

**(SMALL) TALK THAT MATTERS: MAPPING PERSONAL AND POLITICAL  
DISCUSSION NETWORKS ACROSS EUROPE**

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## **Introduction**

In this paper I do a comparative analysis of personal and political discussion networks across a large number of polities that include long-established democracies, post-authoritarian and post-communist countries. The main question that the paper addresses is whether there are differences in the way people from different polities attend to everyday social interaction and casual political talk and whether these differences are shaped by macro contextual variables such as political environments and cultures.

There is wide agreement in the scholarly literature with regard to the political relevance of personal networks and everyday political conversation among peers (Beck 2002, Beck *et al.* 2002, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954, Bradley and Beck 2007, Eveland *et al.* 2005, Eveland and Thomson 2006, Holbert *et al.* 2002, Huckfeldt *et al.* 2002, Huckfeldt *et al.* 2004, Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987, 1991, 1995, Kenny 1998, Lake and Huckfeldt 1998, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948, McClurg 2003, 2006, Mutz 2002b, 2006, Nir 2005, Schmitt-Beck 2003, Straits 1991, Zuckerman 2005) but little research focused on macro level variables that trigger or inhibit individuals' appetite for sociability and their desire to engage in political talk (Iglic and Fabregas 2006). Most of the previous studies considered personal attributes such as age and education or political interest as the main determinants of one's eagerness to connect with peers and make politics a topic of her conversation. Occasionally, the 'supply' side was also taken into consideration by scholars who looked at the opportunities provided by the immediate social context as explanations for one's endowment with social capital and her embeddedness in more politically conversational settings (Straits 1991). However, only a few studies pointed at the possibility that the social norms created over time might have a saying on the way people get connected in a society and agree to make politics a topic of their everyday conversation (Flap and Volker 2003, Iglic 2003, Iglic and Fabregas 2006).

To fill in this gap my paper proposes and tests a theoretical model of the importance of political context and culture for individual forms of social and political interactions. I expect to see differences in the forms of interpersonal communication and habits of political conversation between people from post-communist countries and their

counterparts from consolidated democracies. This expectation is built on scientific and anecdotic accounts on the impact that communist regimes have had on people's mentalities and social norms of interpersonal communication (Flap and Volker 2003, Howard 2003, Iglie 2003, Opp and Gern 1993). To give just a hint, the control exerted in these societies on people's everyday lives and the interference to their private spheres made fear, distrust and self-censorship the attributes of people's social personality. On the other hand, in response to these circumstances people developed a set of adaptive mechanisms and practices that helped them overcoming the difficulties and problems of everyday life. The imperative of the social behavior was: 'lay your trust in a few and think twice before discussing politics'. Is this behavior still in place or can we trace its remnants in the way people get connected nowadays and make politics a topic of their everyday conversation?

In exploring this issue I look at two questions. First, I investigate whether there are differences in the personal and political discussion networks characterizing post-communist countries as compared to consolidated democracies. Second, I test whether these differences can be attributed to the communist legacy.

To this end I draw on two international surveys, namely the 'Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy' (CID hereafter) and the 'International Social Survey Program' (ISSP hereafter). The studies feature mainly European countries that include long-established democracies, post-authoritarian and post-communist countries, and samples from Japan and the US, respectively. They include information about personal and political discussion networks and for this reason are the ideal accessible surveys to investigate the social contexts and habits of political conversation in a comparative perspective. Each of the two studies employs different measures of personal networks and political discussion habits and for this reason I use both of them to corroborate the findings. I consider that this approach is beneficial as the lack of unified conclusions on the political relevance of social and political discussion networks might stem from the differences in the operationalization of the concepts of networks. Equally important, the usage of both studies offer a more comprehensive picture of the researched topic as the pool of countries is different and so are the types of social and political settings that are investigated.

The paper starts with the presentation of the theoretical framework of my research and the hypotheses. It then introduces the surveys and the items of interest included in each of them. In the next part I present the results of comparing different measures of personal networks and habits of political talk that characterize the surveyed polities. Finally, I present the results of testing the ‘communist legacy hypothesis’, according to which post-communist societies are characterized by less extensive social interactions.

### **1. Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

The logic of social connectedness was most of the times seen as a conjunction of individual and contextual attributes. Interpersonal relations form as a result of personal characteristics, interests and attitudes and the opportunities provided by the settings in which individuals reside. When it comes to the latter, little research considered political context and culture as factors that might shape individual sociability or willingness to engage in political discussion with peers.

However, a few studies concerned with determinants of social networks found differences between the norms of social connectedness in post-communist countries and consolidated democracies. In post-communist societies personal networks appear to be smaller, less diverse, and stronger on average, while politics tend to be discussed mainly with close others (Iglic and Fabregas 2006). The explanation is that the fear and distrust characterizing these societies during the communist era still bear upon people’s understandings and behaviors.

Following this line of argumentation I expect to see a significant difference between personal networks in post-communist countries and consolidated democracies.

H1: People from post-communist countries are embedded in smaller and less diverse personal networks.

H2: Their embeddedness in smaller networks is a result of belonging to post-communist societies.

With regard to political discussion habits I theorize two equally plausible models for the post-communist space. One in which people’s involvement in political debates

with family members and peers is higher than their counterparts' from Western societies, the other in which their level of involvement is lower than the average displayed by the other countries. I expect to see an increasing trend in the willingness to discuss politics in the newly democratized countries of Europe for the following reasons. The opportunity to discuss and get involved in political acts after the breakdown of the communist regimes should have presented itself as an invitation to participate. I call this the *'novelty factor'*. It should be responsible for an increase in political talk which thus makes people from these countries more willing to discuss than Westerners. Secondly, the need for political reforms in these societies should have created elation and given rise to an urge to involve oneself in politics. I call this the *'efficiency factor'*. On the other hand, I expect to see a continuation of low involvement or even a further decline in the interest and engagement with politics for the following reasons. Firstly, the legacy of the communist regime might have made people reluctant to participate in politics. I call this the *'critical legacy factor'*. Secondly, due to the rapid transformations that took place in these countries people might have felt overwhelmed and incapable to understand and cope with the new settings and thus abstain from discussing political issues. I call this *'the cognitive overwhelming factor'*.

Finally, there are some aspects which may contribute to either scenario, but with opposite effects. One is the *'economic factor'*. On one hand, people might have become more preoccupied to cope with the economic hardships posed by the transition to the market economy and thus their attention might have shifted to a territory that put them under more pressure. On the other hand, an overall improvement in the economic conditions across Eastern Europe suggests that people become less preoccupied with materialistic needs and their attention shift in the direction of other activities, politics being one of them. A second factor with opposite effects is the *'social relational factor'* which can act as a pull or push. Involvement in political talk might be seen as an effect of social pressure exerted by individual social settings, i.e. family, personal networks, and peers. In a society where personal networks were used as solutions for a multiple set of problems, i.e. from getting scarce goods to confining trust with regard to political opinions people might have searched for an informational refuge and rely on previously developed social circles to give them hints that would help their orientation in this new

complicated setting. This reliance on cues taken from political conversation occurring in familiar settings might have been further enhanced by the lack of trust in media – that used to be the mouthpiece of the unique communist party and in countries such as Romania or Bulgaria changed slowly- and the habit of distrusting, reading between lines and interpreting information that was developed in the communist regime<sup>1</sup>.

H3: People from post-communist countries will be less or more inclined to talk politics with their intimate relationships.

## **2. Data**

The studies I employ were using diverse instruments for eliciting respondents' personal networks and habits of discussing politics with their peers. In the ISSP surveys respondents were asked about three types of friends, namely the number of friends from their workplace, the number of friends from their neighbourhood and the number of their close friends. In the CID study personal networks were obtained through diverse questions such as whether the respondent belongs to an organized group of friends, to a support group and whether she has good friends within the associations to which she belongs. To obtain the information about the habit of discussing politics respondents were asked how often they discuss politics with different groups such as family, friends and so on.

The CID project was conducted between 2000 and 2002 in twelve countries, from which some established democracies and some post communist countries, with separate samples collected for East and West Germany. The ISSP survey was conducted in two waves, one in 1986 and the other in 2001. The 1986 survey includes seven countries, namely Australia, the FRG, Austria, the US, Great Britain, Hungary and Italy. The fortunate presence of Hungary, a communist country at that time, makes possible a comparative assessment of networks in the two groups of countries under scrutiny here, namely countries affected by the communist legacy and established democracies, mainly from Western Europe. However, the sole presence of Hungary imposes limitations in the

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of networks getting more importance in societies with low trust in media originates in a debate over a burrito with my brother in law, Peter Maas.

comparative conclusions one can draw. The other survey conducted in 2001 includes thirty countries, of which seven post-communist countries, ten West European countries, plus the US and Japan.

Some of the measures of personal and political discussion networks included in the two surveys are often found in surveys concerned with these topics, whereas others are new. The advantage of such a variety of measures is that the results could be compared and corroborated. Typically, the questions about respondents' personal and political discussion networks follow the format that was launched in the American General Social Survey studies. In such batteries of questions respondents are asked to indicate a set of people with whom they often interact or use to discuss politics. The differences among surveys that follow this logic of interrogation lay in the limits they set for one's nominating her network and the type of relationships one is asked to nominate. This leads to differences in the size of the network and its degree of tightness and intimacy.

To exemplify, most often respondents are asked to indicate a number of up to three or five people with whom they discuss important issues or whom they consider the most important for them. Such questions usually elicit a mix of intimate relationships, most often spouses and family members, a few close friends, and rarely go beyond the circle of one's intimates. Sometimes the instrument for generating respondents' personal network is somehow relaxed in the sense that respondents have to nominate people with whom they spend time in diverse occasions, such as household or free time activities and such questions generally produce larger networks that include more than one's close circle of intimates. Political discussion networks are obtained either directly – by asking respondents to nominate those with whom they use to discuss politics or the issues of the last electoral campaign - or indirectly – by asking respondents about their habit of discussing politics with members of their personal network.

### 3. Personal and political discussion networks: comparative results

This part presents the results of describing the micro social settings in which individuals reside in a comparative manner. Three aspects of personal networks have been generally considered relevant for their political potential, as far as Iglie and Fabregas (2006), referring to Gibson (2003) talk about, namely *multiplicity*, *strength*, and *frequency* of engaging in political debate. Although the structure of personal networks have been seen as a relevant antecedent for their mobilization potential, still some authors (McClurg, 2003) found out that it is their content, i.e. engaging in political discussion that matters.

Also, as Iglie and Fabregas (2006) revise, previous research found contradicting effects of the three aspects of personal networks. As regards networks' multiplicity it is believed that membership to diverse networks will encourage participation as they provide non-redundant sources of information and mobilization. However, this can also hinder participation as it reduces the structural availability (Snow et al. 1980) of people for political mobilization and weakens the process of social influence while increasing individual autonomy. As regards the strength of ties, strong ties could be imagined as more efficient contexts for mobilization because the information they provide is perceived as more reliable and they also create solidarity-related incentives for collective actions. On the other hand, weak ties tend to reach farther into the social structure and connect diverse social circles (Granovetter, 1973). As regards political discussion, it is believed that this will not necessarily lead to more participation but rather foster deliberation, moderation, and consensus formation. Other studies distinguish among the effects produced by the type of political discussion, whether with like-minded others or with holders of divergent political views, on participation, choice, and political knowledge (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948, Mutz 2002b, Mutz 2006, Nir 2005). Although there is disagreement over the effect of partisan composition it is undeniable that this matters and therefore it is important to analyze whether a country display a higher percentage of politically homogeneous social settings.

Before proceeding to the presentation of my results I will briefly present the conclusions drawn by Iglie and Fabregas (2006) who were analyzing various types of

social networks based on the CID data. They discuss three aspects of social networks and their antecedents, namely multiplicity, strength and degree of politicization.

The multiplicity of social networks is computed as number of types of networks in which individuals are embedded. Four types of networks are taken into consideration, namely 'networks established in the workplace, and voluntary associations, informal friendship networks, and support networks' (Igluc and Fabregas 2006: 190). Their results indicate that people in Western countries are members of a significantly larger number of networks than people in Southern and East European countries. The multiplicity of memberships in West European countries result from a mix of involvement in formal and informal social contexts, 'meaning that formal and informal integration at the country level complement rather than substitute one another' (Igluc and Fabregas 2006: 192). This finding, the authors show contradicts the claim that people join associations to overcome the loss in social interactions they experience as an erosion of social capital in modern societies. The results indicate though that the two types of social relationships do not replace but complement each other; people who are active in one type tend to be active in the other, whereas those who display low social connectedness do this in relationship to both formal and informal social affiliations.

When testing for the factors that explain the cross-country differences in the multiplicity of networks the results indicates that besides the individual level variables (education, employment, residence, and church attendance) it is the country level of general trust that is significantly linked with network multiplicity. The effect of trust is stronger in West European countries than in East European ones and Portugal. The argument for this observed effect is that 'the impact of trust on networks depends on the structure of network involvement' (Igluc and Fabregas 2006: 198). In the countries of Eastern Europe and Portugal, network involvement seems to be strongly dependent on work involvement, and, in this case, generalized trust has a smaller role in the formation of networks. Generalized trust seems to be more important for the formation of weak ties which result from involvement in voluntary associations that bring together people who are quite different. On the other hand, generalized trust is less important for the 'structurally induced' networks of workmates, friends and strong ties where the role of

trust is replaced by the similarity in social positions, preferences and interests (Iglie and Fabregas 2006: 198).

The analysis of the strength of social networks, indicate that strong ties seem to characterize those countries with small multiplicity, namely Moldova, Romania, and Spain. Countries that show the smallest network multiplicity display the highest average strength of ties in associations and workplace, with the exception of Portugal. On the other hand, in West European countries, multiplicity is linked with strength of ties. As regards political discussion, results indicate that it is lower in Romania, Portugal, and Spain.

Based on the same study (CID) I computed a different set of measures of personal networks and habits of political talk.

Table 1 shows the results of computing the average frequency of engaging in political discussions generally and specifically with different relationships, such as family members, friends, workmates, members of associations, and neighbors. The question reads as follows: ‘And how often would you say you discuss political matters when you get together with the following groups of people? 1=often, 2=sometimes, 3=rarely, 4=never. In computing the average I reversed the scale so that higher scores indicate a higher frequency of engaging in political discussions.

**Table 1. Frequency of political discussion with different types of relationships**

	Politics generally	Politics with family	Politics with friends	Politics with workmates	Politics with members of associations	Politics with neighbors
Switzerland	2.9 (.9)	2.7 (.9)	2.7 (.8)	2.4 (.9)	2.2 (.9)	1.8 (.8)
Russia	2.6 (1.1)	Missing	Missing	Missing	Missing	Missing
Portugal	1.9 (.9)	1.9 (.9)	1.9 (.9)	1.7 (.8)	1.3 (.7)	1.4 (.6)
Denmark	2.8 (.9)	Missing	Missing	Missing	Missing	Missing
West Germany	2.3 (.8)	2.4 (.8)	2.4 (.8)	2 (.9)	2.1 (.8)	1.7 (.7)
East Germany	2.4 (.9)	2.5 (.9)	2.5 (.9)	2.1 (.9)	2 (.9)	1.8 (.8)
Netherlands	2.7 (.9)	2.4 (1)	2.5 (.9)	2.2 (1)	1.8 (.9)	1.6 (.8)
Slovenia	2.3 (1)	2.3 (.9)	2.3 (.9)	2.2 (1)	1.7 (.9)	1.7 (.9)
Norway	2.8 (.8)	2.7 (.8)	2.7 (.7)	2.7 (.8)	2 (.9)	1.9 (.8)
Romania	2 (1)	1.9 (1)	1.9 (1)	1.8 (1)	1.2 (.6)	1.6 (.9)
Moldova	2.4 (1)	2.4 (1)	2.4 (1)	2.2 (1.1)	1.6 (.9)	2.1 (1)
Spain	2.1 (1)	2.1 (1)	2.1 (1)	1.9 (.9)	1.6 (.9)	1.3 (.6)
Sweden	2.6 (1.9)	2.5 (.9)	2.4 (.9)	2.4 (.9)	1.8 (.9)	1.7 (.7)

The results indicate that Romania and Portugal stand apart as regards the lowest figures for political talk with all groups. Spain and Slovenia follow quite closely thus indicating the possibility that countries democratized in the second and third wave might fall together. East Germany though is closer to the established democracies for all categories of political talk. Very interesting is the case of Moldova that definitely does not fit with the post-communist or post-authoritarian countries but closely follow Western democracies. Unfortunately, missing data in the case of Russia prevent us from drawing more general conclusions about the former Soviet context. However, the results for political discussion generally show that Russia follows the West European pattern of political discussion.

Table 2 shows the results of respondents' embeddedness in various formal and informal networks. Firstly, respondents were asked about their membership to a group of friends with whom they meet on a regular basis. The question reads as follows: 'Apart from the formal organisations we have just talked about, do you belong to any group or network of friends or acquaintances with whom you have contact on a regular basis?'. Subsequent questions about being part of a network that provide support - Do you actively provide any support for ill people, elderly neighbours, acquaintances or other people without doing it through an organization or club?-, being part of an association and having friends among the members of the association were asked. The results in Table 2 indicate the percentage of the respondents who declared to be part of a group of friends, a support group and have friends among the members of the association to which they belong. For the membership in association the results show the average number of the associations to which respondents belong.

**Table 2: Measures of social networks**

	Group of friends (%)	Support networks (%)	Membership in associations	Friends from associations (%)
Switzerland	55	53	4.9 (3.7)	47
Russia	51	missing	.42 (.83)	52
Portugal	17	41	1 (1.3)	70
Denmark	45	47	3.4 (2.3)	57
West Germany	23	29	1.5 (1.5)	83
East Germany	15	24	1 (1.3)	72
Netherlands	42	51	4.2 (3.2)	36
Slovenia	55	75	1.7 (2)	54
Norway	44	56	4.8 (3.5)	50
Romania	7	80	.3 (.8)	77
Moldova	12	66	.4 (1.5)	84
Spain	36	16	1 (1.5)	66
Sweden	25	35	3.5 (2.5)	77

The measures of social connectedness create a somehow different picture. The smallest percentage of people declaring that they are part of a group of friends with whom they meet on a regular basis is recorded in some of the post-communist and post-authoritarian countries, namely East Germany, Romania, Moldova, and Portugal. On the other hand, Russia and Slovenia fit the pattern of the consolidated democracies.

The membership in voluntary associations displays a clear separation between post-authoritarian countries and established democracies, with the exception of West Germany that resembles more the former than the latter. This variable records the percentage of people who declared that they have a link with a number of twenty-six activities, including membership, donating money, participating in the activities organized by the associations or doing voluntary work for these associations. Although this measure could be seen as an indicator of political or civic activism I consider that it gives an indication about the level of social embeddedness in these countries. The level of personal connectedness at formal group level vary among countries, although it is interesting to notice that in countries like Romania, Moldova, Portugal, West Germany and Sweden the relationship between membership in associations and the development of personal ties is stronger.

In the case of support networks –which is computed as the percentage of people who declared that they either often or at least sometimes are offering help- the results indicate that Romania, Slovenia, and Moldova display the highest percentages of embeddedness in such groups. I consider these networks as strong ties and for this reason some of the post-communist countries appear to preserve old habits where networks prove to be the handy solution for all sorts of issues.

To summarize the findings, there are some patterns emerging although the results should be interpreted with care. First of all, a clear cut observation is that the percentage of people who declare to be involved in any way with a diverse range of organizations is by far the smallest in three of the post-communist countries previously characterized by the toughest regimes, namely Russia, Romania and Moldova, closely followed by the post-authoritarian Spain and Portugal, and by East Germany. Slovenia also displays a lower figure as compared with the Nordic countries, Netherlands and Switzerland, but so does West Germany. Secondly, membership in an organized group of friends is again the smallest in Romania, followed closely by Moldova, East Germany and Portugal. However, none of the other post communist countries or the post-authoritarian ones follow this pattern. Thirdly, when it comes to membership in support networks, which is providing help on a regular basis to family or acquaintances it is mostly the former communist countries that display the highest percentage of people who declared to have been giving support at least sometimes. This indicates that networks are still seen as providers of support in these countries. Finally, when looking at the percentage of people who declared that they have personal friends in the organizations with whom they get involved, it is in fact post communist countries displaying the highest number of those who have friends in at least one of the organizations. Without being able to tell apart whether it is membership in organizations what provide them with social relationships or the other way round, that is personal ties give incentives for participation in organizations, it is interesting to note the stronger relationship between the two in the case of post-communist countries. Moldova, Romania, together with Germany, Portugal, and Sweden has the highest percentage of people who declare to have close friends in at least one of the organizations to which they are involved. When it comes to the content of the social interactions, which is measured by frequency of political discussion, results are

again mixed. Romania and Portugal display the lowest average frequency of discussing politics with the social ties, closely followed by Spain and Slovenia but with Moldova and Russia fitting more into the Western pattern.

This information is complemented by the analysis based on the two cross-country studies conducted as part of the International Social Survey Program, ISSP, in 1986 and 2001.

Table 3 presents the average and median<sup>2</sup> number of the three categories of friends on which respondents furnished information in the 1986 study. The results indicate that Hungary, a communist country at that time displays the highest number of workplace friends and the lowest number of choice-based close friends. However, the lack of information about other communist countries at that time precludes a firmer conclusion with regard to the effect that political culture has on individual social personality.

Fortunately, the 2001 study includes a larger sample of polities surveyed and therefore makes possible a comparative assessment of the average size of the group of friends in the two types of countries, namely post-communist societies and consolidated democracies. Table 3 'presents the average and median number of friends calculated separately for the group of post-communist countries (including the sample from East-Germany) and established democracies (including separate samples from Great Britain, Northern Ireland, and West Germany and the US)' (Lup 2009: 9). The results indicate that post-communist countries display 'on average a lower number of close personal relationships which are not a by-product of other activities (work) or proximity (neighborhood)' (Lup, 2009: 10).

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<sup>2</sup> 'The inclusion of median in addition to the customary measure of average is due to the fact that these variables are not normally distributed and therefore average alone might not be an informative descriptor of the data. Median offers information on the direction in which the data is skewed' (Lup, 2009).

**Table 3: Descriptive measures for number of friends (ISSP 1986 and 2001)**

Country	Friends from workplace		Friends from neighbourhood		Close friends	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
<b>ISSP 1986</b>						
Austria	.7	0	1	0	7.1	5
Great Britain	.8	0	1	0	4.1	4
The US	.9	0	1.5	0	7.1	5
West Germany	.5	0	.5	0	4.6	3
Hungary	1.4	1	.7	0	3.6	2
Australia	.7	0	.8	0	3.6	3
Italy	.1	0	1.1	0	3.9	3
<b>ISSP 2001</b>						
Established democracies	1.8	1	2.9	2	6.7	4
Post-communist countries	2.3	1	2.5	1	4.2	2

Source: Lup (2009: 30)

Here the conclusions seem to indicate that the average number of close friends tends to be smaller on average in post-communist countries (and post-authoritarian ones) and that workplace furnishes more social ties in East than in West.

To conclude, hypothesis one is confirmed as people from post-communist countries seem to be embedded in smaller and less diverse networks. As regards hypothesis three, the results indicate that at least in the case of some post-communist – and post-authoritarian countries- people tend to talk politics less within their groups compared to their Western counterparts. Further investigation is needed for understanding whether this is due to the communist legacy or to other factors, such as the economic hardships imposed by the transition to market economy and the general climate of change.

#### 4. Is the communist legacy still in place<sup>3</sup>?

This part reports the results of testing whether the differences in the size of networks between post-communist countries and Western democracies is attributable to the communist legacy. The analysis draws on the ISSP data and tests whether the

<sup>3</sup> This part draws on the analysis and the results included in Lup, 2009

observed difference in the average number of choice-based relationships between the two groups of countries is related to the membership to the group of post-communist countries. In my analysis I regressed the number of close friends on a set of variables that were generally found to be significantly related to the size of personal networks - gender, age, education, the number of persons in the respondent's household, respondents' civil status, 'and seventeen dichotomous variables corresponding to the countries introduced in the analysis, excluding the reference category'<sup>4</sup> (Lup 2009: 10). With the estimates of these equations I computed two average sums of intercepts: one for the post-communist pool and the other for the group of the established democracies. Using these results I conducted a test of the significance of the differences between the two average sums of intercepts. The results are reported in Table 4 and they indicate that being a citizen of a post-communist country is a significant predictor for the number of close friends. Respondents from post-communist countries tend to have smaller networks on average.

The second hypothesis is supported as the differences in the network size between post-communist countries and consolidated democracies appear to be related with membership to post-communist countries.

**Table 4. Test of significance of countries' differential effect on number of close friends**

	Estimate	SE	P-value
Average intercept difference for dependent variable as count	-.342	.022	.000
Average intercept difference for dependent variable as dichotomous	.542 <sup>5</sup>	.038	.000

Source: Lup 2009: 30

## Conclusions

There are three types of conclusions that stem from this research.

Firstly, the results of my analysis indicate that interpersonal communication continues to display some peculiarities in the post-communist space. In addition to this,

<sup>4</sup> 'Given the distribution of the dependent variable, number of close friends, a zero-inflated Poisson model was defined. Two equations were simultaneously estimated, one where the dependent variable is the actual count and the other where the dependent variable was dichotomized, 0 if the respondent has no friends and 1 if she has at least one friend' (Lup 2009: 10).

<sup>5</sup> This estimate indicates the probability of being unable to assume any value except zero.

there seem to be similarities with regard to the norms of social connectedness and habits of casual political talk between post-communist societies and post-authoritarian ones. Nevertheless, further examination is needed for being able to understand the mechanism of political culture having such a strong impact on individual behaviors.

Secondly, additional research is needed to understand the reason behind the lower involvement in political discussion in post-communist countries as compared to established democracies. Is this a remnant of the old fears and behaviors developed under the communist times or a newly coined attitude? And an equally important question: Is there any connection between a lower involvement in political talk and a lower level of political participation in the post-communist countries?

Last but not least, this comparative assessment is relevant both in itself and for another reason. Macro structural resemblances –similar patterns of interpersonal communication networks and habits of casual political talk- among some polities could be related with observed similarities in the strength of the political relevance of interpersonal discussion networks. For instance, a stronger political relevance of interpersonal discussion networks in the post-communist space might be the result of a greater importance attributed to the personal networks in these societies in all realms of everyday life. By the same token, the cultural norms of some societies might lead to a lower importance attributed to the interpersonal discussion networks as providers of informative and cognitive resources in the political realm. Despite a wide agreement in the scholarly literature with regard to the political relevance of personal networks and interpersonal communication we know little about the universal character of this influence. The proper setting to address this question would be a large scale, cross-country study that gives information about personal networks and forms of political behavior and understanding. Ideally, the pool of countries should avoid any selection bias that would result in an overrepresentation of polities with similar social structures and political cultures. To my knowledge no such a comprehensive data set is available to date and for this reason the way I found for answering this question is to combine the existing resources and proceed with a two-step approach, where I firstly map patterns of personal networks and political discussion habits across a large number of polities that differ in histories, political cultures and institutions.

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