and most frequently linked
to political, military or diplomatic history.

Narratives about pre-twentieth century history mostly served the function of
describing the origin of the nation, and providing stories capable of fuelling patriotic
feelings and national pride. Traumatic events were almost totally absent. The most
prominent exception is Denmark, where the loss of one third of the population and two thirds of the Kingdom’s territory in the Second Schleswig War (1864) marked the greatest historical trauma of the nation. Nevertheless, the narratives of this event are far more reflected and less emotionally heated than those of traumas taking place in the twentieth century.

If we have to go a little into detail, there has been a very ingrained myth that the Danes lost the war in 1864 because the Prussians were so much better. The fact that it was we, who were attacked [...], but in reality, it was we who asked for the war and had a very unprepared defence and lack of everything. Feeling like a victim in the 1864 war is nonsense. It was an inept government’s fault. There was not much that could be done about it. Of course, bitter, but the depiction of the 1864 as if Denmark was a victim – I think it is a bit of a nonsense. (Finn, OC, DK)

**WWI: From indifference to independence and trauma**

World War I is frequently mentioned because of its relation to the birth or independence of a number of states, such as Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, or the Serbo-Croatian Kingdom.

It’s interesting that nowadays they don’t talk about the World War and the role of Finland in it. They don’t talk about this. It’s all just about this Civil War. (Lauri, PK, FI)

Well, of course, we can take Latvian Riflemen’s joining in the World War I and then the Battles of Freedom – this is the process which ended in giving us a state. (Saivis, Riga, LT)

The relative insignificance of WWI compared to WWII was observed not only in such countries where it played a minor role (Portugal, Spain) but also in the UK, where respondents occasionally acknowledged the importance of the Great War in shaping the country’s history and remembering its heroes (Poppy Day) but also distanced themselves from it calling it ‘a war for nothing’ (Craig, Nuneaton, GB). Another respondent criticised the Cameron government for planning to spend too much on the anniversary celebrations (Tammy, Coventry, GB).

On the other hand, World War I appeared to be indeed important in two countries - primarily Hungary but also Germany - where it was understood as a great historical trauma. In Germany, it was mentioned together with World War II 'which is kind of the basis for the Second World War, because it was the main goal to get rid of the Versailles Treaty' (Alex, Jena, DE-E). In Hungary, however, it was represented more directly as a disaster; as the greatest and still unresolved historical trauma, the basis of all self-victimising narratives, and in relation to the Trianon Treaty, in which Hungary lost two thirds of its former territories. 'This determined my and others’ lives; Hungary became so much smaller, and there were so many fewer of us.' (Jutas, Ózd, HU).

Trianon, imagine that everything remained like that, as it was before. The Greater Hungary, that we would have sea. Sometimes I daydream about how nice it would be. It could be better from an economic viewpoint, we would have
sea, from the viewpoint of shipping, and there are agricultural lands and other landscapes that we lost, and mines, and so on. Surely, it would be better for us, Hungary would be in a better economic situation than now. (Mike, Ózd, HU)

Similarly, the interwar period was mentioned mostly in connection to the independence of the newly established republics, the First Czechoslovak Republic (in Slovakia), the Ulmanis era (Latvia) and the First Estonian Republic. The only exception, where the interwar period plays a major role is in the research sites in Spain in Catalonia, where the Civil War and the fall of the victory of Franco over the Second Republic was also a major trauma.

They want to frame it as the Civil War being a war [...] between Spaniards where there weren’t any good guys or bad guys, just that there were two sides, but that is not true. On the Republican side there were criminals too, but the Republicans were [...] legitimate, they defended a legitimate and democratic government, the other side didn’t. The other side was a military coup that violated the existing law. (Ot, Vic, ES)

### WWII and the Holocaust

Compared to the First World War and the period after that, which were represented as important only in the framework of the national independence (Slovakia, Latvia, Estonia) and historical traumas (Spanish Civil War, Versailles and Trianon Treaty), the Second World War appeared as a highly important period across all the research sites, even in Spain which did not take part in it. This is a trauma that fundamentally shaped the European historical consciousness and a war that is frequently represented in popular culture. It is also an epoch to which the generation to which respondents belong retains close connections through grandparents and, thus, intergenerational memory transmission is active in connection to it.

INT: What if, not about interest, but what if, well if I ask you what the period of recent British history you would consider the most important in terms of how it influences the present and so on?
RES: Would the World Wars be classed as recent, yeah? World War Two then I guess
INT: Why?
RES: ‘Cause well it was like every, you don’t really go a week without somebody mentioning Hitler or something [...] (Poppy, Nuneaton, GB)

My grandmother is from Karelia [...] she left there when she was young, around 10 years old. So, well, I have discussed these war things with grandmother quite a lot. Nothing political, but more what life was like then [...] (Inka, Kuopio, FI)

The Second World War together with the Holocaust is the archetype of cultural trauma; an exceptional and unrepeatable event that cannot be interpreted through cultural heritage.

Buchenwald was very emotional for me. Because especially these crematories, and that the people got fooled into such a thing. And that the people back then betrayed their friends and neighbours when they had a different opinion or
confession. Yes and [I] cried then, because I was just completely overwhelmed by my feelings. (Fabian, Jena, DE-E)

In my opinion, this is the most terrible thing possible. The cruellest – Holocaust, camps, fascism, communism. My personal attitude is that it would have been better if nothing of this kind had happened. I don’t know how it could have been, without the Second World War, generally the situation in the world, but I find it very horrifying and I even don’t know. It is undesirable, [I] wish to escape that. (Kate, Daugavpils, LV)

However, this strong emotional reaction is not the only one with which respondents approach the events. From a transnational perspective, the Second World War is the symbol of the insane massacre of millions, however, from a national perspective, it is also interpreted as the heroic effort to defend the homeland. These latter approaches characterise interviews more frequently, which also explains, why the respondents in the MYPLACE survey research considered World War II (and membership in the European Union) the most important events and periods for their countries while the Holocaust (and the NY terrorist attacks September 9th 2011) were viewed as being the least important of the listed events. (Ellison et al., 2014: 384).

I think anyway, somewhere with our [...] the groups that were formed during World War II. I think there is, one way or another, a national feeling that, it was good they did it, that it was good that they were fighting for Denmark. I think you become a little more Danish, and you are a little more Danish when you hear about the story. Because of how important it is [...] we remember that our nationality means something that it cannot simply be subordinated to Germany, Holland or Russia or something else. (Doris, OC, DK)

A national consciousness can be built on common memories of the shared historical past, which preferably represent the in-group positively and thus can contribute to the development of a positive self-identification. These patriotic narratives of the events were quite widespread in those countries, which took part in the war, such as Russia, UK, Denmark, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Croatia, Hungary, and Greece but not in Spain and Portugal (which did not join the conflict) or Georgia (where respondents did not identify themselves with the Soviet heritage). This was also true for those countries that were occupied by Germany during the war, or even joined the war against the Allied Powers on the side of Germany and Italy (Hungary and Finland). In Germany, however, the interpretation of the events was quite different. As previous studies on the memory practices of the German post-war generations has shown, a special kind of interpretation of the trauma of WWII was developed in the form of ‘perpetrator memory’ (Giesen 2004). Giesen (2004) described three potential ways of remembering the traumatic events: heroic memory of those who sacrifice themselves; perpetrator memory of those who subject others; and victim memory of those who innocently suffer from the perpetrators. According to Giesen, perpetrator memory was developed only in Germany; in other countries, the memory of the trauma of WWII is integrated into victim memory, in which one side is the innocent and heroic people and the other side is the foreign perpetrators identified with German occupants. On the other hand, in Germany, the memory of ‘bystanders’ was developed, which is the identification with not those who actively committed war
crimes but those who just passively observed them. Nevertheless, a sense of guilt was clearly observed in the case of the German respondents.

And I’ve been there myself and was totally impressed and also had incredibly strong feelings of guilt. And then some young men came to me from the Israeli group. And he asked me where I was from, who I am. And I couldn’t tell him at that moment that I’m from Germany. Because I was so incredibly ashamed at that moment. (Judith, Jena, DE-E)

Recognising that a nation’s heroes could be also perpetrators can be important since it can contribute to the development of a critical attitude and reflectivity in which the person can leave behind the belief in the exclusiveness of his own interpretation. If a community develops only such memories that represent it as victims, it will become rigid, ‘cold’ in Assmann’s terms (Assmann 1992) and will not be able to integrate other viewpoints (Takács 2009). Our research partly confirmed this. Respondents in the semi-structured interview research frequently used techniques to excuse their own group from potential accusations or:

I would rather say that the Hungarians were rather forced to do that. Because, Hungary was under the pressure of the German Empire. Mostly, the Nazi party is responsible. (András, Ózd, HU)

I didn’t know that Jews were handed over before I visited this autumn, a few months ago, an Anne Frank exhibition and it presented the role of Finland in WW II. I was surprised that nobody had told me about it or maybe I wasn’t listening to it earlier. (Eeva, Kuopio, FI)

However, our research also showed that the picture is not so clear cut. If only infrequently, the perpetrator/bystander memory is found also outside Germany. Krys, from Coventry (GB) claimed that fighting against the Nazi regime was a moral thing to do but the British did some bad things as well and one 'has to avoid whitewash'.

There might also be something with the World War II and cooperation. I do not know how much it was glossed over just after the war, but over time, I think it has been very well elucidated. It was not as if we mounted any wild resistance. There are maybe too many people today, who have the impression that we were one of the allied powers. Maybe it was just to exaggerate it. It was not until 1943, or something like that, the British were aware that we were loyal. (Finn, OC, DK)

While, in other cases, even if young people largely accepted Germany’s historical responsibility, some respondents also resisted being blamed for events that he/she did not commit:

Well, this really keeps haunting us a lot. Or we are made responsible for something for which we’re not accountable anymore. It’s our history, yes, it’s part of us. And we’ve got to deal with it. And we’ve got to make sure that such a thing never happens again. Do educational work, be open. But I think that we cannot be made responsible for it anymore. (Gülcan, Jena, DE-E)

On the other hand, guilt is not the only feeling that German respondents expressed towards the Third Empire.
A lot went wrong, I say. It’s not all beautiful and great, but neither is it all bad, I say [...] Many situations were unnecessary, that he gassed all Jews and discriminated everyone [...] The solidarity. Everybody suddenly listened, and did it. He got his way, which wasn’t always good [laughs]. (Eva, Jena, DE-E)

A special peculiarity of the events related to the Second World War is that in some countries, it is the basis of conflicting interpretations. In Estonia and Latvia, two former Soviet republics with large Russian minorities, interpretations of the events among the two ethnic groups - the dominant Latvians/Estonians and the minority Russians – differ. The official memory policy, describing the Soviet occupation as the loss of independence rather than liberation, was often contested by Russian respondents:

And again, people believed that they were fighting for the liberty of Latvia but in fact they were ordinary police battalions serving Hitler, who conducted basic punitive operations in Russia, Belarus and massacred a mass of innocent children. (Denis, Daugavpils, LV)

In Slovakia and Croatia, the German occupation is regarded negatively. Unlike in the memory policy of Estonia and Latvia, where the defeat of the German troops by the Red Army is interpreted as the loss of independence, or in Hungary and Finland, which joined the war while being independent, in Slovakia and Croatia, the Nazi puppet states established after the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the Serbo-Croatian Kingdom were not represented so positively by our respondents. They identified themselves more with those who resisted the occupation, like the Slovak national uprising or the National Liberation War.

**State socialism: nostalgia and antinostalgia**

Other than the Second World War, it is the post-war period up until 1989, especially the socialist period, that was discussed most frequently in the interviews. This is the era from which the respondents' parents transmit memories, and the transition from the socialist period can be regarded both as a traumatic event or as an object of nostalgic attitudes (Sztompka 2004; Straughn 2009). Our research showed that these young people, who have no direct memories from this era, also share these feelings, which proves the importance of memory transmission within the family.

The most important reason for feeling nostalgia is the association of the socialist period with material security; an association found also in the research sites of the former German Democratic Republic. In these descriptions of the socialist past, people had work, the state offered housing, goods were cheaper, crime was under control, there was more solidarity between people, society was more equal, and the economy of the nation was stronger:

During the Kádár era, as my parents told me, it was much better - everybody had work then, in fact they were punished if they did not work. People could live better, it was better, because they knew that there were work opportunities for people, and there was less crime in the city. (Dabas, Ózd, HU)

This attitude is extremely strong in those areas where the living standard before the
transition was relatively good or even perceived as better when compared to the present economic problems. This was evident in locations such as Ózd or Rimavská Sobota, where some respondents clearly stated that they preferred the previous system:

RES: I would rather live then than now. Because the future was more secure then.
INT: So you feel that the future is insecure now?
RES: Absolutely. (Andrea, Sopron, HU)

Increasing inequalities within society are also regarded as unjust and criticised by many respondents on more egalitarian grounds, which might prove the legacy of systematic ideological indoctrination of the socialist regimes (Straughn 2009):

As far as I can judge by the stories my grandparents told me, the prices were low, the opportunities were great and everybody was equal. And I think that was right. And now we have a situation when one person earns a million and another earns practically nothing. That is not right. (Igor, Kupchino, RU)

But nostalgia for the full employment of the socialist period was expressed also in Croatia, Slovakia, Latvia, Estonia and Russia. In the post-Soviet Baltic States, the decline in living standards was less pronounced by respondents and the severe control of the regime outweighed any positive features of the previous era.

All had jobs but what I think is characteristic of communism – everybody is granted employment but at the same time there was a strict order and a severe regime and no one could leave the country, there was a shortage of goods. People had money but there were no goods. I don’t think life was better then. I can’t agree with that. Although I didn’t live through that time, still I can’t agree with all the grannies who say that at that time life was better, because I don’t think it could have been better. (Auce, Rīga, LV)

Thus besides nostalgic attitudes to social security, because of the lack of personal freedom in the socialist era, strict control by the state, restrictions on freedom of travel and the shortage of consumer goods, anti-nostalgic attitudes also prevail towards the state socialist period in all post-socialist research sites.

Well, the whole retro-cult that emerged around the GDR and the underplaying of the crimes that also existed. And always the whitewashing of the period. It irritated me what came up a few years ago. (Benjamin, Jena, DE-E)

For example, people used to trust each other. The crime rate was very low, people’s lives were less private. But on the other hand, that was bad for people’s personal life. (Alisa, Kupchino, RU)

On the former territories of East Germany, however, even though the majority of respondents thought that the GDR has a significant place in German history, opinions are expressed frequently that question the importance of the socialist period:

Yes, they talk sometimes about the GDR, but it wasn’t that influential for Germany. It was Socialism but that doesn’t exist anymore today and that’s why I think that part wasn’t that important. (Bastian, Jena, DE-E)
Therefore, an ambivalent attitude characterises respondents from all post-socialist research sites (except East Germany), with more nostalgic approaches in those regions where the post-socialist transition was characterised by economic depression (Rimavska Sobota, Ózd), and more antinostalgic opinions in those regions where personal freedom and national independence compensated for the loss of security, and the transition proved less traumatic.

**Cold War in the non-socialist bloc: 'surreal' Cold War**

Beyond the socialist bloc, the post-war period through to 1989 proved less interesting for young people. This period, however, also had its traumas in some research locations where it was associated with the break up of Empire and the collapse of industry in the UK or the dictatorships in Greece, Spain and Portugal. These topics, together with positive (or mostly positively evaluated) processes, such as the development of the welfare state, democratisation and urbanisation processes or European integration were also regarded as determining the present situation.

An important characteristic of young people’s memories of this period is the focus on domestic affairs and lack of interest in international affairs. Even the Cold War seems to be a topic that young respondents ignore. Therefore, the Cold War does not appear to frame the period after the Second World War; if it is mentioned, mostly it is described with incredulity and perceived as irrational:

> I think after being in Berlin in the summer, I became aware of how surreal it has been observing that the wall first fell in ‘89. But otherwise, I have not thought about anything. (Lis, OC, DK)

The only exception is Finland, where the tension between the two military blocs had a high impact on internal political affairs during the controversial Kekkonen era.

> Well, the Cold War has an influence even today. Well, we had close relations with Russia and we are not in NATO even today. Maybe Finland is outside NATO because Russia wouldn’t accept that, and so we don’t want to destroy the trade relations which were created during the Cold War. (Kari, PK, FI)

> Well, it’s like when one teacher of history thinks it’s this way and another says it’s the other way. Like, okay, [Kekkonen] was more like a dictator and some others, like, define him as a god. (Eero, Kuopio, FI)

Of international developments, it is European integration that is more frequently regarded as a process that has an influence on respondents’ lives.

> Maybe, when I was a child, entry into the European Union, that has a very big influence on today. Not only on us, the situation, that I am not saying happened because we joined the EU, but of course it was an important milestone for all of Europe, not just Portugal. But this stands out as an important landmark for me. There were things before me, but I don’t have any idea about that. (Cristiana, Lumiar, PT)

In the southern regions, Spain, Portugal and Greece, the end of the dictatorships and the transition from them clearly framed their narratives of the recent past and were
regarded as the most important event, which, especially in Greece and Portugal, were evaluated positively by members of this generation (even if debates with the older generations were reported from Portugal).

The 25th April. It is the period that I like most in history because it’s fascinating to think that we managed to achieve our freedom without having to shed a single drop of blood. That was it, the people united, who were tired and decided to think: ‘Ok, we are wrong, so we are going to change this’. (Catarina, Barreiro, PT)

In Spain, not the direction of change, but rather its depth and completeness is often criticised by respondents, even claiming that Francoism is still present as an ideology of the political system and in the public discourse of contemporary Spain.

They say ‘Transition’, but there are still [...] neither was it such a huge change. It passed to democracy and everything, but [...] I don’t know. For me, that there were people present in the democratic stage who’d formed part of the dictatorship [...] for me, that was not a complete transition, right? (Rosa, SC, ES)

In the Northern research locations, such as in Denmark, Finland, and partly the UK, the development of the modern welfare state plays an important role in the historical consciousness of respondents. It is always evaluated positively, as a step towards social cohesion and modernisation of society.

Well, how the welfare society was founded, so how could I put it, how Finland became a modern welfare state. It’s interesting because the starting point wasn’t so great after all [...] how it all should be organised, so that there won’t be huge divisions between social classes and the incomes of people. So no matter how much you can make savings and cuts, we can still call it a welfare state. (Kati, PK, FI)

In Finland, this is also linked to the great social and economic developments of the era such as urbanisation, modernisation, establishing a school system, health care centres and social services (see also Kaija, PK, FI).

Well, if we think about the 1960s, when huge age cohorts moved to cities. It was a huge change, but it’s nothing emotional, even though it might have been so for some individuals. But not in that way that wars are, nothing like that radical. (Atte, Kuopio, FI)

Furthermore, in Denmark, it seems from the interviews that the development of the welfare state is a process that is regarded frequently as the most important in recent history. This is not only because (together with the cultural changes associated with ’68) it fundamentally shaped the present situation but because it serves also as the basis of national pride.

Most interesting […] now I do not know so much about history, but the most interesting thing is that we have the social system we have. How long it has existed and how it was built, I'm not completely informed about, but now I have travelled a lot around the world, and no matter where you are in the world, then you will hear, if they know just a bit about Denmark, then they want to know whether it is really true that we get money to be able to study, or if it is really
true that we have free access to hospitals, and things like that. It is that which I think is most interesting to tell people about when you’re travelling – about this part of Denmark’s history. (Ronny, OE, DK)

In the UK, the development of the welfare state is also mentioned occasionally as a positive process (e.g. Rosemary, Nuneaton, GB). However, in the research sites, the trauma of the Thatcher era including the ‘destruction of the coal industry’ proved to be such a determining event that it overshadowed it as well as all other processes and events from the period. Even if the evaluation of Margaret Thatcher’s role is disputed - 'she closed a corrupt and ruined business' (Nicolle, Coventry, GB) - it remains a trauma that frames the way young people member this period.

INT: Yeah, okay, so let’s think about Britain for a minute and Britain’s past, I mean if you think about Britain’s past, what do you think’s important about it?
RES: Margaret Thatcher comes to mind but I don’t really know specifics
INT: What is it about her that comes to mind?
RES: Well she destroyed our industry, most of it, didn’t, and got rid of, it was a huge mistake, she got rid of, I think she decreased retirement age so forcing a load of really skilled workers to go into retirement and got rid of, what’s it called, internships? Like where you go along with somebody to learn the trade, can’t remember
INT: Oh, apprenticeships
RES: Apprenticeships, yeah, those got reduced a lot which was a mistake
INT: Yeah, yeah. So you don’t think she was very good?
RES: No, no one does, no one should really (James, Coventry, GB)

In Germany, it is the question of division and reunification that frames the way that young people approach the post-war period.

Well, the post-war history and Nazi period. I think it is amazing how a completely new system could arise from that, especially under the influence of the different occupations. […] And how the occupation influenced today’s politics. (Trude, Bremen, DE-W)

After 1989-

At the end of the Cold War, the changes on the European political map, such as the breakdown of the multiethnic socialist states of the Soviet Union (1991), Yugoslavia (1992) and Czechoslovakia (1993) or the reunification of Germany (1989) and the subsequent system changes in all the Eastern bloc were processes and events that were regarded as highly important for understanding the present situation in post-socialist countries by respondents. In several countries - Estonia, Latvia, Georgia, Slovakia and also in Croatia - this period also signified the gaining or restoring of independence, which proved a determining factor in all national discourses and was evaluated positively by the majority of respondents. In the new post-Soviet states of Estonia and Latvia, especially in Georgia which was at war with Russia in 2008, this patriotic attitude is the most important one.

When we restored our independence, we got closer to Europe and European integration, therefore now it’s very hard for us to fall under the influence of
Russia once again, that would be very difficult, in that case Georgians and Georgia would have to get completely destroyed, so that’s why I consider [this event] to be important. (Misha, Telavi, GE)

However, the political, social, and economic changes are highly disputed and are not always evaluated positively. Besides nostalgia for the security of the socialist period (see above in this section), new processes after the transition, such as corrupt privatisation and buy-outs of western or multinational companies (Hungary), emergence of crime, fast enrichment of criminals (Russia), economic hardships (Russia, Hungary, Slovakia) or chaos (Russia).

Perestroika. They robbed everything, they destroyed everything they could, everyone knows about that. Nothing else. (Vadim, Kupchino, RU)

INT: When did the whole thing start to decline and why?
RES: I think, after the system change. Until then, everything was going quite well, and then, they brought the multinational companies in, the big ones, the General Electric was built [...] my father works there. And then, the Johnson Electric was also built, and these big companies started to close the factory. (Emericus, Ózd, HU)

The transition itself was frequently remembered also as a trauma, a hard time:

What can I say? There was no money at all. We ate what we could. I mean the cheapest things. We didn’t buy clothes, we were lucky if someone could give us some clothes. We didn’t have money for anything, it was a nightmare. I was a kid, I couldn’t understand anything, but my parents were really worried. They had real problems, they were always in debt. (Nina, Kupchino, RU)

The two research sites from eastern Germany stand out as an exception, where the system change happened together with reunification and thus the economic transition proved less painful and was not criticised by the respondents. However, the problems of the east-west economic, structural and cultural division and stereotypes were discussed.

In their narratives of the post-1989 period, respondents mostly evaluated the whole transition in general. However, political events were also mentioned occasionally, such as the Velvet Revolution 1989 (Slovakia), the August 2001 putsch (Russia), the Bronze night (the relocation of the Soviet WWII memorial in Tallinn, Estonia) in 2007, the Beslan hostage crisis (Russia), Rose Revolution in 2003 (Georgia), the August War in 2008 (Georgia) or anti-government protests in Hungary 2006.

Croatia clearly represents a special case in the Eastern bloc because of the Homeland War, which has a central importance in the respondents’ perceptions of national history. The themes of dealing with the legacy of war and with the questions about who is, and in what respect, responsible for it are still very frequently raised questions in narratives about the war, which is the ‘most fresh and has most effect on people’ (Jadranka, Peščenica, HR). In these narratives, frequently highly unreflected opinions are expressed that blame the other (Serb) side only, which proves that the conflict has not ended yet.

I really don’t know how Serbia can, after so much time, after so much time in
which people say that they are guilty, how can they negate all those events and camps? I really don’t know how they expect that our actions can be declared as an aggression when they came to our territory. (Arijana, Peščenica, HR)

Although the majority of the respondents from the Croatian locations agreed that there were crimes committed also by the Croatian side, the difficulties of dealing with this issue are also described by those respondents who regard the question of guilt/victimisation to be more complex.

I mean, ok, we don’t have good relations with Serbia now, especially now when Gotovina and Markač are free, but the idea that we blame the Serbs for everything and that we hate all that is Serbian is almost hilarious, it would be funny if it weren’t so sad. So yes, that should be dealt with in some way and I don’t know how exactly. (Rudolf, Peščenica, HR)

Other respondents emphasise that they would not like to use the narrative of Serbian aggression and war crimes to justify 'lack of tolerance' or hate towards the Serbian minority in general and also that more discussion of such traumatic issues is needed.

What we lack is an understanding of historic events. That means the Ovčara massacre and Vukovar are not understood as they should be. [...] That means that we can’t perceive that kind of events with a lack of tolerance, an aggressive stance towards the Serbian minority there. (Marko, Peščenica, HR)

Similar, 'othering' discourses were also recorded from post-Soviet sites, especially from Georgia – which had experienced armed conflict with Russia in 2008 - and in Estonia and Latvia, where there is on-going tension between the majority populations and the Russian speaking minorities. Notwithstanding this, the profound presence of the legacy of the Homeland War in the historical narratives of young people makes the Croatian case unique in the dataset.

Beyond the post-socialist bloc, young respondents' narratives of the period from 1989 to the economic crisis of 2008 are devoid of content. The most frequently mentioned process is EU integration (Denmark, UK), although specific steps in the process, even the Maastricht Treaty of 1993 that formally founded the EU are not named. The economic depression in the 1990s in Finland is also mentioned since it evoked memories among respondents. Another relatively frequently mentioned topic was terrorism, especially the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York 2001 (UK, Denmark), the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London 2005 (UK) and the Cartoon affair (Denmark).

### 3.3.2 Nation and other frameworks of history

As seen in Section 3.3.1, political history and the history of conflicts serve as a basis for periodising and framing the past. In the recent history, political processes and traumas are the most relevant issues, while in the more remote past (before the twentieth century), history plays more a role of entertainment a site to store glorious stories that can fuel national pride or patriotism. Nevertheless, it was evident from the dataset that both pre-twentieth century, ‘interesting’, 'cold' history and twentieth and twenty-first century, ‘important’, 'hot' and traumatic events, stories are discussed
within national frameworks. Topics about conflicts, wars, national independence, transformations of the state, roots of current economic hardships dominate discussions. Events related to cooperation (European integration), or peaceful building processes (such as the development of the welfare state) only appear in those cases, where traumatic events do not overshadow them. It is evident from the case of Germany, where, similarly to Finland or Denmark, the welfare state was also highly evaluated by respondents, however, that this narrative could also be displaced; in Germany the story of the two Germanies, the Wall, and the reunification proved a more prominent topic. The same is true of the UK, where the Thatcher era also overshadowed other positive developments.

History was and is still mostly the history of a nation. This is not necessarily the case, however; alternative frameworks, such as gender, class, environment, generational aspects, everyday life, locality, ethnicity, region or religion, might also be employed. However, if we compare the historical events and stories narrated in these frameworks, it is evident that they appear only rarely, marginally, and frequently are related to issues of national history.

European integration is far the most frequently used alternative framework, as seen above. Class is discussed relatively frequently in the UK, but mostly as a peculiarity of the British development: 'I've always found the class system so interesting in Britain, because there's not, there's not really another country with a system like it' (Vera, Coventry, UK). Cultural changes, such as the transformations in 1968 are only occasionally mentioned in Denmark and Hungary as is the history of the local music genres in the UK sites. Environmental issues are almost absent from historical narratives; the creation of Estonian national reserves in 1956 and the Chernobyl catastrophe are exceptions. History of everyday life and ordinary people is also rare:

Well I think we should remember so called small important acts, not important dates, but stories about acts. I mean certain people who were nothing special or great names, but who have done something that people should remember and notice. (Noora, PK, FI)

Gender issues are mostly discussed in the framework of the legal development of a country, such as Denmark (guaranteeing the right to vote in the constitution in 1915), Finland (gay rights), England (suffragettes). Generational aspects are almost absent, in Denmark; a few respondents mentioned that people from the resistance during WWII were mostly young, or, the 1968 movement was related to young people:

What I found most striking is '68. It seemed to me a landmark. In the way, that your normal way of thinking was shaken up, and that you are looking for development and improvement of society. [...] I think that something like the youth revolt really is a landmark for culture. (Eli, OE, DK)

Local communities could also have their own stories. However, these are only occasionally reflected in the interviews and usually occurs while visiting local museums, using websites (Hungary, Ózd) or reading books about local history (Russia, Vyborg) related to the Finnish War: 'The most important period is when we won city' (Luka, Vyborg, RU). Regions are mentioned only by the respondents from the Baltic sites, Estonia and Latvia, where the common history and culture of the Baltic peoples
create a common consciousness (Baltic Way). Religion does not play an important role; it is mentioned occasionally, for example by Georgian respondents, but again, in the context of national history, the baptism of the nation.

The most important event for me is when St Nino came to Georgia […] Her arrival greatly influenced the Georgian nation and I guess that’s why it [this event] is important – the Georgian nation became Orthodox Christian. (Tatia, Telavi, GE)

The history of minorities and historical migration processes were discussed occasionally, for instance the Roma history in Hungary (only one respondent, Alexander from Ózd), or in Finland in relation to Sami people and war refugees, or the questions of Russian immigration in Estonia.

World history either plays a prominent role - such instances are the Second World War in the neutral Spain (in other countries it is discussed in a national framework), the World Trade Centre attack in 2011 (Germany, Russia, UK). The history of other countries, for instance France or the USA was mentioned in the UK and occasionally also history of other countries (Nigeria, Ottoman Empire, Romania) by respondents with immigrant backgrounds.

It is the family that plays an important role in transmitting memories of the past, especially about the Second World War and the post-war period.

INT: Do you speak about the past in the family?
RES: With grandparents sometimes. About the 50s. About work, who worked in which kind of job, where they had the opportunity to work, that my grandparents started working at a very early age, and there was no opportunity to learn. (Auróra, Ózd, HU)

In conclusion, history is still imagined and discussed within national frameworks. Thus, what Lyotard (1984) previsaged in his work on postmodern knowledge - that in the postmodern era, traditional meta-narratives will lose their credibility - was not confirmed by our findings. The nation remains virtually the only mnemonic community and collective memories reside still mostly with the nation and are most frequently related to issues of conflict, independence, glory and trauma.

3.3.3 Parallel narratives and critical attitudes

Young people frequently express that they are interested in history. Thus, even if the disavowal of politics characterises their attitudes towards public issues, history is the way through which they are more open to build their sets of identities. Thus, political messages hidden in historical context can have more influence on young people’s understanding of the world. This is even easier if these messages are hidden in popular art; books, movies with political messages are frequently regarded with suspicion, but in the case of history, this distancing is less prevalent. ‘[…] For example, I’m awfully lazy about reading books, so historical movies are one way for me to get to know [about history]’ (Vera, Kutaisi, GE)

In this respect, it is of utmost importance to understand, how much young people are aware that history is not objective and it is important to recognise that there are
conflicting narratives of an event and that there are certain interests behind them.

In most cases, young people seem to be unprepared to recognise conflicting narratives and interests behind them. Sometimes, they don't even realise, that history is inherently an interpretation of the past: ‘I think it [politics] does not [affect the commemoration of historical events]... Politicians probably don’t need to exert influence over that issue.’ (Meri, Telavi, GE) or 'I don’t know, I think, politics is always more in the future, what they promise you for the next years. I don’t link it much to history' (Uwe, Rostock, DE-E).

These [documentaries] are based on research and don’t present any false statements. I believe that they are neutral, as they should be. (Noora, PK, FI)

Other respondents are theoretically aware of the existence parallel narratives ‘In general, to be honest, history, exactly, because it is written by human beings, it is never objective’ (Periklis, NF, GR), but in practice, they are uncritical when confronted with interpretations and feel surrounded by monolithic discourses:

I: Are there different ways to interpret or perceive historical events? Do you think they emphasize different things or interpret in different ways?
R: Yes, because we don’t all have the same attitudes and some have one interpretation and others have another interpretation, but I think, generally, I think it is very similar how they interpret. (Gurli, OC, DK)

However, since a large proportion of respondents have no trust in the political sphere, mostly, they suppose that history could be used for manipulation. Albeit they approach politicians using history, with mistrust, a great part of them is not able to find those points, where memories are politicised.

INT: And what do you feel, how much politics influences what kind of celebrations we celebrate and how?
RES: Well, er, somehow for sure.
INT: So, it has an impact on it?
RES: Yes.
INT: And could you give an example?
RES: No (laughs). (Julcsi, Sopron, HU)

Nevertheless, critical attitudes are also present, especially in the Catalonian research sites, where the conflicting narratives between the Francoist and republican, the Spanish and Catalonian versions of the history can be found:

This is a huge example of the influence that political parties have on how the past has to be remembered, historical events. The way Franco was portrayed when the PSOE was in charge and when the PP was. There is a big influence. (Ernesto, SC, ES)

In Croatia, where the trauma of the war is too fresh, some respondents clearly recognise the alternative and conflicting interpretation of events from the opponent’s side, but reject it:

[...] but the Serbs consider themselves as victims, and so on, despite the fact that they were the aggressors. Well, I think that the truth is somewhere in-between because there were our people who did stupid things to them, and
their people also [...] (Matej, Pešćenica, HR)

In other cases, they also recognise, that there are various interpretations of the events within their own country, however, they do not recognise this phenomenon positively, but rather as confusion, and they would prefer a clearer picture.

[...] our Homeland war is extremely, extremely badly treated in school. I did my high school matriculation essay on that theme and then I realised why that is so, and that is firstly because there are many conflicting opinions. There’s also the issue of literature which is not unified and that’s a problem. The young don’t have good sources of learning, I mean the Homeland war can be presented in so many ways, depending on who is the author of the particular work. (Branko, Pešćenica, HR)

For respondents, it proved also easy to recognise conflicting narratives of the past in the Baltic States. The majority Estonian/Latvian and the minority Russian respondents live in diverse information fields and celebrate different commemorations (either commemorations related to independence or Victory Day, but not both). They consume their own media, but they are highly aware that the other side interprets the traumatic recent past in a different way, which is apparent, for instance, from the 'Bronze Soldier riots in April 2007, when tensions peaked in Tallinn after the Soviet memorial of the unknown soldier was removed from the city centre. This might provoke defensive attitudes, such as 'Exactly, it is not our history! Our history is in our books not theirs.' (Ralfs, Daugavpils, LV) or lead respondents to reject other interpretations as legitimate. It can even fuel negative feelings:

For me March 16 [the Latvian Legionnaires commemoration day related to fighting against the USSR during World War II] evokes a negative feeling. I think that it is not right. It is disrespectful to veterans. I wouldn’t allow that march. I don’t think that it is correct. (Kate, Daugavpils, LV)

I saw how impudent they are and how they celebrate that 9 May [Victory Day] and, I don’t know, burn the flags. I was angry about that. Because I come from the middle of Vidzeme where no Russian has been heard in recent years and then I came to Riga and was so unpleasantly shocked!] (Dana, Riga, LV)

Other respondents, however, were able to integrate the interpretations of others into their own and thus, could reflect on their own situation and understand the other side better:

And Latvians were actively having it drilled into them that they should rise against Soviet power. It was easy to persuade them at that time, as, having witnessed Stalinist repressions, they succumbed easily. Certainly, they had a certain reason. I think, if my granny had been deported by Stalinists somewhere to Siberia and she had died there, then I think I would not love the reds and Soviets very much and they can be understood, of course. [...] As a matter of fact, I have a granny who lives in Riga, she is already 80, she lives in Ilguciems. She was a convict in a Latvian concentration camp in Salaspils when she was 11. What she has told me about that camp, of course, beats all horror movies, no doubt. (Denis, Daugavpils, LV)

This can lead to a reconciliation between the conflicting sides.
[...] because there is nothing good in it. [...] It would be better to accept that, yes, it happened [...] and [...] now get on with making sure it doesn’t happen again. But to reproach someone for it or something. I think, it doesn’t make sense! [...] people can get offended [...] like, when in the history of some state there are for instance mass murders [...] or something [...] then this rather discredits the state [...] and worse, if other states remember it. To my mind, it would be nice if everyone forgave. (Ivar, 24, Tartu County)

However, as also seen from these examples, the presence of another interpretation field of the past does not necessarily lead to the development of critical skills and reflectiveness; when related to traumatic events tied up with national identity it can easily result in strengthened victimisation and othering discourses.
3.4 Extremism and radicalism

A central aim of the MYPLACE project is to explore receptivity to populist or extreme ideologies and political agendas among young Europeans. The working definition of ‘extremism’ employed in MYPLACE understood it as a generalised measure of deviance from the political norm and as a specific tendency to violate democratic procedures. Extremism means going beyond the limits of the normative procedures which define the democratic process and does not tolerate variety and opposition. It is distinguished from ‘radicalism’, which is generally held to be an ideology which states that its chosen goals and means are more important than the basic principles of democracy while not necessarily being anti-democratic as such. Many radical ideologies declare only the temporal suspension of democratic rights until the realisation of their desired goals - usually the institution of a certain type of social order. Historically radicalism has tended to be either leftist (revolutionary) or rightist (reactionary); the former is aimed at the redistribution of resources, the latter at restoring an earlier order or maintaining the status quo. Most recently, ‘radical’ has come to be attached to populist right wing parties and movements that have gained increasing visibility and electoral success. Such ‘radical populist right’ parties and movements are distinct from classic ‘extreme’ or ‘far right’ political parties in that they remain broadly democratic despite opposing some fundamental values of liberal democracy (relating especially to tolerance) and promoting an ideology that combines nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007: 25-30). Thus the analysis in this section intersects with Section 3.1.4 on young people’s understandings of democracy in that the findings reported here demonstrate the existence not of a separate and dangerous ‘fringe’ as a pathological normalcy of Western democracies (Mudde, 2014: 8) but how ordinary young people’s perceptions and experiences of the political realm frame their understandings of and responses to ‘extremism’.

This section discusses firstly the importance of context to the meanings and meaningfulness of ‘extremism’. It then considers support for, and explanations young people give for the appeal of, extreme right and extreme left ideologies, parties or movements. Empathy with ‘far right’ parties and movements is expressed largely in relation to their anti-immigration policies and thus the question of respondents’ attitudes to immigrant and ethnic minority communities is discussed here. The following sub-section outlines how and why young people reject extremism and are followed by a detailed exploration of young people’s views on whether extremist movements should be prohibited. The section finishes with reflections on some evidence in the data that support for extremist or radical parties is partially ‘hidden’ due to their social stigmatisation.

3.4.1 Meanings and meaningfulness of ‘extremism’: the importance of context

It is clear from this cross-national analysis that ‘extremism’ or ‘radicalism’ is uneven in its relevance to young people across Europe. Respondents were prompted to talk about extremism and radicalism by a common interview question asking them to reflect on whether there were other political actors that might be speaking to some of the social issues or tensions affecting the country at the moment more directly or appealingly than those of the mainstream political sphere. This elicited whether young people were aware of,
or acquainted with, populist or radical parties and movements of the right or left. However, since the question followed on from a discussion of what the key issues or tensions facing their society at the moment were, their response to the question about radical parties could be affected by what they felt those problems were. If respondents did not spontaneously mention any such political actors, they might be prompted by reference to locally relevant movements. If they were already acquainted with such actors, they would be asked to talk about the nature of that acquaintance and their attitudes to the particular parties or movements mentioned. This mode of questioning aimed to retain maximum attention to local sensitivities. The question was also asked at the end of the interview in order not to arouse concern in interviewees that there was an ulterior agenda to the interview.

While the bottom-up data analysis strategy (see Section 2.3), which allowed research teams to develop coding trees reflecting their particular data sets, means that any statistical analysis of the prevalence of references to ‘extremism’ would be meaningless, it is quite clear that engagement with ‘extremism’ and ‘radicalism’ is heavily concentrated in a small number of countries. References to these concepts are predominantly found among respondents in: Hungary, where the extreme right is referenced usually through discussion of the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) (mentioned by 35 respondents in a total of 79 references) although there were also 8 references to the Hungarian Guard, a paramilitary organisation closely associated with Jobbik; Slovakia (87 references among 36 respondents) with references mainly concerning the extreme right party Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (People’s Party - Our Slovakia); eastern Germany, where extremism (predominantly of the right but also of the left) is referenced 276 times but a total of 51 respondents; UK, where reference is made most frequently to the British National Party (BNP) (84 references by 49 interviewees) and English Defence League (EDL) (85 references by 46 interviewees) and to a lesser extent Islamic extremism (5 references by 5 interviewees); Spain, where reference is to parties of both the ‘radical’ left wing Candidatures d’Unitat Popular (CUP) (referenced 121 times by 36 interviewees) and ‘extremist’ right wing (PxC) (273 references by 57 interviewees); and Greece where Golden Dawn dominates discussion (referenced 129 times by 57 interviewees).

This pattern of concentration reflects data from the MYPLACE survey, which found the highest rates of ‘receptivity to the radical right’ and ‘negative attitudes towards minorities’ in locations in the post-socialist countries of Hungary, Slovakia and Russia and also in Greece. As is demonstrated by the frequency and tone of statements from respondents in the Hungarian and Slovakian locations reported below, issues prominent in

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7 The very high number of references to the EDL is at least partially a result of the use of a visual stimulus during the interview depicting an EDL march in one of the two fieldwork sites (Nuneaton). This proved to be a highly useful prompt for discussion as it provoked direct memories of presence/witnessing of that demonstration or talk of its impact on the town or responses to it. For balance a visual depicting an anti-fascist counter demonstration was also shown although this did not evoke such frequent response.

8 The application of the terms ‘radical’ to organisations of the left and ‘extremist’ to organisations of the right here follows the way in which interviewees usually refer to groups.

9 This is a variable constructed on the basis of agreement or disagreement with the following statements: ‘Foreigners should not be allowed to buy land in [COUNTRY]’; [COUNTRY] should have stricter border controls and visa restrictions to prevent further immigration’; ‘When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to [COUNTRY] people over foreign workers’.

10 This variable is constructed on the basis of six questions in the survey eliciting attitudes towards three minority groups - Roma, Jews, and Muslims – as well as immigrants in general (see: Mierina, 2014)
populist radical right and extreme right parties’ platforms are routinely discussed by young people and the positions they take empathised with by more than a ‘fringe’ group, especially on the so called ‘Roma question’. In contrast, respondents from the Greek locations articulate mainly negative attitudes. Golden Dawn and its ideology are negative. Some respondents explain increased support for Golden Dawn as a reaction to the current economic crisis while the minority that partly agree with the official views of the party, believe that there is some truth in its statements concerning illegal immigrants, while disagreeing with violence towards them.

Two countries that feature strongly in the interview data discussed here but not in the survey data are Spain and the UK. In the case of Spain this is explained by the fact that the survey measures receptivity to the radical right (and associated dispositions, namely negative attitudes to ethnic minorities and immigrants) while, in interviews, the discussion concerns radicalism and extremism more generally. The predominance of these issues in interview is thus explained at least partially by the location of the field sites in Catalonia and the popularity among young people of the pro-Catalan independence left wing movement CUP. The predominance of the UK in the interview data reflects both the fact that visual prompts (relating to both radical right and radical left activism) were used in this case to encourage discussion of the subject as well as a disparity in attitudes between the two UK locations. In one of the two field sites, Nuneaton, parties and movements of the radical right had high visibility because two BNP councillors had been elected in the last local elections prior to fieldwork and there had been a recent demonstration by the EDL in the town. Thus, while discussion of extremism is high in both locations, support for the radical right is found only in Nuneaton and this is reflected also in the survey where Nuneaton is one of only four locations from non-former socialist countries to be situated in the top half of locations in terms of receptivity to the radical right.

On the other hand, countries where the locations studied show among the highest levels of receptivity to the radical right and negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigrants but do not feature so strongly in the interview data include Russia and Georgia (where both locations are situated in the top half of locations on both measures). This would appear to be explained in the case of Russia by the lack of reference to particular parties or movements, although respondents do express negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigrants during interviews. In Georgia, negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities were not recorded and even when prompted about practices of boycotting foreign, especially Russian, goods, respondents were not supportive of such practices. Moreover, respondents had only vague understandings of extremist or radical political ideologies or parties, seeing them as groups adopting unacceptable means of achieving their ends. A few respondents named political parties or politicians which they deemed ‘extremist’ without further elaboration or denied their existence altogether: ‘I do not think there are extremist or populist parties in Georgia’ (Petre, Telavi, GE).

The MYPLACE survey showed the lowest levels of receptivity to the radical right are found in the German and Danish locations, and lowest levels of negative attitudes to ethnic minorities and immigrants in the German and Spanish locations (although the Danish locations are also low here). This is reflected partially in the interview data also. In Denmark, despite prompting, respondents only occasionally knew of the existence of radical, extra-parliamentary group and even if they did, they were not acquainted with their ideologies or...
policies. In contrast, interviews in the German locations, where extremism remained a highly politicised issue because of continued sensitivities around National Socialism, suggested an awareness of such movements but a lack of support for them. There was some low level support expressed for the National Democratic Party (NPD) by respondents in locations in eastern Germany. However, the majority of respondents rejected the party and discussion reflected also wider public debate about whether or not the NPD should be banned. Respondents also discussed infamous local incidents of neo-Nazi attacks (Rostock Lichtenhagen in 1992 or the Brown House, a right-wing social centre in Jena) and in Jena concerns about a stigmatisation by media as a heartland of right-wing extremism was raised.

The cases of Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Croatia and Portugal defy easy description. Locations in Latvia and Estonia were chosen to contrast, in each case, those with high proportions of Russian-speaking populations and those without. This is reflected in relatively wide variation between the two locations in each country on the measure of attitudes to minorities. However, in the case of Estonia, this does not appear to be translated into receptivity to extremism. Despite the recognition by respondents of ethnic inequalities and discrimination (especially in the Ida-Viru County field site characterised by a high proportion of Russian-speaking population), the solutions posed to issues and tensions did not reference radical or extremist ideas or parties. In neither of the two fieldwork sites did interviewees contemplate their own involvement in radical or violent protesting, believing that it should be possible to resolve all issues by discussion (Ly, Ida-Viru County, Estonia). A more frequently mentioned response to current problems than a turn to extreme or radical politics for respondents in Estonia was emigration (Allaste et al, 2013: 42). In Latvia, the two locations showed a higher propensity to receptivity to the radical right in the survey data although very little discussion of extremism in interviews (there were only eight references in total related to extreme movements). This is explained probably by the placement of the question in the interview schedule (see above); the tensions and problems respondents perceived in Latvian society were first and foremost related to economic issues and well-being. There was also a general reluctance among respondents to discuss complex and contentious issues such as attitudes to minorities or extremism.

In the case of Finland, the survey shows wide variation between the two locations with regard to both measures of receptivity to the radical right and negative attitudes to minorities: one location, Nurmes and Lieksa, is in the top third of locations, while the other, Kuopio, is in the bottom third. This is captured in interviews in the following confirmation of the reputation of the Nurmes and Lieksa area: ‘This town, and Northern Karelia more generally, is a quite racist area. Here very old and strong prejudices and views exist even today.’ (Kari, PK, FI). However, at the same time, respondents did not recognise extremist parties often. One stated that parties had now become very similar and ‘extremes have vanished’ (Kai, PK, FI) while another did recall a particular incident of extremism in Jyväskylä and attributed it to the fact that when there is an economic downturn ‘some people get excluded’ and that there is always a ‘counter-reaction’ to immigration policy (Riku, PK, FI).

In Croatia, the locations followed the wider trend for former socialist countries to be located in the top half of the locations with regard to receptivity to the radical right and negative

11 A detailed exploration of the particular context of the labelling of Lieksa as ‘racist’ was undertaken as a WP7 ethnographic case study, see: Niemi (2014).
attitudes towards minorities. However, such attitudes are relatively infrequently encountered in interviews and the vast majority of interviewees were unable to identify any ‘extreme’ ideologies, parties or movements in the country: ‘No, nobody is extreme, there are no such parties here’ (Martin, Podsljeme, HR). Portugal provides a mirror image of the Croatian case: the two Portuguese locations are situated around the mid-lower half on survey measures of both receptivity to the radical right and negative attitudes to minorities while interviews reveal a relatively high level of acquaintance with extremist parties (around a third of respondents were acquainted with extremist parties – most frequently citing the nationalist and anti-immigration Partido Nacional Renovador (National Renovator Party) – while around a quarter said they did not know of any such groups.

These contexts of different levels of acquaintance and relevance of discussions of extremism are evident in the understandings, at the general level, of extremism found in interviews. In the most sensitised locations, the academic distinctions noted above between extremism and radicalism are reflected. Discussion is most nuanced among respondents from the fieldwork sites in Spain. Thus Hector, a 25 year old active in the pro-Catalan independence left wing movement himself, rejects the label of ‘extremist’ directed at the CUP and characterises it as a ‘radical’ party:

No. Even though many people have called it extremist. Even though we’re radically of the left, radically democratic and radically independentist. But when I say radical, I mean that we go to the root. ‘Radis’ come from the root, from conviction. (Hector, Vic, ES)

The fieldwork sites in Spain, both towns within an hour from Barcelona clearly have the specific political context in which secessionist or independentist views are routinely expressed and with both radical left wing (CUP) and radical right wing (PxC) inflections. PxC is also understood with some nuance being characterised by a 19 year old student as ‘a rather extreme party’ but not so much for its ideas as for ‘the way of expressing them and publicising them’ (Nil, Sant Cugat, ES).

Spain is of course not the only place where the terms have taken on locally significant connotations. ‘Anti-extremism’ legislation in Russia (first introduced in 2002), for example, is notoriously abused to limit many forms of wholly democratic oppositional activism (see: http://www.sova-center.ru/en/misuse/reports-analyses/) not least through the institutional force of ‘Center E’, the counter-extremism department of the Ministry of Home Affairs in Russia (Litvina, 2015: 15). This leads ‘extremism’ to have become resignified extremely broadly or even emptied of meaning. In this context, respondents from the Russian field sites cite groups from nationalists to Pussy Riot as examples of extremism and distinguish between views which might be considered ‘radical’ and ‘extremism’ as the act of promoting those views in illegal ways: ‘Extremism is a wish to overthrow those in power and a wish to change things using violent means’ (Kostya, Vyborg, RU). This definition is mirrored in the definition of ‘extreme’ and ‘radical’ by a Hungarian respondent: ‘The extreme, the radical always wants to achieve his goals faster and more violently. Yes, he is always violent, that comes into my mind.’ (Gelej, Ózd, HU).

In the UK ‘extremism’ has been discursively applied mainly to describe readings or enactments of Islam that are either violent towards non-Muslim populations or perceived to require behaviours that are non-democratic (e.g. the restriction of women’s rights, female genital mutilorganisation etc). Notwithstanding this, discussion of extremism by
respondents in the UK cases is dominated by references to the BNP and EDL while parties or movements of the far left, even where they have had electoral success (e.g. Respect) are much less frequently discussed by respondents. Examples of religious (Muslim and Sikh) extremists are also mentioned by relatively few respondents while Christian extremist groups were not mentioned at all. However, references to these movements related primarily to their perceived ‘racism’ (reflecting media representation of the movements) rather than extremism and there is little reflection among UK interviewees about whether the groups are ‘extreme’ or ‘radical’. Statements sought to position respondents rather in a normative debate as to whether their views were acceptable or not. Some respondents dismissed such groups as politically insignificant. Thus EDL demonstrators are described as ‘a bunch of people who are just drunk, who just want to cause a bit of mayhem’ (Imran, Nuneaton, GB). This attitude is found also among respondents in Hungary where the hugely successful Jobbik party in Hungary is at one and the same time considered to be ‘a highly radical right wing party’ but also one that ‘should not be taken seriously [because] they were formed just to counterbalance the left’ (Kamill, Sopron, HU).

Finally, it should be noted that mention of radical right wing parties and movements significantly outweighs references to left wing parties. This reflects, it would appear, not greater support for radical right wing agendas - MYPLACE survey data show that across all locations respondents place themselves just left of the mid-way point on the left-right spectrum (Pollock et al, 2014: 147)- but the more frequent association of radical or extreme agendas with right rather than left. For this reason support for extreme or radical right and left wing parties and movements is analysed separately below, whilst noting where reasons for support cut across right/left allegiances. An attempt is also made to distinguish between personal support for such movements and expressions of what respondents imagine explains the appeal of such movements to others; this distinction is not absolute, however, as it is subject to both slippage in articulation as well as the social acceptability factor (the latter is discussed directly in Section 3.4.7.

3.4.2 Support for extreme right and radical right parties and movements

Although support for extreme right and radical ideologies and movements was a minority position in every case considered here, there was also genuine sympathy and openness to these ideas and movements. The starkest expressions of support were underpinned by a broader ideological positioning. One respondent from Slovakia, for example, noted that ‘I agree with some of Hitler’s ideas’ (Tomas, Rimavska Sobota, SK). Others suggest that far right movements focus on and address the ‘most urgent problems of current society’ (Libor, Trnava, SK).

These problems are usually associated with ethnic tension, immigration or ‘threats’ posed by religious minorities. The specific issues raised vary considerably across locations, reflecting the very different compositions of, and political discourses in, each location and country. The desirability of controlling immigration into the country was found predominately among northern European and Nordic countries since for countries of the Mediterranean and former socialist countries respondents concern was greater about the impact of emigration rather than immigration on society. However, one exception to this rule was Russia while occasional calls for the restriction of immigration were found also among Hungarian and Spanish respondents. In Greece, one respondent noted that tensions
had risen so high that, 'I know people, basically kids of my age, that go and beat up foreigners, for no obvious reason, they just hunt them and beat them' (Lemonia, AR, GR).

The most frequent negative associations with immigrants reflect widespread xenophobic discourse suggesting that immigrants: ‘take our jobs’; receive undeserved welfare and social benefits; create cultural tension through non-integration; and demonstrate heightened criminality. These concerns are wedded together in Anton’s perception of ‘ungrateful’ asylum seekers:

It’s totally absurd man. The fact that there are people coming from a war, and then they get here and get a good life, and gain asylum, and then they choose to commit crime. I think that is really bad. And that is an area which you should strike hard upon. That is what I think you should do. (Anton, OC, DK)

Negative attitudes are often expressed in terms of immigrant groups leading to different cultures living ‘in parallel with each other’ (Danni, OE, DK) or ‘others’ intruding on ‘our’ cultural norms or ‘rules’:

I don’t have anything against certain nationalities. [But] I have lost my temper a few times with some people from another country with their own culture. Some Muslims live in my neighbourhood and when they have this Ramadan, just imagine, you are woken up at 6 am by their singing and noise. It is not the best thing. Of course all people have their own culture and I can’t do anything about it. [But] I’m sure that they wouldn’t like if I went to the Middle East to sing some hymns. (Aleksi, Kuopio, FI)

If immigrants would behave according to the norms of this country, everything would be fine and there would be no inequality. If you come here, please, live like we do. (Egor, Kupchino, RU)

A UK respondent makes a direct connection between her concern about immigrants ‘taking jobs’ and support for the extreme right BNP:

You see, I think we should have parties like that [BNP] because things like Polish people and that coming into the country, I can’t get a job sort of thing [...] things like that are affecting me and the people who are around me and the place that I live. So of course I’d join a party like that. (Chloe, Nuneaton, GB)

Mironas agrees with Golden Dawn that immigration is a genuine problem, although not with their methods of tackling it:

Immigration is a problem, they are right on that, and the question is how you deal with it. I mean the fact that illegal immigrants take jobs away from Greek citizens, or work without paying taxes or even that you are afraid to walk in the centre of Athens, all these are facts and Golden Dawn’s views are based on these facts. They are correct, the immigration problem should be solved but the thing is how you manage this. By taking a gun and shooting them? I mean I disagree with its approach, that’s why it is considered a far right party, otherwise it would be a right-wing party.' (Mironas, AR, GR)
In other countries, concern was less around recent immigrants than long-standing ethnic minority groups perceived to be threatening. In Croatia, it is ‘the Serbs’, it is said ‘always want some kind of quarrel’ (Vicko, Pešćenica, HR) while in Slovakian locations, it is the Hungarians who are described with animosity: ‘I don’t want any of the Hungarian parties ruling in Slovakia, because it is our country’ (Kristina, Rimavska Sobota, SK). In Georgia some respondents felt that Georgians ‘don’t like the representatives of other races… We have a negative attitude towards Chinese, African Americans, Indians [who] have arrived, Georgians work with them but they still cause aggression in Georgians. [...]The Roma people, there is a lot of aggression towards them.’ (Vera, Kutaisi, GE). In Latvia tensions are primarily between Latvians and the Russian minority who are, Ada says, ‘in constant conflict’ (Ada, Riga, LV). While these tensions were largely around Latvian and Russian language use rather than street-level hostility, it occasionally leads respondents to support extreme right movements:

[...] when I settled in Riga I had a terrible, terrible hatred towards Russians, well, enormous! I even joined the National Union youth organisation for a while but I did not really go there as I had no time. I cultivated the hatred within me, actively on my own, because I was really shocked when I came to Riga. I saw how impudent they are and how they celebrate that 9 May and, I don’t know, burn the flags. I was angry about that. Because I come from the middle of Vidzeme where no Russian has been heard in recent years and then I came to Riga and was so unpleasantly shocked! (Dana, Riga, LV)

In Estonia, tension and conflict was also described as primarily related to the question of the status of Russian language in the country; Karl (Tartu, EE), for example, stated he did not agree with proposals to make Russian a second official language. In Russia respondents referred to conflicts with ‘people from the North Caucasus [...] because they don’t want to accept our culture when they come onto our territory’ (Grigory, Kupchino, RU) while in Finland, it is Russians who are the object of mistrust: ‘In Finland people connect Communism to Soviet Union and to a sort of fear of Russkies [Ryssäviha].’ (Atte, Kuopio, FI). A special animosity is reserved for Roma communities who it is claimed, ‘do not work, and just receive money for nothing’ (Attola, Ózd, HU) or ‘get 500 or 400 Euros every month without doing anything, they sit at home and have 4-5 or more kids and they live off our taxes (Marek, Rimavska Sobota, SK). Roma people are frequently linked to crime in the minds of respondents: ‘I think they cause criminality, in the regions and we have too many Roma inhabitants and people need to be aware. I fear for my life when I go home at night, because they don’t think about consequences or after effects, they don’t think rationally.’ (Krasko, Rimavska Sobota, SK). While anti-Roma narratives are strongest in Hungary and Slovakia, they are present in other locations too. Roze (Rīga, LV) felt that ‘nobody likes them’ because they ‘try to cheat’ while, Riku (PK, FI) claimed ‘Working doesn’t play a role in Roma culture and so they don’t go to school or anything else. Well they are heavy burden on society.’

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Support for extreme right parties was also expressed as being a consequence of these parties having proved themselves an effective force in local government. This is evident in the recognition by a respondent in one of the Spanish locations of the role of the PxC in addressing the concerns of ordinary people about immigration:

[...] here in Vic... Well, the neighbourhoods we’ve got, some have got a pretty high concentration of immigration, some problems are generated, they go complain, and they fix it. I understand because they see what there is. (Berta, Vic, ES)

Similarly in Hungary, Jobbik is described as having ‘improved the situation’ in particular Hungarian towns:

You can see in Érpatak, Gyöngyös pata, that before Jobbik was elected, nothing was done really, but since Jobbik has been in, a lot of steps have been taken to improve the situation. They actually did something, they actually did something.’ (Emericus, Ózd, HU)

In eastern Germany, it was noted that the NPD ‘does not only right-wing things but some things can be good. Yes. You shouldn’t see it in such a one-sided way’ (Karina, Jena, DE-E).

More usually, respondents suggest that they have some sympathy with extremist views but temper that support with criticism. Among respondents in Slovakia, this often expressed itself in doubts about the capacity of extremist parties to deliver change if they voted for them: ‘I had sympathies with Kotleba´s party [Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko]. It was something different, maybe more radical but it would need to have something more to offer than promises.’ (Lena, Trnava, SK). Another respondent from the same town notes that Kotleba was ‘the only one who is trying to do something [about the Roma question]’ but that although ‘He has some ideas [...] it is not enough.’ (Dusan, Trnava, SK).

In the UK context this doubt is often expressed as agreement with some of the ideas of parties like the BNP but concern that they drift into unacceptable racism.

I’ve heard about the BNP, yeah. Erm, but they’re, they’re not gonna come in, because, they say they’re not racist but then they do racist things, so, a lot of what they say I agree with, like British, you know, British work for British workers. (Melanie, Nuneaton, GB)

Similarly, Carly suggests that it is a problem that when ‘Muslims come in, they manage to get a house straightaway and get money straightaway and get loads of jobs’ but, while she agrees with BNP statements on this, ‘some of the things that they said was a bit like racist’ (Carly, Nuneaton, GB). Another respondent had sympathy with some of the campaigns of the EDL, specifically against ‘Islamist extremism’ and believed that ‘the burqa should be banned in Britain’. However, he felt the EDL discredited what was ‘valid’ in their position because ‘they go about it in totally the wrong way’ and cited drunken, abusive and aggressive protests as evidence of this (Nick, Coventry, GB). In the town of Ózd in Hungary, where a march of the Hungarian Guard had taken place a couple of years prior to the interview, one respondent also noted that he had gone along to hear what they said (the speeches had been about ‘gypsy crime’) but come away agreeing with their views but not their methods: ‘[...] with what they said, I agree. But not with marching. I don’t think, they
can achieve much with it. They just make them more angry. And with this whole guard. But what they said, was good, there was nothing wrong in that.’ (Márk, Ózd, HU).

Besides a substantive agreement with extreme right ideologies, support for parties of this persuasion are rooted in a belief that they are somehow ‘different’ from the mainstream parties criticised so extensively by young people (see Section 3.1). Thus, Jobbik is described as a more ‘authentic’ party, as yet untainted by power:

 [...] they have not lied so far, or it hasn’t been proven. Because they have never been in government, but besides this, they are more authentic, if you look at him, he is more prepared. There are interviews, and other TV programmes, where they are questioned, and he answers immediately, and this comes from him. He is not making it up because it would sound good. [...] He does not hide things. (Frici, Sopron, HU)

Young people who feel deceived and excluded by politicians are receptive to strategies of ‘Tellling it as it is’ employed by the radical populist right parties and movements (Pilkington 2015: 57). Thus Barry describes the BNP as a ‘more an honest type of people listening party’ which makes him ‘believe they’d carry out what they’re saying’ (Barry, Nuneaton, GB). This is evident also in Csele’s contrasting view of Jobbik and mainstream political parties:

They [Jobbik] are trying to tell the truth and to convey the current situation to people; all the other parties are just creating a haze. I think they are just obscuring things, and they don’t say what the situation is with this problem and that this has to be solved. Instead they talk in general terms and obscure the whole problem. But Jobbik takes up issues like gypsy crime, public security, livelihood, security of families and tries to solve them. But they just don’t let them to do it; they don’t listen to them. (Csele, Ózd, HU)

Among eastern German respondents there were also examples of individuals who had found something positive and meaningful in extreme right music (Eva, Jena, DE-E).

3.4.3 Explaining the appeal of extreme and radical right parties and movements

Respondents who do not openly express their support for extreme and radical right parties and movements often express what they imagine explains the appeal of such movements to their peers. These explanations might be broadly categorised as: individualised (‘stupid’ or ‘racist’ people vote for them); or systemic (support for such parties is a product of economic crisis and the failure of the political system).

The ‘typical extreme-right voter’ in Europe is characterised by Bakić (2009: 201) as ‘a twenty five-year-old unemployed man, with below-average education’. This stereotype is repeated among respondents who stereotype those who support such movements as uneducated, unintelligent and working class. Thus respondents in Slovakia explain extremists’ beliefs as the product of their own ‘intellectual limitations’ (Bohdan, Trnava, SK) and find support for such parties incomprehensible: ‘I don’t think that an extremist party can solve anything. Like Jobbik in Hungary. I don’t really understand how an intelligent person can vote for something like that.’ (Libor, Tnava, SK). Pam, a respondent from the UK, also thinks that ‘it does come out of a lack of education, for want of a better word [...] I don’t think I’ve ever
met an educated racist [laughs].’ (Pam, Coventry, GB). The attribution of class characteristics to extreme right supporters is most pronounced among UK respondents. Nicolle believes that those who support the EDL are ‘usually people from the working class. Or not even working, literally lower class [...] I think they think it’s an injustice if someone who’s foreign has a better job or does better than them. I don’t understand it.’ (Nicolle, Coventry, GB). However, arguably, Ernesto’s reference to the ‘interior’ of the country acts as a proxy for lower class: ‘Plataforma can do that because it’s really strong in Vic and, in the interior, people are less educated.’ (Ernesto, Sant Cugat, ES). A similar connection is made by an eastern German respondent who considers those with ‘nothing between their ears.' from the rural areas as more susceptible to the extreme right:

That’s a really big problem, especially in rural regions where young people also do not have that many leisure activities [...] And they simply lose themselves in such groups. That’s more of a follower thing [...] But also whenever such people pass me by, I don’t know. Best I don’t look at them. Because they’re just aggressive...I don’t wanna talk with such people. They have nothing between their ears. That’s my very honest opinion. (Verena, Rostock, DE-E)

It is worth noting here that views on whether age plays a role in the appeal of extreme right parties is as varied among respondents as among academics. While in the published literature there is a widespread assumption that young people show heightened receptivity to the far right, and a case for this based on Eurobarometer survey data is made by Arzheimer (2009), in fact the data on whether young people have a particular propensity to support the ‘extreme-right’ is sparse (Mudde 2014: 1) and inconclusive. Goodwin (2011: 6) argues that those who turn out for ‘populist extremist parties’ are, in terms of age ‘either very young or very old’ and it is these extremes that are captured in interview respondents’ explanations of support. Thus, on the one hand, voters for PxC are perceived to be of the older generation:

 [...] many people who voted for it were elderly. The 75 year-old neighbour who, all of a sudden, out of 12 apartments in the building, they stick 10 Senegalese families in there, and she comes down the stairs and cannot understand what’s going on. And they have different habits, they leave the doors open and shout, and the neighbour feels like this and votes for him. (Manel, Vic, ES)

On the other hand, in the UK one respondent commented that on an EDL march ‘you will see a lot of young people’ (Nicolle, Coventry, GB) while Petros (NF, GR) considers that Golden Dawn attracts teenagers who ‘can’t really understand the ideology’ but think it is cool to support the party. In Croatia there is criticism among respondents of younger people who exhibit fascist ideas completely out of context:

 [...] fifteen year old kids, whose parents maybe didn’t even see the war from here, from Zagreb, they don’t know what it was, but still go round shouting: ‘Kill the Serbs! Kill the Serbs!’ They shout some kind of ustasha slogans. (Mak, Podslijeme, HR)

A second trope of this individualised understanding of the phenomenon suggests that support for the extreme right may be attributed purely and simply to the ‘racism’ or ‘nativism’ of others. This is expressed most starkly by Jana, who sees racism as prevalent across the country: ‘Everyone is against the Roma. [...] We are a racist country. I know very
few people that do not have issues with Roma (Jana, Trnava, SK). Duncan also sees an uncomplicated explanation for why people vote for the BNP: ‘people who vote for them are racist themselves, and they are a racist party, so that’s the link’ (Duncan, Nuneaton, GB). Anneliese (Bremen, DE-W) considers that a section of the German population are simply ‘xenophobic’ while Gerard also imagines that such parties essentially appeal to intolerant voters:

 [...] well, there are people who are inherently intolerant, you just got to see it. Of course, these people [...] goodness, tell them that you’ve got a party, that you can have a political party that’s as intolerant as they are, and that, on top of that, it will bring this intolerance to the whole society [...] it’s like, well! What more do we want? Obviously these people will vote, they will vote. (Gerard, Vic, ES)

From this perspective, the economic crisis is not a causal factor for the rise of support for the extreme right but is exploited by political actors for their own ends. Thus the party, PxC, is believed to have sought to capitalise on difficult economic conditions by playing on nativist sentiments through their ‘Locals first’ slogan which allows people ‘to blame the outsiders, blame the others, instead of blaming yourself’ when, for example, they lose their job (Paula, Vic, ES). An almost identical sentiment is expressed by Pam:

 I think there's a lot of like looking for other people to blame for the state of the country, people can't just understand that, like, maybe the Polish guy who has, quote unquote, 'your job', has your job because previously you weren't willing to work it. You know, and it just like, there's that lack of comprehension, just doesn't seem to be there. That's, yeah, crazy. (Pam, Coventry, GB)

However, other respondents point to the economic crisis as an important contextual factor; people look for someone to blame when they themselves are suffering economically:

 They are people that they have not been concerned about politics all their lives, they are desperate, they think that the immigrant is the enemy, carried away by that propaganda and they are addicted to it; they feel that our national pride has been insulted and we have to find a drastic way to reclaim it [...] (Mitsos, NF, GR)

 [...] I think there’s too many people that are against BNP for them to, for the, for people not, for different cultures and things, not to be welcome. But I suppose it gets harder with the recession because that’s the first place people look is for someone to blame. And it will be people that aren’t from Britain. (Taminder, Coventry, GB)

This means that although there is concern, for example, about the recent success of the BNP in the European Parliament elections, there is a belief that this is a temporary phenomenon borne of popular dissatisfaction at a time of economic recession: ‘[…] when times are bad they [extreme right] have a bit more of a say, don’t they? But I don’t think it’s anything […] If the economy picks up again, then, yeah, they’ll be out again and it will be back to, you know, how it was before, in my opinion.’ (David, Nuneaton, GB.)

Alongside the economic crisis, the failure of the political system as it stands is also seen as a reason for people turning to extreme right or radical populist right parties. Indeed, these
two factors are often intertwined. Thus, in Croatia, many interviewees, depressed by the economic situation in Croatia, felt that current political elites were a part of the problem rather than part of the solution and this could lead to some receptivity to populist or even extreme social movements or groups. This understanding of mainstream politicians as an elite working to promote their own interests is expressed bluntly by Barry, himself a supporter of the BNP, who explains that parties of the extreme right are listening to ordinary people like him more than the mainstream parties because, ‘they’re mainly made up of general people [...]To be fair, to me that’s why they’re listening, they’re not like some fancy fucker who went to Harvard or whatever it is, Oxford, or whatever [...]’ (Barry, Nuneaton, GB). It is important to respondents that those in politics are ‘like them’ in as much as they see this as translating into their ability to recognise what are ‘the real issues’ for ordinary people. This is captured below by Cara who, although not a supporter of the extreme right, believes that issues such as immigration need to be discussed but are frozen out of the political agenda because they do not trouble the political class:

RES: I think a lot of the population would agree that we shouldn’t let as many people in from the EU as we do [...] there’s a lot of people who say, ‘oh, it’s a working class issue that’, because they’re not stealing the doctors’ jobs [...] the civil engineer jobs [...] the upper class jobs [...] so I think [...] it’s seen quite as an issue that working class people care about and not really anybody else.

INT: Do you think that’s why it’s not discussed enough?

RES: I think to an extent that’s why it’s kind of ignored, because although there is quite a lot of people who are working class, I think there’s more people in, involved in politics, like your MPs, your Lords, and things like that who are middle and upper class [...]It just seems to be questions that affect MPs and things and people of the class of politics as it were that seem to get discussed rather than the things that generally affect the working person.

(Cara, Nuneaton, GB)

This, in turn, generates a sense that a party, and its politicians, can be trusted and that, if they came to political power, they would present positive solutions to issues being ‘lived’ by ordinary people (David, Vic, ES). This feeling that parties such as the NPD were attractive not because of their ideology but because they gave hope that ‘at least someone is still there who does something for us’ (Benjamin, Jena, DE-E) was noted also by an eastern German respondent. Craig too felt the attraction to extreme right movements in terms of their passion, their willingness to ‘do something’ and their concern with ‘real’ issues. He claimed he would support the English Defence League if they could rid themselves of ‘the racist horrible like vindictive bit’ in the movement because ‘the EDL, they will go out there, they will fight [...] they ain’t scared to go out there and do like a full on fight [...] We do need a party like to go out there, go on the streets [...] Protest against real things.’ (Craig, Nuneaton, GB).

Interestingly, in relation to political factors that are understood as explaining receptivity to the far right, references to charismatic leadership are remarkably few. This is surprising given existing literature on organisations of the extreme right that argue that such parties ‘usually have a hierarchical structure with (male) leaders who exploit modern trends of the political profession to perfection’ (Wodak, 2013: 28) or have leaders, who ‘combine
charisma, ideology, and organisational capacity’ (Ezekiel, 2002: 55). The one expression of the importance of charisma is in relation to the PxC which is said to be sustained by ‘the force that a figure with the charisma of Anglada has given it. The day Anglada leaves the party or gets tired, I think the party will wane.’ (Dani, Vic, ES). In contrast, UK respondents referred to one of the co-leaders of the EDL as ‘an idiot’ and a ‘scumbag’ while in Slovakia Marián Kotleba is described as ‘a neo-nazi’, ‘nuts’ and as deceitful as other politicians: ‘Kotleba might have some good ideas, but […] I think he is faking. I couldn’t trust this person. (Barbora, Rimavska Sobota, SK).

3.4.4 Support for movements of the extreme left

The extreme left, including respondents’ own support for movements associated with it, is significantly less prominent in interview narratives than movements of the extreme right. Indeed, in Croatia, while respondents referenced a number of movements or parties that they considered to be of the radical or extreme right, they found it difficult to even imagine what left-wing extremism might look like: ‘I don’t even know what it would mean to be extreme left-wing’ (Barbara, Podsljeme, HR). Occasional mention is made of ‘anarchists’ or punks in the context of extremism but their perceived ‘rebellion’ against an over-regulated society is seen as ‘disturbing’ (Siim, Tartu, EE).

The data on the extreme left, therefore, is heavily dominated by references in the Spanish data set and in particular, for the contextual reasons set out above, to support for the CUP. While some respondents were critical of the party for ideological reasons or because they perceived it to be extremist (see below), the majority of references were to support for the party. Reasons for support are broadly similar to the themes identified above as reasons for support for extreme right parties. Firstly, the CUP is seen as different from mainstream parties in that it is more in tune with the actual desires of the population. As with support for the extreme right, it is important that the party representatives’ backgrounds, as well as its ideas, are representative of the general population of Catalonia: ‘I see how they listen to society, you know? That they don’t stand up for the rich, because that’s what worries me. I don’t want a society divided between rich and poor.’ (Isabel, Sant Cugat, ES).

Secondly the party is imagined as having the potential to genuinely alter the political landscape of Catalonia. Respondents believe the emergence of a new party (with a significant youth appeal) carries the potential for system change in and of itself but they mentioned particularly positively the critique of the financial and economic system set out in the party programme and the new ideas and political discourse brought into the political sphere by the party.

But the CUP, I do find them to be an interesting party. In fact, here in Sant Cugat, there are two city council members and, at the municipal level, I’m thinking about whether to vote for them because I think it’s a party that makes noise, that’s with the people and that’s more […] extreme. And maybe that’s what we need nowadays. (Guillem, Sant Cugat, ES)

This perception of the left wing parties as ‘radical’ rather than ‘extreme’ is found also among Portuguese respondents (Carlos, Barreiro, PT)

Thirdly, the party is viewed as authentic and trusted to act as it claims it will. Respondents noted positively action taken by elected representatives from the CUP; for those who had
voted for the party it was ‘the first time that I’ve felt good with a party [...] I like how they are acting’ (Paula, Vic, ES). A particularly important symbolic act was that ‘the first thing they did on arrival [after election] was lower their salaries’ (Maria, Vic, ES).

3.4.5 Rejection of extremism

Rejection of right wing extremism was primarily related to accusations that such parties and movements were ‘racist’ or exploited anti-immigration or ethnic minority tensions. Respondents in Portugal described the PNR as ‘stupidly extremist’ in their incitement of hatred towards immigrants (Eduardo, Barreiro, PT). In Slovakia, Ján Slota, co-founder of the Slovak National Party, is said to be an ‘extremist’ who is wrong to promote negative views of Hungarians and Gypsies (Bocián, Trnava, SK). The Dansk Folkeparti (DF) is associated with ‘racist arguments’ (Chris, OC, DK) while PxC is rejected by respondents in Spain because ‘it’s racist. It gives a racist message’ (Isabel, Sant Cugat, ES). Respondents from the locations in Spain again show their greater engagement with political discourses of extremism than respondents from many other countries. Marc, for example, makes it clear that he finds the PxC ‘horrible’ because it is ‘more than nationalist or not nationalist, they’re racist’ (Marc, Vic, ES). In contrast, UK respondents tend to be largely uninformed about the differences between movements on the right and reject them in a blanket way and in accordance with media and public stereotypes. Thus, the EDL, which is a single issue anti-Islamist movement, is described as ‘like the Ku Klux Klan without the white sheets or the Nazis without the swastika [...]’ (Ed, Nuneaton, GB) and described as potential terrorists:

[...] they’re, they’re inciting, they’re inciting hatred which is what I think terrorism does, I mean obviously it’s not extreme but then if they, if they went and blew up a mosque then it’s terrorism, isn’t it? How far away, how far are, how far are they away from doing that? Look, if, could you, and could anyone, honestly say that every single person in that party, yeah, they would protest but they would never blow up a mosque, definitely not, give some, give, give, give one of those idiots a bomb and enough cans of Carling and they, they’d do it [...] (David, Nuneaton, GB)

In Greece, one respondent dismissed Golden Dawn as ‘a gang rather than a political party’ (Myrana, NF, GR). A respondent from the Roma community in Ózd (where Jobbik and its paramilitary organisations had held several demonstrations), however, drew on his own experience in reporting the fear generated by the movement:

If Jobbik organised a demonstration I would surely avoid it, because if the Gypsies gathered they would certainly kill us [...] They are capable of it. There have been enough examples, when Jobbik supporters, and Guardsmen, have murdered people. They burned the houses of families in Tatárszentgyörgy and murdered a little boy. (Hunor, Ózd, HU)
Parties perceived as overly ‘populist’ are also rejected. PxC is described, for example, as ‘a totally populist party that says what the few people who’ve had bad experiences want to hear’ (Dani, Vic, ES) and for employing a cynical populist strategy:

You’re taking advantage of the fear of immigrants to win votes. The strategy is to win votes, and some people have achieved it. But it seems like a reactionary party that’s taking advantage of the situation and yes, the man, politically, is doing it really well. He’s winning votes. (Iker, Sant Cugat, ES)

The Eurosceptic populist party United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)\(^\text{12}\) is also considered to be ‘borderline racist’ (Malika, Coventry, GB), while a 17 year old respondent noted that he had some sympathy with their anti-immigration policy but that ‘they need to stop being so extreme’ (Felix, Nuneaton, GB).

The reasons for the rejection of left wing extremism differed somewhat from those for rejecting extreme right movements focusing on: the reactive and unattainable nature of parties’ policies; concern about the implications of anti-EU stances; and the rigid nature of their discourse and inability to collaborate.

Lis (OC, DK) talks about revolutionary movements as ‘dreamy, idealistic’ whose policies were little more than ‘wishful thinking’. A classic example of the concern about the achievability of aims is expressed by one respondent in relation to Syriza, winners of the January 2015 elections in Greece. Syriza is viewed as an extreme party and fear is expressed that it was offering false promises to the people:

Well, when the leader of the party is on TV saying that, ‘When we have power we will eradicate our debt and return to drachma’, that's unattainable. I mean if we remove ourselves from the Eurozone, what will happen to us as a nation? (Nadia, AR, GR)

The lack of desire on the part of CUP to cooperate with other parties of a perceivably similar ideological outlook had disappointed one respondent who had initially supported the party (Pere, Vic, ES) while a respondent in the UK who had been recruited to a far-left ‘workers’ revolutionary’ party reported that he had left after a few months because he found it ‘biased’ (Umair, Coventry, GB). One eastern German respondent noted also his disapproval of the left-wing position a friend of his had taken: ‘I once had a good friend who is very left-wing radical now I think. These are things I cannot support. I don’t want to throw her into the same pot with Nazis. But when violence meets counter-violence I cannot support it and approve it.’ (Nora, Rostock, DE-E). In this context, anti-fascist groups are rejected for extremism by other eastern German respondents: ‘I would refuse to go to an Antifa demonstration because for the same reason I would reject the Anti-fa [...] for me violence is never an expression of demonstrations or to defend democracy or a means of political opinions.’ (Peter, Rostock, DE-E).

Finally, for some respondents, extremes of either left or right were equally objectionable. Luis describes both the nationalist PNR and the Left Bloc as ‘extremists’ (Luís, Barreiro, PT),

\(^\text{12}\) At the time of interview UKIP was a fringe party but in 2014 it won the European elections in the UK with an unprecedented 27 per cent of the national vote and thereafter representation in the national parliament as a result of two by-elections.
Rosemarie (Bremen, DE-W) declares extremists from left and right as equally ‘shit’ while Mironas notes, ‘I am repelled by the two extremes in the same way. I do not differentiate between them’ (Mironas, AR, GR). This position is perhaps best summed up by Vladimir who does not have alternatives but knows that extremism is not the answer: ‘I do not support radical solutions, because that is not how the problems will be solved. I don’t know any better solution right now. But I do not support extremists.’ (Vladimir, Trnava, SK). This rejection of extreme positions of both left and right appears to reflect the findings of the MYPLACE survey, which demonstrated that when asked to place themselves on the political spectrum from left (0) to right (10), respondents tended to cluster around the midway point while the full range of positions was relatively narrow: the most extreme left position was 3.2 (Vic, ES) while the most extreme right position was 6.3 (Vyborg, RU) (Pollock et al, 2015: 147)

3.4.6 In the interests of democracy? The prohibition of extremist parties

Another manifestation of the importance of the discussion of ‘extremism’ for wider understandings of young people’s engagement with democracy is found in the lively discussion generated in interviews about whether or not ‘extremist’ parties and movements should be legally prohibited. Those who supported banning such groups did so because: the parties’ ideologies or actions were deemed to be a threat to human rights; although a fringe or minority sentiment at the moment, they might spread and become a threat in the future; or it was in the interests of democracy to ban anti-democratic parties.

A classic example of the ‘threat to human rights’ argument follows from the designation of extreme right parties as ‘racist’. Thus, parties like the BNP ‘should be banned, yeah, ‘cause they are quite racist’ (Sonya, Coventry, GB). Similarly, Dolors argues that the PxC should be prohibited: ‘[…] for going about on the street and insulting others, prohibit [it]. And for fighting with people, it must be prohibited. You can’t go to the main plaza of Vic and insult a person for the colour of their skin, you can’t. It must be eliminated.’ (Dolors, Vic, ES). Arnau expresses the same moral outrage as the justification for prohibition in even stronger terms:

Ah, Plataforma […] I don’t pay any attention to these guys. I hope that they disappear soon. These guys should be totally abolished and not be allowed to do anything. Since when can you create a political party that can beat up all the immigrants, you know what I mean? What is this, I mean? What the hell have we become? And their voters, what the hell have they become? (Arnau, Sant Cugat, ES)

Rodanthi is equally appalled by Golden Dawn stating, ‘I believe not only in its banning but also I think it should be erased from people’s minds, you know, that such people exist, that, such people should not even exist’. (Rodanthi, AR, GR). The importance of stemming any possible growth of extremist parties is articulated by Duncan who felt that the BNP could not be simply banned but their scope for action could be limited (for example by prosecuting incidents when they were verbally racist to people) and added that this limited approach would suffice as long as they did not become a real political threat: ‘if they’re a real political threat I would perhaps change my view’ (Duncan, Nuneaton, GB). In Finland, respondents saw ‘some small extreme right groups, some extreme acts’ but concluded ‘there is no reason to be afraid myself’ (Raisa, PK, FI). Respondents in Croatia were also
quite confident that the strength of centrist parties in the country meant that there was relatively little chance that extreme groups would become such a threat. However, a few entertained the possibility of the rise of extremists if unemployment was to increase further.

[...] let’s say, if the standard of living were to fall further, if unemployment was to rise to maybe 500 000 [...] it would mean there would be room for extreme parties to operate. People are easily mobilised by nationalist enthusiasm here and if the situation was to become any worse [...] I think that there is a possibility, yes. (Branimir, Pešćenica, HR)

Banning parties because they are simply ‘against democracy’ themselves is advocated in the case of the PNR (Filipe, Barreiro, PT).

However, many respondents are concerned that banning parties would itself be anti-democratic and opposition to a potential ban on extremist parties was rooted in one or more of the following stances: a ban of political parties is unwarranted as parties as such do not pose a credible danger; ideas, no matter how extreme, are no reason for banning unless they are violently enacted; parties that take part in an election and gain popular support are granted a form of popular legitimacy for existence; and a ban would constitute an anti-democratic act.

A ban on political parties is viewed as unnecessary by Ivan: ‘They shouldn’t be banned of course. They do no harm to anyone. It is about democracy, you should also let radicals express their feelings. (Ivan, Trnava, SK). This confirms comments noted above by respondents from Croatia and the UK that such parties do not currently pose a real political threat. These sentiments are also expressed by young eastern Germans:

[...] it is not a normal party [the National Democratic Party (NPD)]. But I think it is difficult to ban it. On the one hand, […] I think it is important that in a democracy, that other positions, which we perhaps do not like, that they are able to exist. On the other hand it is of course totally dangerous if they get in to local parliament. […] Banning them is not the right answer because it will not change the political attitudes of people. (Mona, Jena, DE-E)

Among those who argue that thoughts and ideas, no matter how extreme, are no reason for banning unless they are violently enacted is Ignat who thought all parties should be permitted with the proviso that ‘they should not use any violence’ (Ignat, RU). Commenting specifically on (far right) skinheads, Evgenii confirms this position:

These people have the right to their opinion, to think as they like […] But they should not be aggressive and should not express their point of view where it is not appropriate. They can say it, but not express it in a way that might provoke conflict. (Evgenii, RU)

Roman also suggests that parties and movements ‘might be banned but it depends what they do […] If they do some protests and were to act with some aggression they should be banned […].’ (Roman, Trnava, SK). For Ann (OC, DK) also all opinions should be allowed expression ‘as long as you keep inside of the Danish law’.
The third argument put forward for not banning extremist parties was that parties that take part in an election and gain popular support are granted a form of popular legitimacy that should not be interfered with. This is expressed by Cara who notes ‘[…] as much as I disagree with the BNP and some of the other small parties, somebody obviously agrees with them so if you’ve got them represented then there’s more people’s views represented as far as I’m concerned.’ (Cara, Nuneaton, GB). In this particular UK town, local councillors had refused to work with representatives of the BNP who had been elected in May 2008 and this had made issues of (anti)democratic protectionism very pertinent to respondents living there:

[...] they [BNP councilors] were elected, we had chose for that person to be elected […] and they decided not to work, that really infuriated me. […] It’s for us, us to put in there, to say like well this is who we believe in, do you know what I mean? Not for them to say well we don’t, we don’t really like them.
(Craig, Nuneaton, GB)

Finally, banning such parties, some argue would simply constitute an anti-democratic act:

[...] Who decides which parties are good, bad? Maybe they represent a significant part of society, and we don’t know because we don’t let people vote for them. I believe in democracy, and thus, I believe that they shouldn’t outlaw parties, because there can be people who believe in it, and their opinion’s not illegal, it’s an opinion.
(Monica, Vic, ES)

This sentiment is echoed by Mirona (AR, GR) who argues that banning Golden Dawn would be ‘against democratic procedures’ because ‘It is political party, it is voted by the citizens democratically, it should not be banned.’

Respondents also consider the potential consequences of banning parties. While for many, this might feel, morally, the right decision, there is also a concern that it might prove counterproductive:

[...] it’s quite difficult to say that you’ll ban ‘cause then you’ll get all the people who follow these parties who are going to be against the fact that you’ve banned them, and then that causes a lot of conflict and then they can really resent you. I think it’s about controlling them, more than anything. Obviously, in an ideal world no one would be racist, no one would be this and that, but I think it’s very difficult to completely stop it without getting a complete backlash.
(Ursula, Coventry, GB)

This fear is echoed by respondents in Spain who point to the potential radicalisation of the banned parties as a response to the repression by the state; this radicalisation could lead to more extremism, with a potential for more violence.

On a more positive note, some respondents consider that a healthy politics dictates that it is better that extreme views are aired and properly contested:

I think people should be allowed to express their opinions, if it’s hate or whatever it is ‘cause if I want to go and indoctrinate or tell someone this, it’s up to them to form their opinion. No one’s going to force it down your throat, it’s up to you, so if you’re character, the weak character that clearly shows you have
something inside you which has a link towards that opinion, hence why it comes out, and I rather you say your opinion out loud instead of being or closing your door and being very secretive about it, it’s better to show who these people are so you know who they are and you know what you need to tackle [...] (Umair, Coventry, GB)

This position is not far from Mouffe’s (2005: 73, 119-20) warning against establishing a ‘cordon sanitaire’ around right-wing populist movements since this does not pacify society but simply denies the existence of social division and silences ‘an ensemble of voices’ that is essential to the very constitution of politics.

The question then arises as to where to draw the line, or as Ariadna puts it, ‘there should be some rules that say, [it’s okay] to go this far, but from here, no further [...] But [...] it’s complicated to fix this line.’ (Ariadna, Sant Cugat, ES). For Emily, that line should be drawn at the infringement of other people’s human rights through the exercise of your own:

[...] you can’t, you can’t tell someone that they can’t think that. You know, it shouldn’t be illegal to think something [...] That’s, you know, your human right, to have freedom of thought. And [sighs], unfortunately in this case it is your human right to have freedom of speech. But that’s just too far, I just don’t agree with using your freedom of speech against someone else. (Emily, Nuneaton, GB)

For others, it is where verbal abuse or hatred turns to physical violence or the incitement to such. Thus Emma argues that to ban PxC would be inappropriate since ‘it doesn’t do anything’; if it were to ‘start having more power and e violent acts [...] then, yes, I think that should be outlawed.’ (Emma, Sant Cugat, ES). Umair draws a similar line:

I think the difference where, where it is, if the BNP go out and clearly say like, go beat that brown person up, yeah, then they should, they should be totally stopped, you shouldn’t be allowed to say that stuff and with the extremist sides yeah, I think you, you’re allowed to have your own opinion, but you clearly give orders to do stuff I think that’s where the line should be said you can’t do that because there are weak characters out there, in society where they will listen to you. (Umair, Coventry, GB)

3.4.7 Representation and stigmatisation: exacerbating tensions

Finally, there is some discussion or intimation that support for extremist or radical parties is partially ‘hidden’ due to their stigmatisation and the potential consequences of openly supporting them. The most direct although also enigmatic statement is by Evita who notes simply that ‘I passively support extremists’ (Evita, Trnava, SK).

Stigmatisation was most strongly alluded to by respondents in the UK. Respondents said, for example, that they would support and vote for the BNP but would not wear a top with ‘BNP’ on, for example, because people would accuse you of racism:

INT: Yes, so if there was a party that was kind of strong on stopping immigration you’d be interested in...?

RES: Yes, definitely.
INT: Would you be interested in voting for them or would you be interested in joining them?

RES: I’d join them, yes or I’d do both really. If it was like a protest thing, like obviously I’d try and be careful because you know what they’d turn round and say; ‘You’re being racist about letting us into your country,’ blah, blah, blah, so I’d try and be careful to how far I went with it because obviously, if you’re getting tops saying ‘BNP’ sort of thing, people are going to be like, ‘Oh you’re being really racist,’ sort of thing, so I’d be careful to which extent I went to, but I’d definitely support them.

(Chloe, Nuneaton, GB)

Barry, went further in suggesting that he would like to join the BNP but his job – he was serving in the armed forces at the time of interview – prohibited him from showing any support for the party: ‘I can’t even vote for them, if I wanted to’ (Barry, Nuneaton, GB). Another respondent notes that she had wanted to join the BNP but knew membership of parties like that meant you could not join the emergency services or military which was a preferred career option for her in the future (Esther, Nuneaton, GB). A respondent in Finland also notes there is a trade-off between one’s own support of ‘radical means’ and its possible consequences:

Yes I support radical means myself. I think that it’s not enough just talk that this is what should be done. This doesn’t lead anywhere. On the other hand I don’t like to get records about me on police registers because it might affect my profession in the future. (Aira, Kuopio, FI)

Another interviewee from the other Finnish field site also noted that even the discussion of political issues might lead to stigmatisation:

I think that freedom of speech is limited nowadays. You can’t say what you want or you will be seen in a negative light or labelled as bad. [...] If you put it straight today it is ‘no good’ way.’ (Rami, PK, FI)

A third notes that those in power seek to hold on to ‘those ideas that they have learned earlier’ and fear ‘different and radical changes in the structure of society’ when, in fact, 'It could be good for us all to let the system collapse' (Ismo, Kuopio, FI). Perhaps this silencing of uncomfortable political discussion and reluctance to contemplate radical measures by those in power, explains also the relative absence of the discussion of extremism among Finnish respondents noted at the beginning of this section.

This stigmatisation is often blamed on media misrepresentation. One respondent had changed his opinion about the EDL, for example, after comparing what he had experienced first-hand and what had been reported in the media about an EDL march in his town:

A load of my mates was in this, yeah [...] This [...] ain’t as cut and dried as you think it is, right, ‘cause basically this is about the troops, weren’t it? [...] what happened was the troops were doing a march through [...] And I don’t know if they was Muslims or not, but I can only imagine it would have been Muslims, spat at the troops [...] And they were Ghurkhas, weren’t they? [...] Right, well the EDL are right, very racist people [...] They are full of racist people but [...] They
were Ghurkhas, know what I mean, they stood up for Ghurkhas, they were fighting for our country. [...] and I know people that were there, they ain't gonna lie to me about something [...] They ain't gonna lie to me, if they were going to kick off with the Muslims [...] I’m going to kick off or I’m gonna bang one out, do you know what I mean, they ain't gonna lie and they told me straight that they spat at the troops [...] The EDL got everything. The EDL’s the one that got kicked into the crowd [...] It was all over the news that it was the EDL that did everything wrong [...] And that’s how I found out that how bad our news is, do you know what I mean?” (Craig, Nuneaton, GB)

Similarly, Csele, from Hungary complains that Jobbik actions are misrepresented in the media:

They are afraid of us, even if we have not done anything. It happened in the Guard as well. There was not even a punch thrown at anyone. We had not done anything, and they accused us falsely of killing and robbing, and so on, that we threaten people, but I don't know why. (Csele, Ózd, HU).

Spanish respondents suggest also a tendency to misrepresent the PxC as racist when it in fact seeks only to ‘regulate immigration’: ‘What Plataforma wants is to regulate immigration; it doesn’t want to get rid of all the moros even though this is what’s said about them.’ (Angel, Sant Cugat, ES). Coming full circle to our opening definitions of what constitutes ‘extremism’, therefore, respondents lead us to a critical engagement with the relationship between political positioning and political behaviour.

Whoever engages in extreme behaviour can be identified as extreme; you don't have to be a Golden Dawn supporter. For example, PASOK is not stigmatised as an extreme party; this does not mean that it is not because what matters is the behaviour of its members. (Sofia, AR, GR).

As a Greek respondent puts it - political labels should follow behaviour not party names.

### 3.5 Between ‘a lost place’ and a fictional ‘utopia’: Imagining, and realising, a better society

It has been demonstrated in Sections 3.1 and 3.4 that young people across contemporary Europe rarely subscribe to a strong political ideology or seek a radical or extreme change in contemporary society. This does not mean that young people do not have ideas and visions of what ‘a better society’ would look like. This final section of the report considers, first, how young people imagine a better society and, secondly, by whom, it could be realised. The ‘ideal’ society imagined by respondents is characterised by a better economic and material situation and a more democratic and less corrupt political system. It is also a more caring, solidaristic, more tolerant, more equal and more ethical society. When reflecting on how such a society could be brought about, respondents consider first and foremost what they, as individuals, can contribute. However, many young people think a better society is achievable only through collective effort and action. A minority see change as the responsibility of the state and its actors rather than citizens. The section is concluded with a
consideration of those narratives in which a better society is envisaged as impossible; a fictional utopia very far from the ‘lost place’ in which respondents find themselves today.

3.5.1 ‘A society where people can earn a living’: A modest economic dream

With few exceptions (respondents from Finland, Denmark), the improvement of the economic situation is viewed as the first step towards a better society. This vision of an economically more secure society clearly mirrors the deep anxieties of respondents about the present - specifically the effects of the on-going economic crisis – and thus is concentrated in the narratives of respondents from the economically most troubled locations in former socialist and Mediterranean countries. Here, a better society is frequently imagined as one in which basic material security is ensured for all and employment is available for all who seek it.

‘A decent life’: Material security

The relationship between the imagined better society and current material problems is articulated clearly by respondents from Croatia:

A better society? [...] That is a society where people can earn a living, and not what we have at the moment. This is a catastrophe. I mean, I don’t mean that everybody needs to have lots of money, but a situation where you don’t have to worry about every penny you earn. (Astra, Podsljeme, HR)

[...] I would like a society where a man can pay his rent with an average salary, where he can pay his housing expenses, and food. That’s it. That is non-existent today, and I would like that at least that can be done with an average salary. (Đuro, Pešćenica, HR)

This modest vision of ‘a living wage’ to secure ‘a decent life’ (Stas, Kupchino, RU) or having ‘basic conditions’ for life such as ‘housing, food, water, health and education provision’ (Anabela, Lumiar, PT) is all that is imagined by other respondents also. Uwe notes that ‘there are still a lot of people living on the breadline. This should not be the case in Germany.’ (Uwe, Bremen, DE-W) while respondents from Spain present their ‘ideal society’ as one where ‘there wouldn’t be so much poverty’ (Fina, Sant Cugat, ES) or in which you were ‘not worrying about your subsistence’ (Arnau, Sant Cugat, ES).

A basic level of material security is imagined also as a cure for people’s ‘dependence’ and thus a prerequisite of the country being ‘really free’ (Sonya, Vyborg, RU). This connection is probably explained by the fact that this respondent is from the city of Vyborg, close to the border with Finland and the absence of material goods and services in Russia means that
inhabitants rely on trips across the border to access them: ‘we need gyms, cinemas available here, not have to go to Finland to buy goods. I think we should have it all in Russia, too.’ (Arina, Vyborg, RU). In contrast, one Estonian respondent imagines their ideal society in which the country was ‘economically secure’ as jeopardised by the Estonia’s assistance to other countries: ‘Estonia itself, its people don’t have money to live on and then we give a loan to Greece, this is not normal’ (Karmen, Tartu, EE).

A job for everyone: Employment makes for a better society

Respondents in Georgia, Croatia, Slovakia, Russia, Estonia, Latvia eastern Germany and the UK all thought about a better society as one that ‘would first and foremost be [better] employed (...)’ (Nana, Telavi, GE). This meant assisting young people in particular to find employment (Fwkiwn, NF, GR) but ideally ‘the total elimination of unemployment so that everybody could find a job and [have] less working hours’ (Mina, AR, GR). For respondents in Georgia and the UK, better employment opportunities were envisaged as having positive effects on society more widely. In Georgia economic hardship and a lack of jobs were widely seen as the main sources of what they identified as widespread aggression in the population while in the UK frustrated employment opportunities were linked to the rise of extremist politics:

I think if everyone was employed, it would probably make society a lot better. Because then there wouldn’t be this issue of these benefit scroungers or, ‘I have no money, I’m going to join the BNP,’ and stuff like that because finance is really a big, big issue in this country, especially now with the economic turmoil that we’re going through. If everyone was like financially stable, then they wouldn’t really have a reason to, like, rant and join radical political parties. (Tammy, Coventry, GB)

Rethinking the economy: debt, manufacturing and profit orientation

A better society was linked to a number of more fundamental changes in the economy or the relationship between the economy, society and culture. At the purely economic level, the end of the debt crisis was cited as something that would significantly improve society (Rute, Barreiro, PT). A number of respondents (from locations in Russia, Spain, Croatia, Slovakia and Latvia) associated a better society with the revitalisation of domestic manufacturing. There was also a call for less ‘profiteering by corporations’ (Nick, Coventry, GB) and the linking of profits not to sales but ‘better service’ and levels of democracy in businesses (Manel, Vic, ES). The possibility of managing the current crisis through cutting people’s hours of work was also proposed (Gerard, Vic, ES). A lone respondent called for a less socially controlled economy: ‘In our case, a better society would be the United States, meaning complete freedom of entrepreneurship’ (Vera, Kutaisi, GE).
Finally, it is worth noting that the absence of Denmark and Finland from this narrative of a better society as an economically more secure society correlates with a high level of satisfaction with social security and welfare provision in these countries (see below). This is reflected also in references by other respondents to ‘models’ of a good society that one’s own country might follow; the ‘Nordic’ countries (specifically Norway, Sweden and Finland) are considered a model to emulate because of their good healthcare, social security and quality of life (mentioned by respondents from Estonia, Russia and UK).

3.5.2 Being heard: A better political system
As argued in Section 3.1 of this report, the widespread disavowal of contemporary politics indicates not a disengagement from it but a call for its reconstitution as the pursuit of collective good. This is evident in the fact that respondents’ visions of a better society frequently included visions of a better political system. Such a system is envisaged as being: more responsive to young people; more democratic (with more freedom and less corruption; and characterised by a more critical and engaged population. A small number of respondents outline a vision of a better society in classic libertarian terms - lower taxation and less state intervention – while an equally small minority express nostalgia for Soviet style highly direct ed societies.

A better society is a listening society
Central to respondents’ vision of a better political system is the notion of two-way communication:

A more communicative society, politicians who really communicate with people and not with each other, pretending they are communicating with people. I think that the moment this happened, there would be an enormous improvement. (Cristiana, Lumiär, PT)

For the most part this means politicians listening to people; really listening rather than just claiming to listen (Liisa, Tartu, EE). This discourse is particularly strongly articulated by respondents in Finland who emphasise the importance of listening, in particular, to young people: ‘They should listen to young people. Definitely it is listening.’ (Aira, Kuopio, FI). They also complain that young people’s voices are often dismissed:

There have been cases sometimes in everyday life when you’re a young person that occasionally you feel that they don’t take you seriously because you are a young person. [...] Often it has been because of your age. ‘You’re so young’ and ‘you don’t understand’ and ‘you shouldn’t do [this]’ and so forth. (Otto, Kuopio, FI)

Respondents in the UK emphasised also that politicians should be more responsive and deal with those issues of actual importance to people while respondents in Finland detailed a
range of youth issues that politicians needed to address. These proposals for improving society ranged from the need to improve access for young people to mental health services (Riikka, PK, FI) through the need for more education and employment opportunities (Riku, PK, FI) to the desire for more leisure places for young people to meet (Erkki, Kuopio, FI; Ari, Kuopio, FI) and engage in cultural activities (Ossi, Kuopio, FI). The latter wish is echoed by UK respondents (Vincent, Coventry, GB) and by one respondent from eastern Germany who is particularly concerned about the lack of leisure provision accessible to ‘young mothers’ (Eva, Jena, DE-E). One Greek respondent was less ambitious, not requiring that the state solve young people’s problems but at least ‘[the state] should not take away young people’s dreams. They should be pushed to do more and accomplish at least half of them’ (Thekla, NF, GR).

Daring democracy

A better society is imagined as one that is more democratic. This means ‘[…] a society where the population has more decision-making power over politics and over the things which affect them […]’ (Vic, Claudia, ES). The same view is expressed by Trude who sees a better society as one where people ‘have the opportunity to directly participate in decision-making processes when directly concerned. Like education policy for me, for example.’ (Trude, Bremen, DE-W). Others call for more direct citizen initiatives (Thorsten, Rostock, DE-E) and participation in social movements (Maria, Vic, ES).

For some this more democratic state is intrinsically linked to greater freedom of speech: ‘[A better society would be] more daring, more democratic, cleansed from injustice and probably more fearless, where one wouldn’t be afraid of expressing his/her opinion’ (Tazo, Telavi, GE). Respondents in Denmark saw freedom of speech as a symbol of the level of freedom in society more widely. This broader understanding of the freedom a better society would ensure is articulated also by respondents in Russia and the UK. Vadim imagines such a society would provide freedom of choice at every level: ‘Freedom of travel, freedom of will, a right to be non-religious, freedom of political parties […] And we should be free in terms of healthcare issues. I should decide whether I want to be vaccinated or not.’ (Vadim, Kupchino, RU). Krys suggests that greater freedom should include the right to take one’s own life (Krys, Coventry, GB).

For others, more democracy and a ‘just society’ means ‘there must be no corruption’ (David, Lumiar, PT). Russian respondents complain about government ‘bribes’ (Natan, Kupchino, RU) and expensive perks (Masha, Vyborg, RU) while Verena imagines a more transparent politics characterised by ‘control over large business corporations, those lobbyists’ (Verena, Rostock, DE-E).

Critical citizens

While the onus for improving the political system is placed mostly on politicians and parties,
in some narratives respondents suggest that ordinary people/voters also carry responsibility for making a better polity. Respondents from Spain and Portugal bemoan the lack of reflection and critical thought about political issues (Nuno, Barreiro, PT; Ernesto, Sant Cugat, ES). In the UK a better political system is associated with voters taking an interest in issues, informing themselves about politics and parties and making a wise choice when supporting/voting for a party. Alla sees a better society as being one ‘where people think for themselves’ (Alla, Kupchino, RU) while one Georgian respondent notes, ‘I guess society ought to be very critical […] towards the government and should not give it an inch for anything.’ (Keso, Telavi, GE). In stark contrast, Dana argues that people should be less demanding of the state: ‘I think, that society […] would be better if those who don’t have any rights, wouldn’t demand them’ (Dana, Rīga, LV).

**More or less of the state? From libertarian to Soviet-nostalgic visions**

Respondents envisaged the role of the state in a better society in quite different ways. Some would welcome the containment of its reach and argued accordingly for lower taxation (Gilbert, Coventry, GB; Esther, Nuneaton, GB; Nil, Sant Cugat, ES; Freja, OE, DK). One respondent also called for less intervention by the state in regulating society:

> They are regulating many things, for instance, where you can smoke, and things like that. I think, it is everyone’s own business. I don’t smoke, but why do they interfere in such a thing so that one can smoke here but not there. (Márk, Ózd, HU)

However, others would welcome greater state direction, expressing nostalgia for the Soviet past when everybody ‘lived in peace […] and sausage cost 2.50’ (Ruslan, Ida Viru, EE). For some Russian respondents a return to the collectivism of the past would be an ideal state (Liza, Kupchino, RU) while others looked for a combination of the best features of past and present regimes: ‘[…] if we could blend something out of Russian and Soviet politics, Russian freedom of speech and a Soviet education, that would be a dream country’ (Polina, Kupchino, RU).

**3.5.3 A better society is a caring society**

A vision of a better society shared across respondents in MYPLACE locations was that of a caring society; one that ‘doesn’t just look after the rich or poor but after the whole society’ (Anna, Jena, DE-E). This is a society that ‘hears’ the needs of its citizens (Agamemnon, AR, GR) and protects ‘the vulnerable groups in society’ (Arijana, Pešćenica, HR) and is ‘more sensitive towards the problems of underprivileged people’ (Elene, Kutaisi, GE). Such a society is often characterised as one where welfare state principles are implemented thoroughly. Respondents in Denmark generally believe that the country has achieved this state already (Palle, OE, DK; Ann, OC, DK) although individuals suggest the country does not live up to its reputation abroad in this respect and that society could be more supportive.
other societies such as Estonia where the country ‘is not a welfare state in this sense’, this ‘Nordic model’ is held up as an object of emulation (Simmo, Tartu, EE). One respondent from Spain also expressed his belief that the national health system in Spain constituted the ‘ideal in a democracy’ (Oriol, Sant Cugat, ES).

This more caring society is also characterised by solidarity and greater social cohesion in the face of tendencies towards individualisation. At the most basic level, respondents envisage such a society as being more friendly and sociable; ‘just walking down the street and people saying hello to each other’ (Emily, Nuneaton, GB). One respondent reflects on the positive sense of feeling part of a single community which happens, for example, on New Year’s Eve and ‘is a lovely thing which unites in fact pretty much everyone’ (Lasse, OE, DK).

This vision of a better society imagines people pulling together rather than being envious of one another, ‘fighting among themselves’ (Viktoria, Rimavska Sobota, SK) or ‘thinking only of himself’ (Dieter, Bremen, DE-W). As Kevin notes, society would be very different if people stopped ‘working against each other because of profit’ (Kevin, Bremerhaven, DE-W). Paradoxically, in situations of extreme crisis people are felt to become ‘more generous’ (Pilar, Sant Cugat, ES) and solidarity emerges in the face of difficulty:

In everyday life you find solidarity, even though they try to alienate us, individualise us, make us more selfish […] With the supposed crisis, many networks of solidarity are expanding, many links and many ties are being formed with a lot of people, and all this is positive. (Hector, Vic, ES)

This is expressed also in a Greek respondent’s characterisation of a better as society as: ‘Solidarity. We should help others and someone who has more goods give to those that don't have’ (Thekla, NF, GR).

3.5.4 Respecting difference: The enriching quality of multicultural society

One of the most commonly expressed characteristics of ‘a better society’ is ‘tolerance’. This may be an aspiration expressed at an abstract level:

[…we need more tolerance (Margot, Bremen, DE-W)

If everyone was a bit more considerate and everybody cared for each other a bit more and was a bit more tolerant, that would be important (Christina, Jena, DE-E)

That would be the best society. Everyone should be tolerant to others, accept other ideas, not by giving up his own, but finding a compromise. That’s what democracy is. (Alisa, Kupchino, RU)

In Georgia, a better society was described as one where people would be more respectful, tolerant and supportive of each other: ‘[…] society would become better (…) [if] there was more love between people, more support, tolerance and patriotism’ (Lasha, Kutaisi, GE).
More specific references to what constitutes a tolerant society usually relate to visions of society without discrimination against immigrants, ethnic minorities or people ‘from a different culture or background’ (Plamen, Coventry, GB). This is articulated by Luís:

A better society? It would be a society where people had no need to judge each other and a society less biased, less racist - because there is still a lot of racism and not only in relation to ethnicity, but to different ways of living. I think it is important for people to learn to accept [...] the difference. (Luís, Barreiro, PT)

In Estonia, where one of the field site locations (Idu-Viru county) had a predominantly Russian-speaking population, there were a number of more specific statements in which a better society was envisaged as one in which citizenship was granted to all Estonian Russians or Russian was made an official language.

The virtue of tolerance for ethnic minority or immigrant groups was often expressed in classic visions of cosmopolitan and multicultural societies. ‘Multicultural society’ is described by Dani as ‘more enriching for everybody’ (Dani, Vic, ES) while Anabela envisages her ‘better society’ as:

[...] a society in which everyone is happy with each other [...] I think people should live in harmony [...] all religions, people should have contact with other races, because you learn a lot from people from other countries. I think this is a good society. (Anabela, Lumiar, PT)

This vision of a ‘multicultural society is translated by one Estonian respondent into support for an open borders policy:

[...] free immigration politics. I believe in this really strongly [...] that our education policy, asylum policy should be more free so that from everywhere in the world [...] people could come, change society into one that is more multicultural, this enriches us strongly [...] a society where Estonians and Russians would build up Estonia together including all other ethnicities who would like to come here [...] (Oskar, Tartu, EE)

This vision of an outward looking society ‘in which we don’t just think within narrow borders, but also about many people everywhere in the world’ is shared by Mona (Mona, Jena, DE-E).

There are also refutational positions, however, from where respondents depict a better society as monocultural or with less immigration. At the extreme end of the spectrum, one respondent states bluntly that his better society would be ‘white’ (Barry, Nuneaton, GB) while another states, ‘I think without Roma it would be better’ (Tomas, Rimavska Sobota, SK). In a more measured way, Oleg expresses concern that Russia is too ‘hospitable’ and that there should be ‘some rules migrants have to follow’ (Oleg, Kupchino, RU) while Emily welcomes the UK’s cultural diversity but believes that EU immigration should be limited:
I think we should be embracing the cultural diversity of our country. I do think that we should maybe limit the amount of people from the EU coming in, because, as much as not to be judgemental, erm, they, they do get paid less for the work and they're happy with that. And our, our, the people who are, some of the people who are on the dole, some people my age, are really struggling to get jobs, because business people know this, they know they will work for longer hours, get paid less, and be happy with that. (Emily, Nuneaton, GB)

Respondents understand a better society as constituting one where there was tolerance not just for ethnic or religious minorities, however, but for a range of non-traditional identities and opinions: the LGBTIQ population, the disabled, the materially deprived, homeless).

Gemma suggests that society has made significant progress in the last 30-40 years towards being more open-minded and respectful to everyone despite their differences, but it could go further (Gemma, Sant Cugat, ES). Paul also emphasises that a better society would be one in which people are brought up to be respectful rather than ‘abusive’ to others who are different from them and he recounts his own experience:

I’ve seen it, yeah, that was when I used to have long hair. Someone, I heard someone talking about me to their young child because I had a black top on, and black jeans and long hair. Saying things about goths and stuff. I’ve heard that. (Paul, Nuneaton, GB)

Gerli also criticises arguments and fights among groups of young people because of the way people look or behave: ‘if you don’t fit in then you are immediately bad or I don’t know, like left out. Such stuff should not happen.’ (Gerli, Tartu, EE). Thus a better society is imagined as one in which nobody is ‘left out’: ‘a society which integrates everyone’ (Rosemarie, Bremen, DE-W)

3.5.5 A just and equal society

From across the range of locations in the MYPLACE study, young people imagined a better society as one in which there was greater equality. This equality did not imply ‘sameness’ but usually a combination of: equal rights (before the law) and absence of discrimination; and equal opportunity for all to reach their individual potential. For some, equality also meant material equality and envisaged a redistribution of resources.

A just society: equality before the law

[...] in an ideal society, there are equal rights, every person has the same rights, regardless of his or her position in society – everyone is treated equally by the court. (Stas, Kupchino, RU)
A better society is described widely as one in which ‘discrimination should not take place’ (Mariam, Kutaisi, GE) or when ‘no one is discriminated and then people have their own freedom to choose, what they want to do’ (Ahto, Tartu, EE) Pau elaborates by giving the example that equality means that you would not earn more or less at work because of your gender (Pau, Vic, ES) while Tariq describes a fair society as one where people are treated equally regardless of their different backgrounds (Tariq, Coventry, GB).

The prerequisite of a ‘fair and better society’ is thus ‘to obey the law’ (Dajo, Tranava, SK) and requires confidence in the justice system. For this reason some respondents – in Portugal and Russia - link their vision of a better and fairer society to a better justice system (António, Barreiro, PT). If people believed that they would be treated equally before the law regardless of their social status, ‘that would make society better, because people would have more fear of doing wrong and would seek to do everything according to the law’ (José, Barreiro, PT). Russian respondents were more specific, calling for the need for the police not to be open to bribes (Natan, Kupchino, RU) and for courts to work in the interests of justice and not ‘[it’s] own pockets’ (Igor, Kupchino, RU).

The right to achieve your potential: Equal opportunities

‘Equal opportunities’ were seen as the pillar of a more equal society and achieving this state of society entailed: removing barriers; helping those not able to help themselves; and neutralising the advantages gained from inherited privileges (DK). A good society is envisaged as one where ‘Everyone should have the same opportunities to achieve what he/she has the potential for, independently of money or their parents’ salary’ (Uwe, Bremen, DE-W). Similarly, Rosemary sees a better society as one where ‘everybody had equal opportunity to make their life what they want’ (Rosemary, Nuneaton, GB). More specifically it was suggested that everyone should have the right to education, basic food and transport (Rosemary, Nuneaton, GB), equal opportunities for employment (Nicolle, Coventry, GB; Tammy, Coventry, GB) and ‘to have access to the same resources as everyone else’ (Eduardo, Barreiro, PT).

‘A fair wealth distribution’: Material equality

For some respondents, the notion of greater equality went further, entailing material equality even if this required a redistribution of resources. This position was particularly evident among respondents from locations in the Mediterranean and post-socialist countries. Respondents from Greece called for ‘a fair wealth distribution ’ (Lakis, NF, GR) and a society in which ‘people would not exploit other people, or classes, where there are no bosses and employers’ (Markos, AR, GR). In Portugal, Alberto imagined a better society as one with less inequality in income (Alberto, Lumiar, PT). This is echoed by UK respondents who note the huge salaries, for example, of professional footballers in comparison to nurses
and teachers even though the labour of the latter was ‘more helpful’ (Nicolle, Coventry, GB)

In Estonia, a better society is described as one where ‘everyone is equal. Where there isn’t such poverty, where everyone would have food on their table and a place to live [...]’ (Liisa, Tartu, EE). In Hungary too, concern was primarily for the low paid, and there were calls to respect the obligation to pay people at least the minimum wage (Leonóra, Ózd, HU). In Slovakia a better society was simply envisaged as ‘the equality of all people’ (Alexandra, Rimavská Sobota, SK) while Aziza declares ‘I want inequality gone’ so that people were not judged on what they could afford to buy or wear (Aziza, Kupchino, RU).

**An artificial virtue? Limits to justice and equality**

Finally it should be noted that understandings of a more just and fair society conform to respondents’ wider political views. Thus those who support welfare statism tend to see economic equality as underpinning fairness, while neo-liberal supporters argue that fairness is the right to keep the outcome of one’s own efforts instead of relinquishing much of it to the state.

Sceptical attitudes to fairness and equality evoke Hume’s (1985) claim that justice is an artificial virtue. In Estonia for example respondents argued that a just society is impossible since people would never get exactly what they want while improving the position of one group (e.g. the Russians) would be resented by another (e.g. the Estonians):

> [...] well a better society doesn’t necessarily seem fair or just for everyone. For example progressive tax levels definitely don’t seem fair to richer people, but for others it’s better [...] (Madis, Tartu, EE)

In Estonia and Russia the eradication of hierarchy was envisaged as leading to anarchy: ‘[...] if everybody were equal, everybody here would do whatever s/he wants’ (Masha, Vyborg, RU) In Hungary, in contrast, complete equality was rejected because it was associated with the failure of the communist system.

Thus some respondents in the UK and Hungary were keen to emphasise that rights to benefits had to be accompanied by obligations such as compulsory training and job seeking by those claiming unemployment benefit (Chloe, Nuneaton, GB) and that those, specifically the Roma, who did not meet the requirements should be treated ‘harshly’ (Frici, Sopron, HU). Along similar lines, in Greece and Spain a meritocratic rather than egalitarian society was promoted (Biel, Sant Cugat, ES) in which productivity is rewarded but lack of contribution is punished: 'Everybody should get recognised and rewarded for the work he produces or be punished respectively for the illegal things he does' (Stathis, AR, GR).

**3.5.8 Getting active: Participation and collective action**

When people talk about effecting change to improve society they frequently note that this requires engagement with the political sphere including participation in formal politics or forms of collective action. This appears to confirm that although young
people are more inclined themselves to participate in non-conventional forms of politics, they continue to attach higher ‘value’ to traditional forms of participation. When MYPLACE survey respondents were asked what constitutes effective political participation, for example, they evaluated traditional forms most highly; ‘voting in elections’ received the highest mean response for effectiveness (Mean = 6.85 on a scale of 0-10) and ‘being active in a political party’ was considered the third most effective form of participation (Mean = 5.41) notwithstanding the almost exclusively negative associations with political parties expressed by young people discussed above (Pilkington and Pollock, 2015: 5). Since participation is discussed in detail in Section 3.2 of this report, here the discussion is confined to those direct references respondents make to how such participation can bring about their imagined ‘better society’.

Getting active

Getting informed and getting active was the first step to making a better society.

I think that what we should do is get informed, know what is happening around us and try, try a little bit to get more active, wherever we can [...] I believe that it is good to participate, and not just fold our arms and watch things evolve. (Agamemnon, AR, GR)

Istvan concurs with this:

[...] I think people should be more active and aware of what’s happening around them and who’s leading them and what are the parties in power and what are their political views and everything so people, people should know, because if you know then you know when it’s time to act. (Istvan, Coventry, GB)

However, another UK respondent noted that many people were scared to take that step (Ursula, Coventry, GB) while Maria, from Spain, felt ‘people don’t really know how to change it [society]’ and what was needed was more belief that ‘the power is ours, it’s us who change things’ (Maria, Vic, ES).

Political participation and collective action

A range of standard forms of participation were suggested as contributing to improving society. These included participation in elections and being active in political life, signing petitions and organising meetings, informing oneself and others about political issues, participating in local councils and local assemblies and raising awareness through one’s own political actions and by challenging government bodies about system failures and injustices. Thus, Nick argues, to bring about change you have to:

[...] talk to people, to raise awareness, to write letters, to ask questions. You’ve got to nag and nag and nag the, you know, the government bodies and the local authorities, because they, too easily and too often they just ignore you. Erm, so I, I will never give up asking questions, you know, I'll only be satisfied, er, if they answer my questions properly. [Laughs] (Nick, Coventry, GB)
Some respondents thought young people could make a particular contribution because ‘the young have new ideas […] I am not saying that the politicians today are old, but I think that a chance should be given to the young, the new ones, because there are new ideas and new possibilities.’ (Ana, Podsljeme, HR). This potential, it was argued, could be better realised if youth councils were given ‘real resources’ in the form of an ‘annual budget’ which the councils could decide themselves how to spend (Niilo, PK, FI). This cooperative and collaborative attitude to participation is summed up by Gurami who called on the government and people to unite and combine their efforts to address problems (Gurami, Kutaisi, GE).

Others envisage people coming together in collective action to make a change through protest. As Timo put it, ‘So, a classic way – a demo can change things’ (Timo, Rostock, DE-E) while another respondent from eastern Germany saw the most obvious mechanism for bringing about change as being ‘to organise yourself in some groups’ (Jens, Jena, DE-E). Respondents in Greece talked about the importance of forming a collective consciousness and engaging in collective activism through, for example, occupations and demonstrations with the Indignant Movement. A note of caution is also sounded, however, that sometimes collective action can fuel the fire. Thus Sebastian argues that a more tolerant society could be brought about best not by challenging prejudice but by choosing to ‘ignore it’:

I think a better society would be one that’s a bit more tolerant of everyone for everything. Not just race, religion, it can be point of view, expression. And obviously there’s always going to be hatred but I think a better society would be one that ignores that hatred. So people could ignore the BNP, ignore the EDL and whatever, don’t even give them the time of day, ignore them completely. You get the counter protest against them and it feeds their fire. […] Any time any hate comes out, or anyone makes a remark, put on Twitter or Facebook, just ignore it. It’s not going to hurt you. […] And accept it as the minority of people who are doing this sort of stuff. (Sebastian, Coventry, GB)

3.5.6 Treating people with respect: A more virtuous and moral society

A better society is also characterised by a number of moral and ethical criteria. At the most general level, Erekle states simply that ‘A better society would stand comparatively higher in terms of virtue and morality […]’ (Erekle, Kutaisi, GE). Tracing her own vision of a better society to her religion, Vera states more specifically that a better society would be one:

[…] where people trust each other and there's honesty in, in business, in personal relations, in things like that, there should be honesty and, and virtue and a sense of, there should be a good work ethic, and teaching our children values and valuing everyone and valuing life, and taking, you know […] a more accepting view to people and their different views, even if they're not of the same religion as you, the same race as you, the same background, same caste,
you should still respect them as a person, and respect that their upbringing has been different to yours. (Vera, Coventry, GB)

Honesty was noted as an important virtue among both people and government (Olga, Vyborg, RU).

**Respect for others**

Mutual respect is frequently referred to as an important characteristic of a better society. A better society would come about ‘if people simply treat each other with respect’ (Bidzina, Telavi, GE) or show ‘more respect’ for communal space and ‘for the society in general’ (Raquel, Lumiar, PT). In Russia, respect is often expressed as part of a wider ‘culture of behaviour’ (Petr, Vyborg, RU) or communication. Thus a better society would be reflected in ‘people’s communication, mutual respect, maybe we will have less rudeness. And people will become more civilized in general.’ (Inga, Vyborg, RU). In the UK, in contrast, the discourse of respect is often closely linked to that of tolerance. Thus, a better society was viewed as one in which people were respectful of others’ way of life or thinking (e.g. religious beliefs) or stage in life (respect for elders) (Rita, Coventry, GB; Vijay, Coventry, GB).

I just think people having more consideration for other people, I mean I’ve been brought up with manners, I’ve been brought up that, you know, you respect your elders, I’ve also been brought up that respect is something that’s earned and as a nearly eighteen year old, yes, I will always respect my elders but if they don’t respect me back, you know, get stuffed [...] you’re no better than me, stop looking down your nose at me, that kind of thing, I’m so head-strong when it comes to things like that and I really think if everybody had a little bit of consideration for everybody else, this country, the whole entire world would be a much better place. (Jan, Nuneaton, GB)

One respondent also noted specifically that human rights needed to be respected, especially in relation to how the police treated citizens (Semen, Vyborg, RU).

**A society free of war, violence and conflict**

A second strong narrative is that an ideal society would be one without war (Guy, Nuneaton, GB; Vika, Vyborg, RU), violence (Luis, Vic, ES; Anthi, AR, GR) or conflict:

[…] for me, there would be no fighting, there, it’s really unrealistic but there’d be no fighting, they’red be no arguing and everyone would get a chance to have their say but I suppose you can’t have your say without, ‘cause there will always be someone that disagrees, so, unless you’re all clones of each other which isn’t very diverse and cool, so […] (Taminder, Coventry, GB)
The same doubts that society can be conflict-free are expressed by Oleg, who goes further to suggest that a modest level of conflict actually facilitates finding solutions to social problems: ‘You can’t solve a problem without a small conflict. You should have one to make people think of a problem, find solutions.’ (Oleg, Kupchino, RU).

Post-material values

A number of what might be called broadly post-material values were seen as attributes of a better society.

At the end they say life should be based not on some material goods but on human values. We should give people everything and not ask anything in return. So then people will act in a different way, feel in a different way, and there will be no wars and issues. All this is very hard to do. But yes, if we were to be less dependent on economics and the market, things would be better. (Tolya, Vyborg, RU)

The focus of society on consumption was deemed ‘crazy’ and as leading to a decline in ‘the morality of people’ (Aira, Kuopio, FI).

An associated concern is with creating a better society through caring for the planet and its ecology (EE) at both the global and local level: ‘Stop littering, first of all. That is one thing that will make our planet cleaner. And it should be normal, stop trashing your own country.’ (Egor, Kupchino, RU). A process of moving back to the land and deurbanisation was also suggested by Estonian and Greek respondents (Nadia, AR, GR).

Feeling safe

Finally, a better society was described as one in which you ‘live without fear’ (Vadim, Kupchino, RU). For Vadim fear was evoked in certain places in the city and by encounters with particular ethnic groups (‘people from the Caucasus’) although Vijay, expressing a similar desire not to be ‘scared of people around you’, felt that society would be better if there was less stereotyping of people based on how they look (Vijay, Coventry, GB). The desire for a society in which they felt safe was a discourse strongly concentrated among UK respondents. Sally imagines ‘a world where you’re not scared to go out your own front door and where you feel safe’ (Sally, Nuneaton, GB) while others want to see a ‘safe environment’ in which kids ‘could play on the street’ (Rita, Coventry, GB) or characterise a better society as being one with ‘less crime’ (Gemma, Coventry, GB) or ‘no crime’ (Susan, Coventry, GB).
3.5.7 In our hands: Bringing about a better society through individual action

In the second half of this section, we consider if, and how, respondents imagine their ideal societies could be brought about. As discussed above (see Section 3.1.2), the MYPLACE interview data confirm that young people largely perceive politicians and the political sphere as unresponsive, untrustworthy and distant. This, research into young Europeans’ participation suggests, makes young people feel that they themselves are unable to change society in the way they wish (Banaji and Buckingham, 2010: 18). Furedi (2005: 17) argues that this lack of efficacy is a product of contemporary society being gripped by a ‘politics of fear’ encapsulated in accepting that ‘there is no alternative’. This, he suggests, takes away any scope for effective political action and denies the human capacity to make a difference. Others, however, suggest that the decline in the efficacy of political institutions, accompanied by widespread neo-liberal discourse emphasising individual responsibility, translates not into withdrawal by young people but their seeking to effect social change by creating their own spaces rather than engaging with state institutions (Riley et al: 346). As demonstrated below, MYPLACE interview data appear to confirm that, when thinking about how social change might be achieved, respondents think first about what they might be able to achieve as individuals. However, they also indicate that this does not exclude recognition of the potential for change through collective action or the possibility that certain social (rather than political) institutions (education, religion) may be crucial sites of mobilisation and action. However, a minority of respondents abrogate responsibility for change to the state and its institutions or remain highly pessimistic that a better society exists or can be brought about.

‘We have the power’: Change ourselves and society will follow

Respondents often feel uncertain about what they can concretely contribute to bringing about a better society:

 [...] people don’t really know what they have to do to change things, they don’t know how to mobilise for change, this is the problem [...] but if we don’t then we are stuck, because I think that we have the power, we are the ones that have to change things. (Maria, Vic, ES)

A common narrative is that a better society can only come about if people first change themselves.

I believe that the first thing we can do is change ourselves; I don't think that occupations, demos and strikes are the solution. I think it is up to us to change the way our parents used to think that led to this situation. (Lhda, NF, GR)

Another Greek respondent suggests that to ‘save’ society as a whole, ‘people must be changed’ (Loukritia, NF, GR). These reflections often involved a degree of introspection about a presumed national ‘mentality’. Thus respondents in Croatia highlighted the need for some kind of change in public consciousness that would mean Croats were more optimistic
about the future and more socially responsible while being less prone to depression or lethargy as a result of the poor economic situation. One Russian respondent also noted the need to change what she considered to be peculiarly Russian mentality which she characterised as ‘a desire to get everything without an effort (Nastya, Kupchino, RU). A vision of a pessimistic and complex mentality emerged from Georgian narratives. For Irina, in a better society, people ‘would not see everything in dark colours, would not complicate anything and would not focus on negative sides’ (Irina, Kutaisi, GE) while Tsira imagined improvement through introspective reflection: ‘I think we all should look deep into ourselves, and realise who we are and what we are doing. Then everything will be alright.’ (Tsira, Kutaisi, GE)

**Leading by example**

Individuals could make a change, it was suggested, by simply living by their principles or leading by example. Thus Oriol states simply:

> If you criticise something, don’t do it yourself, what I mean is that if you are upset that there is corruption, don’t be the one who at the first opportunity is getting paid under the table or hiding money from the tax man, or operating in the grey economy. (Oriol, Sant Cugat, ES)

Dennis concurs that, ‘the only thing you can do is to be a good example yourself. So if you preach that you want to pay taxes, then you have to do it’ (Dennis, OC, DK). Similarly, Vera sees the best way for an individual to have an impact is ‘by being an example to people’ (Vera, Coventry, GB).

Individuals might contribute to the improvement of society according to respondents by volunteering their services or expertise in their community (Pam, Coventry, GB). Eastern German respondents also noted that they might make a contribution by using their knowledge to inform people in their community (Johanna, Jena, DE-E) or by helping people through giving advice or assistance in completing application forms, for example (Thorsten, Rostock, DE-E). In Croatia, a significant proportion of respondents thought that people can help through the NGO sector and several, mainly female, interviewees were active in that capacity.

This focus on making a virtue out of one’s own life can lead to the conclusion that one’s own personal successful transition into adult life (completion of education, securing employment etc) constitutes a contribution to society in and of itself:

> One professor told us: ‘Help Croatia with your college graduation!’ and I think that is, basically, the only strategy. [...] to graduate and to find work. [...] Um, I think that you need to act on a micro-level as much as possible [...] In your company, in your neighbourhood, on the street. Um, I think that is the only way. (Anđela, Pešćenica, HR)

Thus, it was suggested, simply by being a good citizen - by playing a socially positive role
through getting education, working hard, abiding by the law and being self-sufficient - individuals could help bring about a better society (Marexi, Kutaisi, GE). This is articulated by Duncan as he describes how taking care of oneself and one’s immediate environment is the first step to making a difference to society:

> It's important, for, if you look after society, or, a good way of looking at it is [...] my great grandpa used to spend every day in a coal mine, and every day he would come back and his hands would be filthy, but he'd wrap a towel round him and he'd stand there and scrub his hands until they were clean, and if you look after yourself, that's kind of quite a good way of, you know, looking after things, your hands or where you work, your desk space, if, that, those things are kind of metaphors for how to live your life. You can't be messy and you can't put people down, your life can't be cluttered, if your desk is cluttered it's hard to find things. And if you are that, a kind of person that does all of those things, not putting your nail file back where it needs to be, then you're just helping society, in, you know, it's a small thing, but those small things mean that other people can't then find it. If that's the only nail file left. (Duncan, Nuneaton, GB)

An individual cannot do anything

There are dissenting voices, however, that suggest that individuals do not have the capacity to bring about change. In the UK, it was suggested that it is not possible to improve society as an individual because people do not listen unless you are in a position of power (Guy, Coventry, GB; Vera, Coventry, GB). The current situation in Greece, according to one respondent gave little choice: '[...] for better or for worse, Germany tells us what to do and I don't think this will change' (Erato, AR, GR). Kulpa feels equally powerless to challenge the prejudice he experiences as a member of the Roma community: 'one man cannot do anything alone. I myself, alone, I just hope in vain that they do not discriminate against us (Kulpa, Ózd, HU). This sentiment is summed up by Đuro who states simply that, 'I think that someone like me, I think that an individual can’t do anything’ (Đuro, Pešćenica, HR).

3.5.9 The role of social institutions in bringing about a better society

In talking about how a better society might be brought about, respondents spontaneously mentioned the important role of two social institutions: education; and religion. While education was universally seen as being essential to the creation of a better society, views on whether religion helped or hindered the process varied.

Education is our weapon

The importance of education for creating a better society is universally and simply stated:
'Education is the base for everything. [...] Good education makes people better and then society gets better'. (Mironas, AR, GR). Respondents in Finland put forward numerous suggestions as to how education might be improved in the interests of bringing about a better society including an increase in the hours devoted to social studies and history (Lauri, PK, FI) or more multicultural education (Atte, Kuopio, FI). Education in German schools was seen as open to improvement (Dario, Bremerhaven, DE-W) including the suggestion that the teacher: student ratio should be improved so that individual learning needs could be addressed (Uwe, Rostock, DE-E). Education is also the necessary base for the development of advances in technology and medicine, which are viewed as defining characteristics of an ideal society: ‘The Internet, new technologies, everything. [...] This century, we’ve progressed more than the previous twenty centuries. And this suggests that we will advance even more.’ (Pere, Vic, ES).

Education is envisaged as important, on the one hand, because it is a means of effecting equal opportunities: ‘It is the most important thing in my eyes, because it gives you the freedom that no matter how you are born into society, you have the opportunity to go far.’ (Finn, OC, DK). On the other, it has the potential to create critical and active citizens: ‘if we get informed maybe things will change’ (Ersh, AR, GR). Irene explains how she came to the realisation that education adds social value, over and above what it can do for the individual, thus: ‘now that I’m studying, I realise how important it is, not only in order to get a new job, but also in order to understand our society and create better than good citizens, right?’ (Irene, Sant Cugat, ES). Eva states simply that: ‘What we need is education. Education is our weapon, nothing else [...]’ (Eva, Kutaisi, GE).

‘Less religion, more freedom’: Religion as double-edged sword

As noted above, faith or religion often underpinned respondents’ beliefs about what constituted an ideal society and individuals suggested that ‘It would be better if the nation became more religious, that is what’s most important.’ (Ia, Kutaisi, GE). However, when the role of religion in bringing about a better society is mentioned explicitly, it was often seen as a negative force. For example, Istvan declares ‘less religion, more freedom’ and argues that religion should be assigned less importance today because it is likely to cause conflict and violence (Istvan, Coventry, GB). Marina also recognises that religion brings conflict, although suggests solving this by adopting a ‘main religion’ rather than having a multi-confessional society (Marina, Kuchpino, RU). This is echoed by a Russian-speaking Estonian respondent who suggests a better society would be one in which Orthodoxy was the only confession (Mihhail, Ida-Viru, EE). For Vera, on Georgia’s path to democracy, ‘religion is a bigger obstacle than politics’ and acts as a constraint on society (Vera, Kutaisi, GE).
3.5.10 ‘Actively minding their own business’: Change is the responsibility of the state

In a small number of cases, it was suggested that bringing about a better society was the responsibility of the state. Thus, Bjoern states that he was happy to contribute to society by paying taxes when he was earning but motivating himself to get engaged politically was not necessary when ‘the state has institutions to manage that’ (Bjoern, Jena, DE-E). For Meri, indeed withdrawal from social and political engagement appeared to be the ‘active’ choice: ‘In a better society [people] would probably be less involved in politics and more actively minding their own business.’ (Meri, Telavi, GE).

3.5.11 ‘I cannot imagine an ideal society’: A better society as beyond the realms of imagination

A better society is dismissed by some respondents as ‘a utopia’ (Nádia, Lumiar, PT) or ‘just a fiction, utopia. It will never be like that.’ (Barbora, Rimavska Sobota, SK).

I don’t even have any idea what type of society would be better? [...] I think, we need to live in reality. Some kind of utopia, a beautiful life in the future we can imagine all the time, but what will change because of it? (Dailis, Daugavpils, LV)

These pessimistic views were unevenly spread across locations. Thus, while only one Greek respondent believed nothing could be done to improve society, seven UK respondents expressed the view that it is impossible to achieve a better society. In some cases this was because it required material resources that were not available (Natalie, Coventry, GB) while for others, it was felt that society is too diverse to accommodate the rights, needs or aspirations of everybody. When asked what would make an ideal society, for example, Barney responded, ‘I don’t think one exists, I don’t think one can exist, because we’re all so different’ (Barney, Nuneaton, GB) while Umair concurred that ‘I don’t think that a better society can exist because we’ve got such a diverse group of people, like everyone thinks differently’ (Umair, Coventry, GB). Since diversity was, itself, seen as a social ‘good’, these views are, arguably, not inherently pessimistic. Indeed, the bleakest visions came not from respondents in the GB but those in locations in Central and Eastern Europe where, for some, their current situations were such that no better future could be imagined: ‘Ózd is a total desperateness, for the youth and for the older people as well. This is a lost place.’ (Feri, Ózd, HU). For these people an ‘ideal society’ is just so distant that it cannot be imagined at all: ‘I cannot imagine an ideal society’ (Simona, Rimavska Sobota, SK).

4. Conclusions

This report has outlined the key findings of the meta-ethnographic synthesis of more than 900 interviews gathered from young people in 30 different locations in 14 countries of Europe. Using an inductive approach, it has sought not to test a particular hypothesis or
define a typology of countries or locations but elucidate the main themes emerging from the synthesis analysis across research sites. It has, however, indicated the clustering of findings by locations or countries where it is evident. It has also, where appropriate, illustrated how the interview findings confirm, elaborate or question data from the survey element of the MYPLACE project. In this concluding section, the key findings of the analysis on the five key themes, and the related metaphors generated, are summarised.

4.1 Politics and ‘the political’

Immediate associations with ‘politics’ in the narratives of the young Europeans interviewed evoke the sites and institutions (sometimes personalities) of formal politics. However, such responses are often elaborated by broader definitions of ‘the political’ which coalesce around the interrelationship between opinions utilising terms such as ‘debate’, ‘dialogue’, ‘consensus’ and ‘conflict’. This is encapsulated in the metaphor, drawn from one respondent that politics is ‘solving conflicts with words’. Some respondents go further and understand politics as being something lodged in the everyday - ‘everything’ and ‘everywhere’ – although this understanding of politics as going beyond the realm of ‘formal’ politics and political parties is less likely to be found in post-socialist societies.

The semi-structured interview data confirm the MYPLACE survey finding that young people display a lack of trust in political institutions and high levels of cynicism about politics and politicians. The interview data reveal that beneath this lack of trust lies an almost universally negative evaluation of the agents of politics (politicians, political parties), which are described across the respondent set as: removed and distant from real problems; self-interested and self-serving; corrupt; deceitful (don’t keep promises); ineffective (‘do nothing’); and indistinguishable from one another (‘all the same’). The metaphor ‘politics is one big dirty game’ reflects the synthesised data. Particularly significant, for understanding the wider implications of this loss of trust in politics, it is suggested, is the notion of politicians being self-interested since this undermines the sense that politics should be about serving the collective good. This confirms what Hay (2007: 1-2) considers to be a profound shift in understandings of ‘politics’ and the ‘political’ away from the pursuit of the collective good to the enactment of individual interests. The MYPLACE findings suggest that when politics is perceived as used for self-promotion or material self-interest, young people consider the meaning of politics – the concept of ‘public good’ - to have been distorted. It is this distorted version rather than ‘the political’ per se that is rejected.

MYPLACE data confirm other recent studies suggesting young people are characterised by widespread disaffection with politics. However, it finds that this is expressed only by some as ‘apathy’, or more accurately, a declared lack of interest in public affairs (Wattenberg, 2006; Blais et al., 2004). Young people’s lack of interest is partially framed in a sense that politics is not a place for young people and a frustration that youth issues are rarely addressed by politicians. A second response is a more strongly articulated ‘disavowal’ of politics (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 158), evidenced in the MYPLACE data by the paradoxical way young people may express strong, sometimes passionate, views about something in which they claim to have no interest. Indeed while traditional ideologies (left/right, liberalism/conservatism) were found to have little purchase for young people, they nonetheless expressed the importance of politicians having strong beliefs and being
passionate - 'not fanaticism, just passion' - about what they believed in. Finally there was some evidence that young people responded to disaffection with formal politics by embracing it and reclaiming it. However, this narrative was a partial one and found mostly in locations in western and northern European countries participating in the MYPLACE research and very rarely in post-socialist locations.

Finally, interview data confirmed the MYPLACE survey findings that young people in Europe were strongly committed to ‘democracy’ even if the means of getting there – ‘politics’ – appears a ‘dirty’ business from which they would rather distance themselves. However, there was also widespread criticism of democracy as currently constituted and experienced. Democracy, in principle, was defined by respondents as: freedom of speech; the exercise of ‘voice’ or ‘power’ by the people’; choice; and equality. In practice, however, respondents were critical of current representative democracies for their: ‘majoritarianism’; de facto rule by an elite (in the form of elected representatives); the limited opportunities for participation, which gives a ‘false sensation of people power’; and prioritisation of the interests of political parties over voters. Criticisms of democracy, as currently experienced, are also strongly regionally differentiated. Reflecting findings in the MYPLACE survey, satisfaction with democracy is highest in locations in western and eastern Germany, Denmark and Finland. Criticisms of democracy are also very clearly demarcated between: post-socialist societies where democracy is considered to be, at best, ‘a work in progress’ and, at worst, absent or no more than ‘a mask’; and the rest of the participating countries where minor imperfections in, or limitations to, ideal versions of democracy are identified. Exceptions to this rule are, firstly, the locations in the three Mediterranean countries where respondents also used the post-socialist terminology of democracy as ‘false’ to describe the polities they live in. A second exception is eastern Germany where respondent narratives are closer to those of western German respondents than other post-socialist countries in that they demonstrate a general trust in the political system and pride in their democratic system. Support for authoritarian or single-party alternatives to multi-party democracy, however, was weak and interview data confirm findings from the survey that support for non-democratic systems was mainly clustered in post-socialist locations.

4.2 Political participation

There is widespread concern in existing academic literature about the decline in participation in formal political activities by young people. While the MYPLACE survey generally confirms low levels of such participation, albeit not everywhere or of every kind, the interview data show that several forms of formal political participation remain popular and regarded positively. This is especially true of electoral participation. MYPLACE survey data found this to be as high as 80 per cent of eligible respondents in some locations while the interview data reveal that voting remains popular because it is regarded as ‘a civic duty’ and an ‘easy way to effect change’ while not requiring any open affiliation with a party. Only in some locations (UK, Greece), where the relatively high value attributed to political participation is accompanied by critical attitudes towards the political sphere (‘they are all the same’) were respondents found to deliberately abstain from elections.
At the same time, participation in formal organisations was widely rejected. Only in the regions with the highest trust in the political system (Denmark, Finland, Germany) was such participation evaluated positively. In other locations, respondents frequently rejected these kinds of participation out of hand and considered the lack of inclination to work with political parties to be self-explanatory. Even in those locations where respondents are more active, interviews reveal that young people are reluctant to join parties because doing so marks a clear declaration of belonging to a political community (and thus carries the risk of being ‘stigmatised’) and requires commitment to a stable pattern of activities that they perceive as constraining. As is evident from the data set from locations in Finland, Spain and Denmark, where respondents do participate in political parties, they take part for a relatively short period in specific actions or local organisations rather than taking up formal membership and participating at a higher level. Positive attitudes expressed towards trade union activities also give some insight into why participation in parties is declined; trade unions are perceived to be addressing real problems, unlike political parties, which are often criticised for being comprised of ‘far from ordinary people’. It follows that if young people are to be attracted to participation in political parties, these organisations might need to develop flexible forms of participation in which young people can engage without feeling committed (and marked) ‘for life’ and which have a more direct and tangible connection with everyday problems and issues.

It is evident from interviews that wider attitudes to politics and politicians also have a negative effect on participation in political parties; joining a political party is perceived as being a step towards a political career when career politicians are associated with corruption and ‘filling their pockets’. Respondents also indicate that other commitments and interests (leisure, education, but also work) also limit the opportunity for active participation.

In contrast to participation in formal organisation, unconventional activism is evaluated positively but often regarded as relatively ineffective. Joining demonstrations, for example, was seen as providing the opportunity to ‘raise your voice’ on a particular issue and only a small proportion of interviewees categorically rejected such participation. However, demonstrating is also perceived as being unlikely to make any real difference (‘I won’t change anything on a protest’). Interview data shed further light on survey findings indicating low levels of participation in demonstrations in some locations; interviewees reported there was simply a lack of opportunity to do so. This was especially true of rural locations (in Finland and Hungary) but was also evident in the difference in levels of participation in the two sites (one more and one less urban) in Estonia as well as more widely across the post-socialist region (with the exception of Georgia).

Engaging in violent or risky actions is viewed as acceptable by few respondents.
Rejection of such activism is usually explained in relation to desire to avoid risk but is sometimes accredited to moral positions (‘I hate violence’) or rational judgements that such actions are ‘illogical’ and counter-productive. However, it is generally accepted that the instinctual defence of family, loved ones and one’s own rights sometimes requires one to take risks and even defend oneself or close relatives with force. Violence is also regarded as a means to draw attention, especially of the media, to an issue or to send a message. For some respondents from the Spanish locations, violence is tolerated or legitimate if committed not by individuals with indiscriminate targets but by large groups with specific goals. This is justified by the claim that this prevents a deeper, and more serious, structural violence of profound poverty. The Occupy and Indignant movements were mentioned only in a very limited number of locations, primarily in Spain and Greece as well as the UK.

Signing petitions is regarded positively also since, unlike demonstrations, it is anonymous and safe; a ‘quick and easy’ way to participate. Petition signing thus combines the advantages of voting (safety and ease) and of demonstrations (being issue-related). On the other hand, interviewees were even more doubtful about is effectiveness.

Political consumerism is frequently rejected for financial reasons (‘price comes first’) especially in the post-socialist region. Environmental and animal welfare concerns are mentioned frequently as influences on consumer behaviour although it is patriotism, (buying national products to support the national economy) that is the most frequently mentioned driver of consumer activism.

Interview data confirm that young people are aware of the potential of the internet (mostly the social media site Facebook) for reaching and mobilising people. However, interviews suggest there is a digital divide (see also Schradie, 2011) between a small active and creative minority and the majority who opt for more passive forms of web-based activity and do not create content actively. Active respondents were found in Denmark, Germany, Spain and Finland. Interviews suggest widespread scepticism about the effectiveness of virtual activism and many respondents also regard the internet as a dangerous place characterised often by a negative tone and a place where they are vulnerable to harassment. This makes them reluctant to reveal political attitudes on the net openly since they fear future negative consequences. The MYPLACE interview data thus suggests that new forms of internet activism have destroyed or replaced traditional activism.

4.3 History and memory

Historical events, or, more accurately, narratives and (often second-hand) memories of them, shape young people’s attitudes. Young people relate to events from the distant past - before the twentieth century – differently to those from the more recent past,
however. The distant past is used frequently for escaping present problems and tends to be regarded as ‘interesting’ rather than ‘important’. It is used for building a positive, glorious image of the nation (or (pre-)ethnic ancestors) while reference to traumatic events before the twentieth century is made only rarely and described in a neutral tone (for example, Denmark, 1864). In contrast, discussion of twentieth century history is full of national traumas in the narratives of respondents. Memories of both the ‘interesting’ and the ‘important’ eras are, in this way, placed in a national framework.

The Second World War is a common reference point for all locations in the MYPLACE study including in those countries which did not take part in the war. WWII is narrated also as a national trauma although often through the medium of family memories. Discussion of historical events is dominated by themes of conflict, war, national independence, state transformation or system change as well as the roots of current economic hardships. Events or themes outside the political history of the nation state – such as class, gender, religion, world, locality, region - are raised with the partial exception of the more frequent discussion of EU integration. Thus, beyond the (micro social) mnemonic community of the family, it appears that for respondents, the only collectivity that ‘has memories’ is the nation.

Respondents frequently mentioned that they are interested in history or at least that remembering the past is important. Thus history is a means through which political messages can reach them. However, more often than not they do not have the critical skills to recognise political manipulation embedded in those messages. Even if theoretically respondents were conscious of the existence of parallel discourses and narratives in society, they felt themselves surrounded by monolithic discourses and could not identify how history was used for political purposes. The exceptions to this were primarily found in those research locations where conflicting and contesting narratives are evident within the political community, for example the post-Soviet states of Estonia and Latvia where there are large Russian-speaking minorities, with different understandings of the past, or post-war Croatia or even Georgia. However, in these sites, self-victimisation and emotionally heated narratives mean that respondents are rarely able to incorporate the other side’s narrative and use it to critically reflect on their own; ‘Our history is in our books not theirs.’ Thus, in general (although not without exceptions), history, as narrated by our respondents, remains framed by the nation and concerned with its traumatic events. In this sense it has been unable to reach its potential of facilitating the recognition and understanding among respondents that there is a plurality of legitimate opinions in society.
4.4 Extremism and radicalism

The findings of the synthesis analysis of interview data reveal the high importance of context to the meanings and meaningfulness of ‘extremism’. The analysis reveals that engagement with ‘extremism’ and ‘radicalism’ is heavily concentrated in a small number of countries. This pattern of concentration broadly reflects data from the MYPLACE survey, which found the highest rates of ‘receptivity to the radical right’ and ‘negative attitudes towards minorities’ in locations in the post-socialist countries of Hungary, Slovakia and Russia and also in Greece. In addition to these countries, interview data detailing encounters with or views on extremism were found to be most prevalent in eastern Germany, the UK and Spain. The prominence of discussion of extremism in these latter countries reflects less high levels of receptivity to the extreme right and more the high politicisation of discussions of the far right or particular local issues and, in the case of Spain, the high visibility of secessionist Catalanian parties of both radical right and radical left orientation. The data show also that the extreme right has much higher visibility for young people across Europe than the extreme left, although the latter features in particular in narratives of respondents in Spain and, to a lesser extent, eastern Germany.

Although support for extreme right and radical ideologies and movements was universally a minority position, there was genuine sympathy and openness to these ideas and movements in some cases. Such empathy was usually constructed around concerns over ethnic tension, immigration or ‘threats’ posed by religious minorities although the specific issues raised vary considerably across locations, reflecting the very different compositions of, and political discourses in, each location and country. The desirability of controlling immigration into the country was found predominantly among northern European and Nordic countries since for respondents in locations in the Mediterranean and former socialist countries the impact of emigration rather than immigration on society was of greater concern. Exceptions to this rule include Russia and Greece where anxieties about immigration and immigrants were voiced. A particular animosity is reserved for Roma communities across the locations. In addition to anti-immigration or anti-minority sentiments, support for the extreme right was expressed as being a consequence of these parties having proved themselves an effective force in local government or because they were believed to be somehow ‘different’ from, and more trustworthy than, the mainstream parties from which respondents felt distanced. Where respondents did not profess personal support for the extreme right, they explained the support of others as either the product of individual traits (‘stupid’ or ‘racist’ people vote for them) or systemic problems (support for such parties is a product of economic crisis and the failure of the political system).

Rejection of right wing extremism was primarily related to accusations that such parties and movements were ‘racist’ or exploited anti-immigration sentiments or ethnic minority tensions. The reasons for the rejection of left wing extremism differed and focused on: the reactive and unattainable nature of parties’ policies; concern about the implications of anti-EU stances; and the rigid nature of their discourse and inability to collaborate. Finally, the data suggest that support for extremist or radical parties is partially ‘hidden’ due to their social stigmatisation.
4.5 Imagining and realising a better society

The analysis of interview data from MYPLACE show that young people in Europe rarely subscribe to a strong political ideology or seek a radical or extreme change in contemporary society. However, this does not mean that young people do not have ideas and visions of what ‘a better society’ would look like. The ‘ideal’ society imagined by respondents is characterised by a better economic and material situation and a more democratic and less corrupt political system. It is also a more caring, solidaristic, more tolerant, more equal and more ethical society. When reflecting on how such a society could be brought about, respondents consider first and foremost what they, as individuals, can contribute. However, many young people think a better society is achievable only through collective effort and action. A minority see change as the responsibility of the state and its actors rather than citizens while a few consider a better society as a fictional utopia and unimaginable in any concrete sense.

5. References


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