

# PIRATE PARTIES: THE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS OF ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

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*Contemporary technologies facilitate democratic participation in a digital form. And Pirate Parties claim to represent such an empowered electronic democracy. Thereby this study examines whether Pirate Parties are actually social movements practicing and promoting electronic democracy. For this aim, the research applies the 'real utopias' framework exploring desirable, viable, and achievable alternative social designs. In terms of methods, the inquiry is based on the analysis of expert interviews and political manifestos. The study revealed that Pirate Parties are genuine democratic initiatives, widely implementing principles and mechanisms of electronic democracy. Overall, the studied Pirate Parties foster member participation at all stages of policy making. Even though Pirate Parties have achieved low electoral results for public offices, their models of internal democratic organization and political ideas are proliferated by other parties.*

**Key words:** democracy; e-democracy; participatory democracy; political parties; social movements.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The modern digitization of public life presumes that democracy can be realized also by online participation in politics. Such electronic democracy can be defined as “the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by democratic actors (governments, elected officials, the media, political organizations, citizen/voters) within political and governance processes of local communities, nations and on the international stage” (Clift 2004). Moreover, Earl and Kimport (2011) argued that Internet allows easier and more cost-effective means for online communication, mobilization for offline protests, e-activism via e-participation instruments, and self-organizing for e-movements. Besides, given the global character of Internet, e-participation can transcend boundaries and evolve at large scale – at regional, national, and even supranational levels. Furthermore, online tools might foster engagement at all stages of policy making

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cycle, which includes, according to Hood (1998), agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

In this respect, the Pirate Parties (further – ‘PPs’) are sometimes viewed as a successful experiment in e-democracy. The movement started from the Swedish Piratpartiet, founded on 1 January 2006 (Anderson 2009). They reappropriated the word ‘pirates,’ used by the media to label opponents of intellectual property. At first, they aimed to attract attention to debatable copyright laws, but later their agenda expanded to the themes of civil rights in digital domain and democratic participation. Over 13 years, by the start of 2019, PPs’ presence grew from 1 to over 44 societies (Pirate Parties International 2019). The founder of the movement Falkvinge (2013) defined the initiative as a decentralized, collaborative effort of volunteers who cooperate on a common goal, where the authority is delegated the way that anybody can make almost any decision for the entire organization. But does this statement conform with empirical evidence? To find this out, this study aims to test the normative design of PPs versus the political reality of their internal organization and wider institutional impact. Therefore, this inquiry seeks to answer the research question of whether PPs are social movements of a genuine electronic democracy?

The next section will illuminate the theoretical background of this inquiry, the methodological section will specify the research approach and design, the findings section will present the results of the study, and the concluding section will summarize the common patterns of PPs, discuss limitations, and suggest prospects for further studies.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

As organizations pursuing activities for social change rather than seeking electoral victory in the government Pirate Parties can be more closely associated with social movements than with traditional political parties. In this context, Almqvist (2016) viewed PPs as alternative social movements realizing subpolitics (or sub[system]politics), enacted outside of the institutionalized political system, and subactivism, practices of personal empowerment. However, as long as PPs’ goals require legal change, they do aim to affect the state, regardless of being within or outside power structures. This accords with Tilly’s (1984) definition of real social movements as sustained interactions among authorities and challengers. Although, the combination of PPs’ protest and electoral activities reflects the highlighted by Goldstone (2003) organic interplay between social movement and political parties. Burkart (2014) also admitted that PPs both engage in the political system directly and act as a counterhegemonic movement contesting corporate and state power.

PPs as social movements can be classified in several aspects. Postill (2018) linked the rise of digital activists of PPs with the new protest movements. Taking into account PPs’ aim to affect only certain policies, they can be labelled as reformative social movements – according to the classification by Aberle (1966). Considering that they operate inside the existing institutional boundaries, in Wright’s terminology (2011) they can be also referred to as targeting a transformation via a symbiotic metamorphosis – a social democratic evolutionary adaptations using state institutions. In the digital aspect, Edick (2015) compared PPs to the Net Party in Argentina and Podemos in Spain, who use open-source technology for political organizing too. Further, Hartleb (2013)

found common features between the German PP and the Italian Five Star Movement, since they are both populist new anti-elitist movements employing modern communication technologies, which makes them 'cyber parties' or 'network parties.' These wider similarities with other movements were confirmed by the findings of Fredriksson (2015); many of the interviewed PPs' members saw themselves as part of a much larger global democratic movement that includes Occupy protesters, Arab Spring activists, and others.

Furthermore, PPs as a totality can be seen as a global social movement. Their dissemination from Sweden to other countries corresponds with the diffusion process, where ideas, practices and frames spread from one country to another (della Porta and Tarrow 2005). In the beginning, they were united by common agenda, but later, with the establishment of the Pirate Party International (further - 'PPI'), they became a truly global social movement. From this perspective, they resemble transnational advocacy networks (Laxer and Halperin 2003) and transnational associations advocating for social change (Smith and Wiest 2012) aiming to empower people with a greater voice in the decisions that affect their lives. In this context, PPs can be viewed as a global social movement, an actor of the global civil society - in the meaning of Keane (2003). Accordingly, Edick (2015) named them an international, grassroots populist movement. Whereas Banaji and Buckingham (2013) recognized PPs as an international movement, engaging people for issues of high democratic and political importance.

Scholars emphasize different PPs' normative aspirations. Baldwin (2014) portrayed the European PPs as technologically digital, politically anarcho-communist, socially lumpen bourgeois, and aesthetically avant-gardist, urban, and aristocratic. Burkart (2014) found that they valued anonymity and privacy online, free speech and access to information and culture - the ideals of cyberutopianism. He described PPs as essentially optimistic and hopeful that the social agency of online communities can deliver the Internet from an impending crisis. A content analysis (Jääsaari and Hildén 2015) of the 2013-2014 political programs of PPs in 5 countries (the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, and Sweden) revealed the common themes of digital rights (free speech, privacy, and access) and the freedom of self-expression (freedom of speech, freedom of information, and freedom of access). And though PPs might seem to be preoccupied primarily with their strife for a copyright reform (Kurtz and Smithey 2018), a series of deeper interviews with the members of 5 PPs revealed their concerns with the crises of democracy, capitalism, and property (Fredriksson and Arvanitakis 2015). Further, in other interviews the members of PPs of Belgium, Germany, and the UK acknowledged progressive, libertarian, and social agenda views (Cammaerts 2015). Even more, they admitted that they favour universal free education and unconditional basic income (ibid.). Their common idealistic vision becomes apparent as PPs' members express the belief that the new technology can give rise to a more democratic and enlightened world characterized by global solidarity and free sharing of knowledge and culture (Fredriksson 2015).

PPs devote special attention to the virtue of democracy. In interviews, PPs' members illuminated their core values of democracy, free speech, and freedom of information (Fredriksson 2015). In another series of interviews, members of PPs expressed the support for higher transparency in public sphere and the promotion of more participatory forms of democracy (Cammaerts 2015). PPs hold that, by means of new technology, citizens should continually participate in

politics and oppose the hierarchies within the mainstream parties (Hartleb 2013). Specifically, they believe in direct internet democracy (Baldwin 2014).

Among favourable conditions of PPs' emergence, scholars point out technological readiness, open party system, sympathetic popular sentiments, efficient leadership and political campaign. Burkart (2014) argued that Sweden was ready for 'pirate' politics because its political economy of communication possessed key information-society characteristics, its legal system supported 'pirate' politics, and its cultural norms contributed to the cultural commons. Goldstone (2015) also noted that an open multi-party in many European parliaments allowed new parties to gain entry to the legislature. Almqvist (2016) emphasized that leaders played a critical role of catalysts in establishing PPs. Burkart (2014) credited the success of PPs to their numerous media campaigns, providing a stable web presence and valuable public relations.

Regarding the profiles of PPs' members and supporters, there are several studies of voters, but most reflections about members are rather hypothetical. In terms of social class, 'pirate' politics expressed concerns of a new middle class that was structurally vulnerable and economically blocked from ascendance (Baldwin 2014). In professional realm, the Swedish PP made an explicit focus on membership recruitment from technical universities, which attracted male software programmers and file-sharing geeks, but then turned to wider political representation (Baldwin 2014). Voters data analysis demonstrated that, compared to the electorate as a whole, young people, males, students and persons living in cities were over-represented among the Swedish PP's voters (Erlingsson and Persson 2011). A comparative analysis of surveys about voting for the European Parliament in 11 countries demonstrated (Zulianello 2018) that the voters for PPs can be young groups aged 18–24 either concerned about Internet-related issues (Swedish PP in 2009) or committed to PPs and active at elections (Luxembourg and the Swedish PPs in 2014), as well as other groups supporting PPs' Internet policies or concerned about macro-economic issues and protesting against policies of other parties (Czech and Slovenian PPs in 2014). Another cross-national analysis of multiple survey data for 11 countries confirmed (Otjes 2019) that PPs' voters are (in the order of prediction power) young 'digital natives,' distrustful of politics, and supportive of cyberlibertarian policies. It also showed that Iceland and German PPs particularly tend to attract left-wing voters. However, the available studies better elucidate PPs' supporters than members themselves.

PPs are also notorious for their exotic organizational patterns. Thus, Almqvist (2016) described PPs as an 'amateur-activist' grassroots highly decentralized party with egalitarian decision-making processes and collective forms of leadership. PPs apply crowdsourcing for political organizing and decision-making: using GitHub or reddit, party members organize, debate, and decide online (Edick 2015). Furthermore, PPs practice liquid democracy giving the citizen's vote a liquid authority: a voter can delegate a vote to a known expert or trusted friend (ibid.). In theory, liquid democracy allows citizens to freely choose to either vote directly on individual policy-issues, or to delegate their votes to issue-competent representatives, which allows it to mobilizes more political expertise and achieve higher equality than under representative democracy (Blum and Zuber 2016).

The existing evaluations of actual democraticness of PP structure are ambivalent. For example, Almqvist (2016) concluded that during the mobilization phase in

the Swedish PP Falkvinge set up a top-down corporate structure and a swift commando organization lacking transparency. Later, it transitioned to a more formal party structure (Almqvist 2016). Bolleyer, von Nostitz and Smirnova (2017) found that in the German PP tribunal decision making was shaped both by 'elite partiality' and by 'stability considerations.' Besides, PPs utilized a 'cloud protesting', where individuals tailor their participation according to their own private motifs and values and take part in fluid local and global constellations without compromising their personal agendas (Fredriksson 2015). Overall, the interviewed members of PPs emphasized open horizontal structures and encouraged bottom-up participation in their parties (Cammaerts 2015).

PPs attract considerable attention to their challenges. Fredriksson (2015) criticized PPs' assumption that digital communication is egalitarian and free by its technological character, since it is linked to capitalist communication structures, which PPs pragmatically exploit. Burkart (2014) argued that ideas of PPs contradict the ontological condition of post-privacy created by the combination of data retention, surveillance, and the popularity of persistent identity services such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google. The analysis of the PP of Sweden's 2009 platform and of the 2009 e-survey of PP's sympathizers showed that the party was more preoccupied with eliminating constraints than with designing opportunities and that its sympathizers seek individual liberty at the expense of the market and the state (Demker 2014). One study characterized PPs' deliberation instrument LiquidFeedback as a failure because its highly decentralized nature makes coherence difficult to achieve even in a party of like-minded individuals (Edick 2015). For instance, the German PP congress in October 2012 demonstrated over 1,400 pages and 700 initiatives, endless debates in the virtual world, complicated decision-making processes, and an obvious lack of a coherent vision (Hartleb 2013). There were concerns that liquid democracy tends to concentrate power into the hands of the most active and initiated users (Almqvist 2016) and leads to policy inconsistency (Blum and Zuber 2016). Considering the internal balance of power, there were open and antagonistic clashes between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary organizations in Germany and the US, as well as conflicts between their radical and reformist wings (Almqvist 2016). Overall, some members of PPs expressed concerns with agenda-related or power-related controversies (Cammaerts 2015).

Despite this criticism, there is an acknowledgement of PPs' impact on politics. Erlingsson and Persson (2011) credited PP's success in EU elections not so much to protest voting, but to issue voting concerning privacy and copyright policies. Burkart (2014) admitted that the mainstreaming of some messages of 'pirate' politics suggests that its efforts have been successful. He further specified that the Pirate MEPs have exercised real influence over the creation of new International Telecommunications Regulations of the International Telecommunications Union, the rejection of the ACTA, and the official condemnation of Hungary for authoritarian new media laws. Besides, local PP has played a role in Arab Spring developments in Tunisia (Fredriksson and Arvanitakis 2015). Burkart (2014) concluded that if PPs disappear, 'pirate' politics would still persist as a transnational cultural movement that urges the development of the Internet as a platform supporting democracy, shared knowledge, and governmental transparency.

Regardless appreciable findings, the available research on PPs has multiple limitations. The found inquiries either investigate a narrow aspect of PPs or cover

a small sample of them. The socio-demographic profiles of PPs' members and their participation rates are understudied. There is a lack of analysis of democraticness of the whole participation cycle. Although numerous challenges are revealed, they are seldom accompanied by proposed solutions. The influence of PPs on individual members is understudied too. Therefore, PPs require a more systemic research.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There are multiple theoretical frameworks potentially applicable to the study of Pirate Parties. For instance, it is possible to use the approach for the study of social movements by Tilly (2004), who devotes attention primarily to campaigns (sustained, organized public efforts making collective claims on target authorities), social movement repertoire (the ensemble of performances of political action), and participants' public representation (of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment). Also, one can apply the perspective of della Porta and Diani (2006), which looks how ideas, individuals, events, and organizations are linked to each other in broader processes of collective action, with some continuity over time. Similarly, Jenkins (2004) is concerned about the origins and goals of social movements, their strategies and tactics. Alternatively, Burkart (2014) studies PPs from a perspective combining new social movements theory, critical theory, and communication theory. However, the focus of this research is not so much on the methods of reaching the ultimate political goal of PPs' collective action, but rather on their democratic organization and its effect on wider politics. Thereby, this inquiry requires a different perspective.

One approach was developed particularly to study new projects promoting social change in the domain of participatory democracy. For Fung and Wright (2003) empowered participatory governance requires reforms deepening the ways in which ordinary people can effectively participate in and influence policies which directly affect their lives. This makes such approach especially suitable for the analysis of PPs as social movements aiming to embody participatory democracy. In addition, it is relevant for PPs, which are often labelled as 'utopias,' although they do exist in the political realm. Respectively, the 'real utopia' framework of Wright (2011) studies valued social designs (utopias), which are feasible (real). It employs three principal components of an analytical design: desirability, achievability, and viability. Desirability refers to normative understanding of how a social group and society should be organized. Achievability implies deliberate actions, grounded on conscious strategies and using the relative power of actors involved. Viability sets up limits to planned initiatives and tests the sustainability of already created social designs in practice. Thereby, this comprehensive approach is especially relevant for the study of PPs as real-life long-term cases of deliberate social transformations.

Accordingly, in this study PPs will be tested towards the model of a transformative 'real utopia' (a normatively desired and practically realistic) social movement. The research will examine to which extent PPs implement and promote participatory democracy in their internal organization and in public domain. The 'real utopia' approach will serve as the organizing principle for the interview guide and the logic of analysis.

Considering how understudied PPs are, the research design was qualitative. It was based on the analysis of PPs' documents and expert interviews. In addition

to academic publications on PPs, the study referred to 2 electronic books and online manifestos self-published by PPs themselves. The interview guide was structured around the aspects of desirability, achievability, and viability. Some questions were reformulated and added later. The content analysis of this qualitative data focused on common patterns across PPs.

To understand a mid-term experience of PPs, the country sample included the most established of them. Respectively, the PPs' case selection criteria were (in the order of priorities): (1) being officially registered; (2) having representation in the public office; and (3) having high participation rates. All registered PPs with electoral success with available contact details were reached via email. Further, respondents advised other numerous and active PPs, which were contacted afterwards too.

Aiming to comprehend PPs as a world movement, instead of taking several PPs as individual cases, it was intended to interview at least one member from each of the studied PPs. Only in the PP of Catalonia and the PP of Italy they decided to respond collectively (as a reflection of their democratic principles). Besides, the representatives from Germany and the US served as board members of the Pirate Parties International (further – PPI) – an international umbrella organization, so their answers referred both to national and international entities. Within parties, the respondents were selected among persons, most knowledgeable about their parties: heads, spokespersons, or other referred members.

The fieldwork lasted during 6-20 December 2013 – till the saturation point, where new interviews contributed considerably less to the gathered data. As PPs were present in overseas countries, interviews were conducted remotely, in English. Given the potential for interaction and instant clarification, interviews via Skype were most preferable, via phone were the second option, and emailing – the last option, only if respondents insisted. So, 8 interviews were held via Skype, 1 by phone, and 6 via emailing. Video and audio interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, while email interviews were recorded as written answers. Skype and phone interviews lasted 38 to 92 minutes, 1 hour on average. The respondents agreed to be cited.

As a result, a total of 15 semi-structured expert interviews were held. Thereby, the interviews represent the PPs of: Australia, Austria, Catalonia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Poland, Sweden, United Kingdom (further – UK), the United States (further – US) – the total of 12 countries and 1 autonomous community. In addition, the interviews also illuminate the functioning of PPI.

Overall, out of 50 functioning PPs by the end of 2013, 23 were unregistered and 27 registered, 8 of 27 registered PP had won public office (Pirate Parties International 2013). As a result, out of 27 registered parties, 13 (48.2%) were covered by this study. And out of 8 PPs with success in elections, 7 (87.5%) were studied in this research. The list of studied PPs and the data sources are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: THE LIST OF REGISTERED PPS IN 2013 AND THEIR RELATION TO THE RESEARCH

N	PP countries	Registration status	Electoral results	Relation to research	Interviews	Political manifestos
1	Australia	Registered	--	Studied	1 Interview	--
2	Austria	Registered	1 Communal mandate	Studied	1 Interview	--
3	Belgium	Registered	--	--	--	--
4	Bulgaria	Registered	--	--	--	--
5	Catalonia	Registered	2 Communal mandates	Studied	3 Interviews	--
6	Croatia	Registered	2 Communal mandates	Studied	1 Interview	--
7	Czech Republic	Registered	1 National, 2 communal mandates	Studied	1 Interview	--
8	Denmark	Registered	--	--	--	--
9	Estonia	Registered	--	--	--	--
10	Finland	Registered	--	--	--	--
11	France	Registered	--	--	--	--
12	Germany	Registered	45 regional, 201 communal mandates	Studied	1 Interview	--
13	Greece	Registered	--	Studied	1 Interview	--
14	Iceland	Registered	3 National mandates	Studied	1 Interview	--
15	Israel	Registered	--	--	--	--
16	Italy	Registered	--	Studied	1 Interview	--
17	Japan	Registered	--	--	--	--
18	Netherlands	Registered	--	--	--	--
19	Poland	Registered	--	Studied	1 Interview	--
20	Serbia	Registered	--	--	--	--
21	Spain	Registered	--	--	--	--
22	Slovenia	Registered	--	--	--	--
23	Sweden	Registered	2 European parliament mandates	Studied	1 Interview	--
24	Switzerland	Registered	2 Communal mandates	--	--	--
25	Tunisia	Registered	--	--	--	--
26	UK	Registered	--	Studied	1 Interview	--
27	US	Registered	--	Studied	1 Interview	1 Self-published book
	Total	27 Registered	8 With public office held	13 Studied	15 Interviews	1 Self-published book
	Pirate Parties International	N/A	--	Studied	2 Interviews	Resolutions, Statutes

Source of registration status and electoral results data: Pirate Parties International (2013).

## 4 OBTAINED FINDINGS

The analysis is structured around the three principles of desirability, achievability, and viability, which is reflected by respective sub-section headings.

### 4.1 Desirability

As Pirate Parties are deliberate endeavours, their representatives were asked about their normative visions of social designs. These included the underlying values, the initial focus on societal problems they intended to solve, the objectives set up to tackle those problems, and finally, the integral models of democratic organization.

With relation to values, officially, PPI supported “civil rights, direct democracy and participation in government, reform of copyright and patent law, free sharing of knowledge (open content), information privacy, transparency, freedom of



information, anti-corruption, and network neutrality” (2013). Over time, the formulation of these values changed, shifting the emphasis from democratic participation to the protection of human rights in the digital realm. Thus, in 2019 PPI declared “the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the digital age, consumer and authors rights-oriented reform of copyright and related rights, support for information privacy, transparency and free access to information” (2019). The values shared by PPs can be grouped into 3 broad categories: civil rights (human rights, diversity, equality, information privacy, freedom of information, culture, speech and self-expression), democratic participation (openness and accessibility, direct and liquid democracy), and government responsibility (transparency, accountability, consideration of people’s voices, social justice). All these are interconnected, although originally the civil rights were the priority, internal democracy followed soon, and government accountability on wider issues developed later. This normative complex clearly goes beyond particular aspects highlighted in earlier narrower studies.

The ideological background of PPs is intricate. Some members claim the absence of a distinctive ideology or a pure pragmatism. Others name particular values, not a comprehensive ideology. Still, others mention neoliberalism. However, as PPs oppose restrictive policies of private property in information realm, probably, their vision is closer to libertarianism. Besides, anarchist or pro-democratic views can be found too. The expressed sentiments gravitate towards the leftist end of ideological spectrum. Overall, it can be concluded that specific ideologies are more pronounced by individual members, rather than by official parties as a whole. This signals the risks of any speculative generalizations about PP ideology. Only representative surveys of party members can illuminate it.

PPs heavily criticize the functioning of the state, treating legislation as the key target. They perceive the deep ignorance of contemporary technological change in obsolete laws as a fundamental societal problem. The most immediate threat, which triggered the creation of the first PP in Sweden, was the new copyright policy, leading to the prosecution of proponents of the free exchange of information. PPs deem that technology enables quick and unrestricted sharing of information, while the legislature is very strict about intellectual property rights. This concern is shared by all or virtually all studied PPs.

It is connected to the problems of violating fundamental civil rights. As inscribed in its resolutions, PPI condemns all dictatorships and regimes, which deny human rights (2017a). However, not all PPs pay equal attention to these problems. They are more pronounced in the PPs of Germany, France, Sweden, and US. The primary focus is on the violation of personal privacy. In the US, they suspect that NSA is spying on people, which signals acute issues with transparency and accountability (PP UK and PPI, personal communication). Allegedly, the government power abuse can go as far as to censorship, which violates the rights to free speech and the freedom of expression.

The broader problems of thin democracy were included in the agenda too. They range from low public participation in governance to the ignorance of people’s opinions in decision-making and to the insufficient protections of people’s interests. And this occurs despite the fact that technology allows cheap, quick and direct voting for almost everyone.

The highest overarching mission of PPs is “to find better ways of satisfying the

needs of the public for progressive, responsive government, under conditions of rapid cultural and economic change” (Bainbridge 2012). Their goals can be classified as terminal (having ultimate value) and instrumental (required to reach terminal ones). Among the terminal goals historically the central one was the protection of civil rights. They include the protection of freedom and privacy, from governments and corporations alike. The PPs’ strategy is to pursue copyright and trademark reforms. Later their priorities shifted towards broader government responsibility issues (including transparency and accountability) and democratic participation, especially direct democracy (including referenda). It is indicative that PPI resolutions specifically proclaim the strengthening of participation in political processes and utilizing general referenda (2017a). The instrumental goals comprise an active participation in the parliament and the use of modern communication technologies in governance. A special approach is advocated by several PPs representatives: they stand for bringing new principles and policies to politics, regardless of implementing actors. The representative of the PP of Greece said: “we want other parties to adopt our policies... we believe in some principles, which we want to pass into legislation... if they are going to be passed from another political party, we would be happy” (PP Greece, personal communication).

In terms of internal organization, models or initial institutional designs of PPs were based on the principles of accessibility, participation, self-governance, democracy, direct democracy (especially in agenda-setting, decision-making, and elections), and online electronic democracy. Concerning external politics, via a mandate in the parliament PPs aspired to transform the politics at local, national, EU, and even global scale.

#### 4.2 Achievability

As the studied Pirate Parties are working cases, this sub-section is devoted to scrutinizing how they were created. The analysis covers external favourable conditions, the role of leaders, the practicalities of establishment, the profiles of typical members, the diversity of involved partners, and the mechanics of organizational functioning.

One of the relatively static and thereby an independent cause is the small country size. It makes easy to create a community and explains a success in local elections. However, there is another opinion, that it is desirable that country has a relatively moderate population size in order to have a sufficient membership base. But there should be enough enthusiasts to find each other and establish a party. Primarily this relates to a critical mass of the target group of ‘digital natives,’ who witness the ongoing informational technological revolution. The European societies having PPs are either small or moderate. But what about Australia, Brazil, Russia, and the US which have PPs too? In fact, they do have sufficient digital communications infrastructure, so despite huge distance between members they still can cooperate. Apart from infrastructure, a country should possess conducive political conditions: civil freedoms, an active civil society, a targeted social movement, and the easiness of establishing a party. Thus, a study of 131 countries discovered that country’s e-democracy development is connected to internal factors of political norms and citizen pressures (Lee, Chang and Berry 2011).

Besides general conditions, some developments can work as triggers. The most fundamental factor was the legitimacy crisis, creating a demand for alternatives.

A more specific trigger was the political pressure endangering civil rights – copyright laws changes. In particular, there was the Pirate Bay process in Sweden, the prosecution of file sharing platforms, censorship policies, and the efforts to sign ACTA agreement. Later, the example of a functioning PP served as a model for other PPs.

A new movement and organization always require leaders. As the founder of the PP of Sweden, Falkvinge confessed: “I’ve found that the typical Internet community methods of inclusion, when combined with strong leadership, work much better to achieve global change than working leaderlessly under little more than a common flag” (2013). In some cases, only one person with idea and charisma – a programmer in Czech Republic or a law student in Australia – started national PPs. In other cases, a small group or groups of people with similar views and goal launched PPs.

The routine of establishing a new PP mostly rests on communication in digital media. Primary channels include emails, websites, forums, IRC channels, Mumble, and social media, like Facebook and Twitter. Secondary ways of engaging people are inviting family, friends, and colleagues. Finally, coverage in mass media news is used too. The network of contacts and the speed of spreading information enables a quick start. As the Co-Chairman of PPI narrates: the Swedish PP had a goal of collecting 3,000 signatures allowing them to run for parliament – they collected them in 48 hours (PP Germany and PPI, personal communication). Although, in other cases, a party experiences a rather gradual growth.

It is not easy to identify the profiles of PPs’ members. Sometimes PP is organized in a way that only an e-mail and a nickname are known, not even basic demographic statistics is collected – and it totally complies with the party principle of personal privacy. Yet, it is possible to rely on the description of Co-Chairman of PPI that the participants are the younger people, the educated, and mostly males (PP Germany and PPI, personal communication). The characteristics of urban population, information professions, Internet culture, and leftist views complete the list of major similarities. However, in PPs with longer experience, for instance, in Germany one can observe three waves of members: the first were mostly young IT professionals, the second brought middle-age civil activists, and the third attracted older politicians. Thus, the growing publicity and political participation leads to the voluntary inclusion of a more diverse public with broader values and goals.

Taking into account different stages of PPs’ development, each socio-demographic category takes its share. Definitely, the majority constitute males – 80-93% in different PPs. Although, some experts claim to have more women than in conventional parties and to incorporate more as party develops. The PPs’ members are relatively young – the average age ranges from 25 to 40 years, the youngest are 15 and the oldest are 80 years old. However, the average age increases over the time of party functioning. In several PPs, many members come from big cities, so they are mostly urban residents. Nevertheless, in smaller countries with developed communication infrastructure members tend to be distributed more evenly. PPs’ participants have relatively high educational level, especially taking into account that they are young and some are still studying. Their professions are rather diverse, including IT, technology, medicine, governance, finance, civil activism, higher education, music, etc. Generally, they

tend to represent white-collar jobs. They share the general Internet culture and thereby are sometimes called the 'digital natives.'

While some PPs claim that they operate on their own, the majority of experts did mention their political allies. First of all, these are individual activists, who for different reasons do not officially enter the party, like lawyers who are employed as professors or advocates elsewhere. The most common partners are NGOs, which fall within two categories: 'pirate'-specific, open-source communities or general democratic organizations. Sometimes they distribute roles for common action (charitable activity for funds and politics for PP). Some occasionally contact academia for research. Also, PPs collaborate with PPs from other countries. Due to unconventional policies of PPs, cooperation with other parties can be complicated. Still, some PPs do collaborate with other parties, which promote civil rights, and adhere to liberal and democratic values. This conforms with the perspective that PPs share intrinsic similarities with other new social movements (Edick 2015; Hartleb 2013; Fredriksson 2015).

When a PP is small enough, it can be run by simple online communication in social media and simple consensus among its members. However, bigger PPs require more detailed procedures of internal organization.

The fundamental issue of agenda-setting is solved in two ways: proposals and member meetings can be suggested either by an elected governing body, such as the board, or by party members themselves. Specific proportions vary: in some cases, the initiative mostly rests with the governing body, in others it is comparatively equal, and still in others only party members suggest proposals. It is virtually always announced by online communication channels: emails, forums, or websites.

An essential democratic process is deliberation, for it fosters better understanding and the creation of an organic public opinion. PPs employ numerous formats of discussing ideas. Among those few are offline: personal meet-ups and conferences. Yet, the overwhelming majority is online: mailing lists, internal newsletters, blogs, forums, podcasts, voice meetings, IRC channels, online working groups to discuss proposals, Mumble online voice system, the Metapad online collaborative editing system, and the LiquidFeedback online system. Proposals are usually edited online – consequently, they are usually created by many people, contributing to writing or editing.

An important issue is the process of selecting proposals, as it connected with the authority to pass a proposal for voting or to block it. It depends on the nature of the issues suggested: either it is a proposal consistent with the frame of the established statutes (minor), or it is an offer requiring change of party statutes (major). If it is a minor proposal the selection might be quite simple: in small parties, as few as 1-2 party members can put forward a suggestion and then it goes directly for voting. However, it can be as complicated as this: one member has to engage 60 members as the minimum number of supports; he or she collects signatures online; when 1 square root of the members support the proposal, everyone receives the message and one can collect further till 1/6 of the party supports the proposal and then it is passed for voting (PP Czech Republic, personal communication). In bigger parties, like the PP of Germany, there are too many proposals, so they apply a committee managed semiformal filtering, which reviews the quality of proposals and the number of supporters indicated by online surveys. If a proposal is major (meaning it affects the core

party principles) it should pass an additional check by the governing body.

With relation to power distribution, the key process is decision-making. Generally, in PPs any registered party member can vote. Yet, some PPs require at least a three-month membership to establish a person's credibility for voting. As a rule, general assemblies are conducted yearly, though they can be called more often, especially in smaller parties. In some cases, only major decisions (concerning party principles) are voted by the whole party, leaving minor ones to the discretion of a governing body. Albeit, in other PPs all decisions are voted by the members. There are three formats of voting: offline, online, and hybrid. Voting methods vary: direct, through an email list, or employing an online system, like Wiki, reddit or LiquidFeedback. Sometimes there is a combination of methods. Online voting raises identification and anonymity issues: using e-mails one ensures identification but fails anonymity; granting access without identification secures anonymity but fails identification. There are two solutions to this: the validation system for online voting in Multi-tool and the voting system reddit. Both provide each voter a unique number to login (known only to the voter). There is a range of voting principles: from direct democracy ('one person – one vote' principle) to liquid democracy (optional and voluntary delegation of votes, even to different persons depending on issues, with the possibility to withdraw a vote) up to a relatively rare representative democracy. It might raise the expertise of voters, but creates the risk of power concentration. To pass a decision, a simple majority to 50% is required for minor issues (operating decisions) and 2/3 to 75% for major issues (party principles).

The majority of PPs studied delegate some managing functions to the elected governing bodies. Some do authorize them to make operating decisions (clearly specified in party statutes), while others delegate the governing bodies mere presentation, coordinating or informing functions. As far as PPs rarely or never pay salaries to their representatives or professional workers, they do plenty of work voluntarily. Ordinary members contribute to party work by drafting press-releases, doing web-design and graphic design, performing research, and authoring articles for wiki-pages. Some use Metapad (a real-time collaborative text editor) to issue a co-authored text. PPs protect their principles: every public statement should comply with party statutes. In many cases, they even write statements for mass media with a broad party members' participation. Some trust members as far as letting them post in official social media (e.g. on party's Twitter web-page) without prior approval. According to the Leader of the PP of Sweden, there were 200 people having access to the Party Twitter account (PP Sweden, personal communication).

Last but not least, PPs conduct internal monitoring and control. In most cases, there are special governing bodies authorized for checks and sanctions: Board of Governors, Court of Arbitration, Dispute Resolve Committee, and Steering Committee. However, there are cases and options of direct democracy in controlling party work, up to recalling elected representatives. The latter is performed on a regular basis by direct observation and *ad hoc* if somebody is suspected of abuse. There is some evidence that in general PP culture altogether with institutionalized transparency ensures compliance with the core party values, so there is little need for control.

Thereby, at all stages of self-governance PPs demonstrate the attributes of a participatory digital democracy. Direct democracy is implemented in its fullest form in smaller PPs. Associational democracy, implemented in the 'three-pirate

rule', liquid and representative forms of democracy are more characteristic for bigger PPs.

### 4.3 Viability

For a systemic change, initiating a social project is not enough – it should be tested for sustainability in terms of both duration of existence and conforming to initial values and goals. Therefore, this subsection analyses participation rates, democraticness of internal functioning, available resources, substantial challenges and applied counteractions, created social institutions and their dissemination, synergies between other alternative projects, and overall impact on participants, communities, and wider political systems.

Concerning the number of party members (those who are considered members according to party statutes), in the registered PPs studied there are 3 clusters of membership size: (1) tens – 40-50 members; (2) hundreds – 300-600 members; and (3) thousands – 10,000-11,000 members (in Germany and Sweden). Hypothetically, unregistered parties might have even less members. The numbers vary due to membership requirements, especially whether they are free or for a fee. These party membership ratios correspond with findings in another study (Cammaerts 2015)

There is a larger group of supporters, who occasionally participate in party activities, predominantly in online discussions on forums and online social networks, and sometimes in general assemblies too. Their numbers also fall into 3 clusters: (1) hundreds – around 300 supporters; (2) thousands – 1,000-3,000 supporters; and (3) tens of thousands – up to 40,000 supporters (in Germany). Despite the seeming ten-fold increase compared to official members, the actual difference is 2-8 times. Some cannot join as official members because of the conflict of interests or affiliation issues. This relates to public officials, lawyers, bankers, etc. So, they are counted as supporters too.

The next important category of adherents is voters in official elections for public offices. These form 2 clusters: (1) tens of thousands – 20,000-40,000 voters and (2) hundreds of thousands – 100,000-960,000 voters (the highest in Germany). The ratio of voters to party members is 30-70 times.

Concerning the dynamics of PPs' membership, the numbers oscillate from year to year. Partially it is because of random causes, partially due to political situation.

Also, it is reasonable to trace the general participation level – the share of members actually participating in party's activities. The average estimation is that around 10% of all members regularly take part in activities, and of those roughly 10% (1% of all members) are the most devoted, core activists.

Discussions attract significantly varying percentage of PP members – around 7-50%. The smaller the party, the higher the percentage. Nevertheless, 10% seem to be the most widespread proportion. General assemblies show roughly the same average 10%. Intra-party voting participation levels vary considerably too: they range between 4%-56% in different PPs and votes. Online voting generates higher numbers, yet 10% is a mode.

Officially, all members of PPs have equal rights. All party activities are open to its

members. For instance, in the PP of Iceland everyone can participate in electronic voting system, through which any issue should be processed (PP Iceland, personal communication). However, members of governing bodies have additional delegated rights and duties – similarly to representative democracy. Every member of a PP has the right to express an opinion, but some of them enjoy more prestige or informal social power, which is attributed to their personal qualities, skills and experience on the merit basis. In any case, leaders share the norms of giving others word and respecting them.

An important democratic characteristic is the freedom of speech and expression. It relates both to internal party processes and external relations. It is most pronounced in direct democracy forms. The famous ‘three-pirate rule’ states: as long as 3 ‘pirates’ gather and decide to do something, which is in line with the core party statements, they can start an initiative (PP UK and PPI, personal communication). In terms of complexity theory, this contributes to self-organization.

Definitely, transparency is the strongest democratic attribute of PPs. According to the Statutes of Pirate Parties International, “all votes are public” and “a permanent online e-Democracy system allowing for decision making of General Assembly between its meetings shall be put in place where issues can be raised, initiatives started, suggestions made, and progress checked until a final vote can be cast” (2017b). Transparency relates to meetings, voting, work of governing bodies, finances, and media relations. This is ensured by multiple methods: open forum discussions, live-streaming, voice and video recording, and transcribing of meetings for posting online. This applies to deliberation, decision making, and reporting on political and financial issues. Regarding accountability, PP’s governing bodies are subject to control from party members, up to revoking elected representatives.

With relation to resources, PPs minimize expenses by introducing an exclusively volunteer participation and online activity. Still, some funding is needed for hosting sites, advertisement, merchandise, information materials etc. Some PPs rely on membership fees, while others on donations from individuals and organizations, yet others obtain government funding because of parliamentary representation. The size of membership fees varies: from no fees to dozens of euros yearly. In general, party contribution policies result in high cost efficiency. As the founder of the Swedish PP claimed: “Our campaign budget was fifty thousand euros. Our competitors had spent six million. We had spent less than 1 percent of their budget and still beat them, giving us a cost-efficiency advantage of over two orders of magnitude” (Falkvinge 2013).

PPs have multiple challenges, which can be grouped into 3 categories: (1) external conditions influencing PPs; (2) internal party functioning; and (3) influencing politics and civil society.

External conditions create the most pressing concerns, because it is difficult to affect them. Major limitations are imposed by state laws. Sometimes it is because the laws are too restrictive (large membership, support, or administrative coverage is required), demanding (high entrance limit – 5% instead of 2%) or incoherent with modern technologies. There may be a pressure from the government. For instance, according to PPI Resolutions, “the members of the Pirate Party of Russia do not have opportunity to officially create its own party” (2017). Absenteeism of general public is a big concern too. Almost all PPs strive

to obtain funding. It is vividly illustrated in the US: the state PP of Georgia had its party status revoked, because they didn't have 500 United States dollars on their account each year (PP UK and PPI, personal communication).

Due to online communication, some face the communication problem of misunderstanding – it is an unintended consequence of e-democracy. Others admit the lack of time for participation due to business. More serious problems are some members' deviant behaviour and internal conflicts. At worst, a PP can lose its democraticness because of delegating votes, specifically within liquid democracy format. As PPs grow in numbers, their social structure requires changes, so they face organization development issues.

The most ambitious are the challenges of influencing politics and wider society. Many PPs complain about problems with conventional mass media coverage (although online media coverage is good). A connected issue is the changing negative public opinion. Some find it difficult to cover democratic agenda, which might not be a priority for the general public, concerned with security and employment issues. More ambitious goals are winning elections and public offices. Those who already succeeded aim to sustain the election results nationally and supranationally. Politically, the most dangerous and actually widespread is the antagonism of other parties towards PPs. The most universal problem is the promotion of unconventional policies, e.g. of liquid and direct democracy.

A mere recognition of the existing challenges is not sufficient, so it is important to learn respective counteracting measures. Concerning laws, PPs study laws and try to change them. Membership issues are principally dealt by networking in person and on digital social media. It is important for them to make people feel that they and their contribution are significant, to demonstrate acceptance, recognition and respect. Conflicts are mostly resolved through a discussion: people either reach consensus or leave a party. Besides, transparency positively affects public opinion and trust.

Regarding institutional legacy, the very practices and relations matter. A simple cooperation between people based on the principles of equality and participation brings results. So, regular democratic procedures and the resulting democratic norms of transparency, accountability, and participation have effect by themselves. The practices of law-making initiatives, lobbying and other suggestions contribute too. PPs have developed numerous statutes, reflecting core principles and procedures. A more advanced example is that "common European election program was made by all European 'pirates' (for the EU election of 2014)" (PP Catalonia, personal communication).

Furthermore, social structures and elements of culture are vital for PPs sustainability. The most developed PPs have general assembly (responsible for passing statutes and policies), executive board (managing and informing), dispute resolving committee (resolving conflicts), and steering committee (supervising adherence to the party principles). These are legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power respectively. The direct democratic institution of general assembly is acknowledged as the supreme body of power. The members of PPs are at the top of power structure, while the elected management is subordinated to them. So, PPs and their umbrella organization PPI are fully functioning democratically organized associations.



PPs disseminate institutions and develop more complex entities. They form youth divisions of parties, establish their local branches on subsocietal level and export their model to other societies. And the existence of an international organization – PPI – indicates a high level of cooperation between PPs. Although, the exit of 4 PPs from the PPI might signal an internal conflict.

The study revealed the impact of PPs' democratic practices on people at the scales of individuals, communities, and political systems as a whole. The personalities of PPs members are affected the most. At minimum, they develop knowledge and skills of participation in governance – it is the effect of civic education. Some people change their opinions about the possibility of direct democracy. Party members gain confidence in themselves, especially young people, who are given enough freedom to participate and take the initiative, and thereby become more empowered and responsible. A significant achievement is the increase of trust within PPs. Finally, party activities enhance the feeling of inclusion and belonging, social cohesion, solidarity, friendship, and a sense of well-being.

PPs have gained some electoral success. Their largest achievements in elections to authorities include: gaining 2 seats in European Parliament due to achieving over 7% of votes in Sweden in 2009, 15 seats in the state parliament of Berlin due to 8.9% percent of the votes in the Berlin state election in 2011, 16 mandates in the Parliament of Iceland with a result of up to 23.9% in parliamentary elections in Iceland in 2015 (Edick 2016). However, the number of proponents is insufficient to impact national or supranational politics with traditional methods – via representation in authorities. Nevertheless, if evaluated by the criteria of over 2% votes in national or European elections, they still enjoy notable popular support in Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Iceland, Luxembourg, Slovenia, and Sweden.

There is a number of evidence that PPs have a 'soft' impact on politics. They experimented with new democratic forms (e.g. liquid democracy), became the first functioning cases of digital parties, and attracted attention to these new designs. They disseminate their ideas of civil rights, direct and electronic democracy – via blog posts, journalist articles, and self-published e-books. Moreover, PPs propose legislative initiatives. According to the Pirate Parties International Resolutions, the party “states support for the creation of a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly (UNPA) as a parliamentary body within the UN system that is complementary to the UN General Assembly, calling for the creation a body that is directly elected by earth's citizen” and “calls upon world governments to include the involvement of citizens in the practice of making large scoped far-reaching decisions by utilizing general referendums” (2017a). They also call for implementing or at least researching liquid democracy forms inside a possible Parliamentary Assembly of the United Nations (PP Germany and PPI, personal communication). PPs have prevented undesired policy changes, for instance, the ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement between the US, Canada, Australia, and the EU). Probably, the most profound impact of PPs is the spread of electronic democracy model. There is some criticism that other parties copy the ideas only nominally. However, there are more opinions that other parties do implement some elements of electronic democracy (mainly of transparency) and direct democracy (mostly about suggestions but voting as well). For instance, a study (Hanel and Marschall 2013) confirmed that the popularity of German PP put pressure on other German established parties to use

online collaboration platforms; and although they were implemented at a smaller scale, they did increase the intra-party participation.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The research revealed that Pirate Parties are genuine democratic initiatives, widely implementing principles and mechanisms of electronic democracy in both direct and representative forms and thereby empowering people. Their most distinct feature is the wide decentralization of authority. It is vividly expressed in open co-editing of resolutions, universal online voting, and the 'three-pirate rule.' Overall, the studied PPs encourage participation at all stages of intra-party policy making: agenda-setting, deliberation, decision-making, elections, implementation, monitoring and control.

It should be noted that this research has certain limitations. The sample covered 13 PPs, which constitutes 26% of all PPs active during the fieldwork. Also, the study primarily targeted more established parties, e.g. those with a registration, public office, and high membership. A bigger sample of PPs might bring more nuances to these findings. Further, most interviewees belonged to party leadership. A representative survey of regular members can provide insights into opinions and beliefs of regular PPs' members. In addition, the study largely focused on the normative system and internal organization of PPs and covered their external impact only with relation to this model. Their mobilization, public communication, and political advocacy patterns require a separate inquiry.

Considering their evolution over time, individual PPs seems to follow a hype cycle. It starts from enthusiasm of a core group of activists, continues with a membership growth, attempts to win a public office, and ends with a decline in popularity or a collapse. When a party goes through this cycle faster, it can be labelled a 'flash' party (Erlingsson and Persson 2011). This process develops at the global scale too. Over 13 years, by the start of 2019, 3 PPs ceased to exist and 4 PPs left the PPI (2019).

Apparently, the potential for political outreach of PPs is debatable. Due to representation in various legislative bodies they are able to impose influence on regional, national, and even supranational levels. Yet, their popular support is limited, unstable, and demonstrates higher levels in economically advanced societies with developed information technology and an educated middle class. Although, the very nature of spreading ideas in the digital age facilitates the dissemination of their principles. Despite the modest electoral results of PPs, their model of internal democratic organization and political vision are copied by rival parties. Thereby, their democratic and participatory agenda has diffused beyond organizational and national boundaries.

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