



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

MYPLACE: MEMORY, YOUTH, POLITICAL LEGACY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

MYPLACE

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This SECOND policy brief of the Framework 7 Programme MYPLACE research project involving partners in 14 countries highlights the most policy-relevant findings and policy implications to date for GEORGIA. A future Brief in July 2014 will highlight further results and recommendations.

Ongoing project

Commenced June 2011

March 2014

INTRODUCTION

MYPLACE (www.fp7-myplace.eu) is a major 7.9 million Euro EC funded project, running from June 2011 to May 2015, which explores young people's civic, political and social participation in 14 European countries, and specifically how it is shaped by the past, present and future shadows of totalitarianism and populism in Europe.

Conceptually, it goes beyond the comparison of discrete national 'political cultures' or rigid classifications of political heritage such as 'post-communist' or 'liberal democratic'. It is premised rather on the pan-European nature of a range of radical and populist political traditions and the cyclical rather than novel nature of the popularity they might currently enjoy.

Empirically, MYPLACE employs an impressive combination of survey, interview and ethnographic research methods to provide new, pan-European data that not only measures levels of participation but captures the meanings young people attach to it.

Analytically, through its specific focus on 'youth' and the historical and cultural contextualization of young people's social and political participation, MYPLACE replaces the routine and often abstract assumptions of presumed 'disengagement' from politics with an empirically rich mapping of their understandings and orientations towards European civic and political spaces.

In policy terms, MYPLACE identifies both the obstacles and factors which facilitate young people's reclamation of the European political arena as 'my place'.

The Purpose of the Policy Brief

This is the second of three Policy Briefs produced for the MYPLACE project. It reports on the results of:

- ‘Measuring Participation’ - a structured survey (sample size in Georgia – 1167) in two contrasting locations, Kutaisi and Telavi (Work Package 4);
- ‘Interpreting Participation’ - 61 in-depth interviews with survey respondents (Work Package 5);
- Collaborative work with local partners on how historical memory shapes the current political responses of young people (Work Package 2);
- Three ethnographic case studies of youth activism, performed in an NGO, a church choir and the student self-governance of a Georgian university (Work Package 7).

Policy Brief 3 will present a typology of youth activism across Europe, ethnographic case studies of social and political activism of three different groups of young people, and intergenerational interviews, as well as the implications of wider cross-national and cross-case analysis of themes from across the projects.

MYPLACE is distinctive in taking a multi-methods approach, which included large scale survey, in-depth interviews and ethnographic case studies in order to inform policy and practice in holistic ways. Rather than seeking to generalise in spurious ways about countries as a whole, the fieldwork was conducted at two contrasting sites in each country in order to show the interactions between local, national and international influences on young people’s attitudes and behaviour. In Georgia, the sites were Kutaisi, the second-largest city located in the western part of the country, where the national Parliament moved in the beginning of MYPLACE fieldwork, and Telavi – a smaller town located in eastern Georgia. In addition to the differences caused by different sizes of the settlements (hence – different infrastructure and different lifestyles of the population), attitudes of young people living in Kutaisi and Telavi towards civic engagement were also expected to be different. The rationale behind the selection of these settlements resulted from desk research and fieldwork preparation. Young people living in big urban settlements, on the one hand, and young people living in small towns or rural settlements, on the other hand, would respond differently to radical political appeals. This is because their life experiences, educational background, level of reliance on various sources of information (hence, critical thinking) are very different, as are their employment opportunities and chances of well-being. We also took into consideration that Eastern and Western parts of Georgia are traditionally characterized by different styles and rhythms of life, involvement of the population in social and political events, as well as by differences in the dominant attitudes of the population towards major events and/or social and political institutions.

Different research methods were used to explore Georgian youth activism: focus groups, in-depth interviews, survey, and ethnographic fieldwork. The research was conducted by CRRC-Georgia at the end of 2012 and early 2013.

MYPLACE research design facilitates a deeper, more holistic understanding of the contexts shaping young people’s attitudes and behaviours as a basis for more effective policy responses and interventions. Project teams have worked closely with policy partners through Youth Policy Advisory Groups (YPAGs) to design and conduct the research, and advice on its implications.

The main objective of the MYPLACE project was to explore young people’s social, civic and political engagement and participation, the meanings young people attach to it and how participation is shaped by historical memories. The major findings of the project do not significantly differ by research locations (Kutaisi and Telavi), and are summarized below:

- Only 34% of survey respondents in Kutaisi and 41% in Telavi report being interested in politics. The young people interviewed in the two Georgian locations report being **most interested in the domestic issues**. Issues to do with their country are the most interesting for them, closely followed by the issues to do with the city they currently live in, and, then, the neighbourhood they currently live in. European-level issues attract much less interest, according to our survey data (Table 1). Respondents in Kutaisi and in Telavi provided very similar answers.

Table 1. How interested would you say you are in issues to do with ... (*% of those interested¹, by location*)

	Kutaisi	Telavi
... the country you live in?	95	95
... the city you currently live in?	92	88
... the neighbourhood you currently live in?	81	72
... Europe?	55	57

- Georgian youth are **not politically active**, as demonstrated by both quantitative and qualitative data gathered in terms of the MYPLACE project. Politics has negative connotations to many Georgian youth, since, in their opinion, it is associated with dirty business and conflict, in which they have no desire to get involved. The only form of political activism they are engaged in is voting in elections – they consider voting their civic duty which they seem to take quite seriously, and 65% of the survey respondents of voting age said they vote regularly.
- Youth reported during the survey that they were generally aware of the current political situation and did sometimes **discuss politics with friends and family**, who usually tend to share their views (Table 2). They noted that it was impossible not to be at least somewhat informed about the political situation in the country, given the highly politicized nature of Georgian society.

Table 2. How often do you discuss political issues with ... (*% of those who discuss “always” and “often,” by location*)

	Kutaisi	Telavi
... your mother?	8	18
... the brother or sister you are closest to?	4	12
... the grandparent you are closest to?	8	17
... your best friend?	13	15

¹ Answers “Very interested” and “Quite interested” were combined.

- Both in Kutaisi and Telavi youth **do not regularly engage in non-electoral forms of activism**, such as signing petitions or partaking in rallies (see Box 1). Historically, these forms of social and political activism were not characteristic for the local society, and, apparently, have not become common yet.

BOX 1

Over 90% of the respondents reported during the survey that they **never** volunteered in an election campaign, participated in a demonstration, boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons, signed a petition, or written political messages or graffiti on walls during the last 12 months.

Five percent of young respondents report being members of a political party or its youth section, whereas only around 1% report membership in a student union, national or local Youth Parliament, or human rights organization.

- At times of crisis and moral outrage, however, the behaviour of Georgian youth does seem to change. Focus groups and qualitative interviews showed that young people, and university students in particular, organized or participated in massive protests in the wake of the “prison videos scandal”² just weeks before the parliamentary elections in October 2012. Our respondents and informants indicated **they had participated in these protest rallies, although they were not politically active otherwise**. As a female respondent from Kutaisi explained her participation during the qualitative interview, “*I just wanted to express my opinion, to express solidarity with the prisoners ... because I could not stay indifferent.*” At the same time, this respondent indicated several times during the interview that, usually, she was not active politically, was not even voting in the elections:

I have never participated in political events [before] ... I have participated in elections for the first time this year. [Before,] I was eligible to vote, but did not see any point in voting.

According to her, people – and youth in particular – became politically active due to the recent political events (the “prison scandal”).

- Important to note, the “prison scandal” issue was perceived by the respondents as a moral, rather than a political one, and this definitely increased engagement. Those participated in the “prison scandal” protests **did not consider their participation as a form of their political activity**. Additionally, there was the indication that the protests would be consequential given the proximity of the decisive parliamentary elections with the participation of a unified, well-funded opposition coalition. All these factors contributed to the feeling that protesting “made sense”, whereas, as a rule, the respondents reported not having such a feeling.
- It does seem, though, that engagement is dependent on the stakes involved. As our data shows, it was easier for youth **to join protests initiated by someone else**, than to initiate or organize protests themselves.
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² The videos showing graphic footage of prison guards and other officials raping and humiliating prison inmates caused outrage and became the decisive factor for the defeat of the then-ruling United National Movement.

- While the respondents often think that youth has the potential to be an influential force in the country, qualitative interviews reveal that they **do not currently see opportunities for their participation** and positive consequences of activism. Youth feel alienated from the political system and powerless to really change anything. According to a young male respondent of an in-depth interview from Kutaisi,

I cannot change anything at this point. Not only me, but [even] people who know more than I do cannot change anything. <...> Because people who think normally, and there are not too many of us, are not being asked [anything].

A fellow male respondent from Telavi supports him: *“I don’t think I can do anything alone.”* This apathy both causes and feeds their lack of activism and initiative. Importantly, the respondents cannot think of successful historical examples that would prove otherwise.

- As both quantitative and qualitative data suggest, many young respondents **lacked knowledge** about concepts like “[political] radicalism” and “populism.” They were not able to identify political ideologies and place Georgian political parties on the left-right ideology continuum. This is understandable taking into consideration political history of Georgia after the breakup of the Soviet Union – the country, and its major political actors, have not yet established their own political traditions.
- Young respondents in Georgia tend to strongly believe that **most people cannot be trusted** since most people are out for themselves (34% of the survey respondents fully agree with this). Social distrust is deeply rooted, with the only exception of the attitude towards religious institutions (Table 3). This may explain the lack of motivation for civic engagement. The analysis of the survey data shows that social trust has a statistically significant relationship with all tested indicators for attitudes toward national sovereignty and external influences, and is generally associated with opposition to trade restrictions, acceptance of foreign cultural contributions, and opposition to restrictions on land purchases by foreigners.

Table 3. How much do you trust ... (% of those who reported high trust³, by location)

	Kutaisi	Telavi
... the Parliament?	29	35
... the courts?	27	33
... political parties?	15	15
... church?	92	92

³ Respondents choosing codes 8, 9, or 10 (reflecting the highest level of trust) of the 11-point scale offered to them.

- **Radicalism is not a common characteristic of Georgian youth.** The vast majority of the respondents report believing any problem or disagreement may be resolved through peaceful means. Few respondents would justify force to achieve the following goals (Table 4):

Table 4. Share of the respondents believing violence would not be justified ... (% by location)

	Kutaisi	Telavi
... to overthrow a government	78	82
... to protect the jobs from being cut	76	78
... to protect human rights	67	75

- The respondents also generally favour **fair and equal treatment of minorities**. However, there is also an indication that they are not well informed about the limitations and discrimination various minority and disadvantaged groups may face, not least of all due to having little to no contact with them. For example, a group of IDP youth living in Telavi for most of their lives confirmed having limited contact – and limited interest to have contact – with the local population. Similarly, the local youth also indicated having limited contact with this group of peers living in the same community.
- According to the survey data, the overwhelming majority of respondents seem to be **rather nationalistic** in the sense that they have a highly favourable view of “Georgianness” and have a very high level of trust in the Georgian Orthodox Church. 78 percent of respondents report they completely trust it. 84% of Kutaisi respondents and 82% of Telavi respondents reported to be “very proud” to be Georgian citizens. They think of Georgia as hospitable and tolerant to those who are different, yet mostly prefer that minorities not interfere with the majority or question its dominance. Moreover, several interviewees also support curbing minorities’ right to effectively practice their religion – i.e. that local Muslims should not be allowed to build new mosques and minarets and should worship with the already existing facilities.
- The youth thinks that **knowing their history is important to their identity**. In Kutaisi 75 percent of survey respondents thinks it is very important. In Telavi the percentage is even higher – 81 percent. However, there is little critical assessment of historical narratives that young people are exposed to through school and museums.

- Notably, **museums are mostly visited on school organized trips** (Box 2). Georgian youth tend to believe that ancient history is objective and free of politics, while a subjective interpretation of recent history is more tempting to whatever forces are in power.

• BOX 3

% of young people involved in the following activities during the last 12 months:

Visited a museum with an exhibition about the recent past	79
Participated in a discussion about history at school or in college	77
Talked with grandparents about the past	64
Talked with parents about the past	44

- Qualitative interviews and focus-groups with young people suggest that their understandings of recent history are mostly influenced by family experiences, opinions and their own memories of the events that have happened in the recent past. Such events, understandably, are also often considered to be important historical events by Georgian youth. A vast majority of respondents talk about the importance of knowing where they come from and of maintaining their identity. However, they **do not seem eager to gain more knowledge of their county's past through different kinds of activities**.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The fact that the youth is not very active socially and politically is most clearly associated with their lack of information and lack of possibilities to be active. It is also connected to a lack of trust in major political institutions. No less importantly, the youth is cynical and suspicious of activism. People generally seek ulterior motivations for any form of activism, rather than altruism and the general public good.

To overcome young people's disengagement, we recommend the following policy actions:

- Introduce **courses on promoting volunteering and civic activism** in the curricula of Georgia's secondary and tertiary educational institutions. Ensuring basic high quality civic education is expected to increase the share of individuals who are familiar with the concept and potential outcomes of active citizenship. Indeed, young people acknowledge that education is the key to increased social and political engagement: several interviews conducted for this research refer to schools in the West as the vehicles of thriving volunteering and civic culture.
- **Depoliticize youth organizations**. Georgian society has been and still remains highly politicized. This research shows that the most frequent form of youth activism is also related to politics. Moreover, some youth organizations, student unions for instance, are encouraged by political parties to get involved in political actions. As is evident from this research, politicization hinders activism: many young people do not want to be associated with the "dirty business" – as they call politics, and prefer not to take part in such events. Hence, removing political interests from non-political youth organizations is expected to strengthen the youth's yet inchoate activism by engaging alienated non-partisan young people to identify and solve common issues.

- **Establish a forum** of organizations working on youth issues to identify, discuss and promote good practices in youth activism. Such practices often exist, but remain unnoticed by state institutions. For example, Eurasia Partnership Foundation in Georgia has operated a “Youth Bank” program for years. The key objective of the program is to encourage young people to take responsibility for their communities by debating, finding and jointly solving common problems. Instruments used to achieve these objectives include micro grants and trainings on community organizing. Since these mechanisms proved to be very effective, the state should give every effort to step in and extend similar activities to many more communities, especially those experiencing economic deprivation. State institutions should also seek out similar successful programs to be adopted and made available to a wider segment of the youth.

The full research reports on which this Policy Brief is based can be accessed here: <http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/deliverables.php>

For further information please contact: admin@fp7-myplace.eu

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

MYPLACE: Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement

- A four-year, €7.9 Million EC funded project.
- Exploring how young people's social participation is shaped by the shadows (past, present and future) of totalitarianism and populism in Europe.

MYPLACE combines survey, interview and ethnographic research to provide new, pan-European data that not only **measures** levels of participation but **captures the meanings** young people attach to it:

- **Exploring the construction and transmission of historical memory with focus groups and inter-generational interviews (Work Package 2).**
- **Measuring young people's participation using a survey delivered in 14 countries with 18,000 respondents (Work Package 4).**
- **Understanding participation using 900 in-depth follow up interviews in the 14 countries (Work Package 5).**
- **Interpreting young people's activism through at least 42 ethnographic case studies (Work Package 7).**

MYPLACE provides a hugely rich and sophisticated dataset, covering young people's attitudes and beliefs in relation, specifically, to far-right and populist ideologies, but in practice covering issues such as class, xenophobia, racism, education and trust in democratic processes and associated social and political exclusion. We welcome opportunities to work with interested policy makers as our data analysis develops. Please contact: admin@fp7-myplace.eu



PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME

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

COORDINATOR

CRRC-Georgia (<http://www.crrc.ge/>) coordinates the project in Georgia. Contact person: Dr. Tinatin Zurabishvili (tina@crrccenters.org).

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University of Southern Denmark.
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University of SS Cyril and Methodius.
Trnava, Slovakia.

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BUDGET

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WEBSITE

<http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/index.php>

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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FURTHER READING

Deliverable 2.1: Country based reports on discourse production (publication via European Commission and MYPLACE website pending).

Deliverable 4.5: A series of country specific analyses which highlight local historical and cultural factors and which contrast the two regions sampled.

Deliverable 5.3: Country based reports on in-depth interview findings.

All published deliverable reports are available here:
<http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/deliverables.php>

Blog post “Youth Activism in the South Caucasus” (<http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2013/11/youth-activism-in-south-caucasus.html>).

Blog post “The Hard Work away from the Spotlight” (<http://myplacefp7.wordpress.com/2013/07/10/the-hard-work-away-from-the-spotlight/>)

First MYPLACE Policy Brief, February 2013.