Social media use and political participation in small states: A case study of Estonia

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1. Introduction

Political participation is at the heart of democracy. For a democratic system to function well, political participation is a key component (Chang, 2017, p. 386). In simple terms, a democracy is defined as governance by the people, where citizens elect leaders in free and fair elections (Bollen, 2009, p. 369). In a democratic system, good governance requires political participation, so that the voice of every citizen is heard when electing the leaders. An important component to political participation resides in political information. For citizens to vote, it is crucial for them to learn about political issues and get informed on which leaders to vote for (Baek, 2009, p. 376). Many components help understand what stimulates political participation and one of them is citizens' media use. Media use helps increase political information; various studies have shown that political communication through media results in higher voter turnouts (Baek, 2009, p. 387).

Since media structures have evolved with technological developments, various alternative ways of getting informed emerged. Modern political participation is shaped by new ways for citizens to express their opinions online. The growth and spread of social media created new ways to politically participate such as signing online petitions, holding online political discussions, and creating blogs (Chang, 2017, p. 386). Social media offer a platform where political information is much more accessible. Some scholars researched accidental exposure to information on social media and found that even when users do not seek information, they can still accidentally get informed or misinformed (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016, p. 1858). It is essential to keep in mind that media structures also increase the chances of stumbling upon fake news leading to citizens misinformation (Shu et al., 2020, p. 171). Studies on the correlation between social media use and political participation concluded that more frequent use of social media results in higher political participation (Valenzuela, 2013).

Although various investigations of the correlation between social media use and political participation were conducted, such studies were rarely applied to small states. Small states are an excluded group of cases in international politics, as studies often focus on larger states and world powers. The definition of small states itself is debated which makes research on the topic very heterogeneous as contrasted definitions of small states lead to different cases selections. Small states are significantly more democratic and more likely to pertain to a stable democracy (Veenendaal, 2018, p. 394). Moreover, small states are characterised by close communities where everyone knows one another (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 109), which makes the use of social media even more relevant to study as the social networks are different from

larger states. Indeed such close networks of social relations could result in different use for social media structures.

In this paper, I intend to investigate the correlation between social media use and political participation in small states. First, I will discuss the existing theories that help understand the correlation between both variables in small states. Second, through a mixed-methods design, I will analyse different data sources in order to attempt to fill the existing gap in literature about small states. In the data analysis, a quantitative analysis will be proposed to draw general conclusions on social media use and political participation in small states. Subsequently, through a qualitative analysis of a single case study, I aim to propose a better understanding of the dynamics at play with social media in a specific small state. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in this data analysis aims at complementing their individual findings and provide more insight into the topic.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Democracy and political participation in small states

Small states have been shown to have notable records of democratic governance as well as democratic stability (Veenendaal, 2018, p. 394). They are also characterized by informal and personalised politics as well as close relations between voters and politicians. These components can lower the quality of political representation, but they also seem to reinforce the participation of locals in political affairs (Veenendaal, 2018, p. 396). Political participation remains one of the most discussed topics in political science as it represents a crucial component of every democratic system (Baek, 2009, p. 376). In small states, these personalistic relationships between citizens and politicians partly explain the higher levels of political participation. (Veenendaal, 2018, p. 398).

Political participation in smaller states can be explained through the elements that are specific to state size. First, as the communities are smaller, people are expected to have an "emotional attachment to the public good" and can "exercise effective scrutiny over their governments" (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 106). In larger states, as communities and populations are larger, effective scrutiny and emotional attachment can be harder to achieve on a national scale. Secondly, small states are characterised by particular political mechanisms. Some studies showed that in small states, politics are highly informal and personalistic (Veenendaal, 2018,

p. 406). Small states are characterized by small-scale social structures, where citizens are well acquainted with each other and their leaders (Baldacchino, 2012, pp. 106-107).

2.2 Political participation: A rational choice theory explanation

A relevant theory to understand political participation is the rational choice theory that views political participation as a cost-benefit calculation. For instance, through the spectre of rational choice theory, citizens are expected to vote only if the benefits of voting exceed the costs (Baek, 2009, p. 377). From this standpoint, voting costs include going to the polling stations, waiting in line and registering, but also the costs of information. The latter include the costs of getting the information, processing that information and deciding whom to vote for (Bimber, 2001, p. 56). Following the rational choice theory, the reduction of both information costs and time costs would result in higher participation. Besides representing a cost in itself, information also helps citizens calculate the costs and benefits of different forms of political participation (Jost et al., 2018, p. 110). When citizens have the necessary information regarding protests, for instance, they are able to calculate whether their political participation will bring them benefits or not. This means that political information in itself is a cost of political participation but is also a useful tool to calculate the costs and benefits of political participation.

Following this theory, the technological developments that led to the invention of the internet clearly reduce information costs for citizens (Bimber, 2001, p. 58). For instance, regarding campaign information, the internet is perceived as less costly in time but also easier than watching TV or reading the newspaper (Bimber, 2001, p. 60). The internet provides a platform for citizens to find information, initiate discussions and express opinions which results in better knowledge and understanding of political affairs (Chang, 2017, p. 388). Additionally, political discussions are seen to reduce the costs of political learning and also help motivate people to increasingly participate and mobilize for political causes (Valenzuela, 2013, p. 924). Social media being a space for discussions including political discussions can thus be perceived to lower costs of information and motivate citizens to politically participate. It should be kept in mind that fake news and misinformation remain an important risk of these information platforms (Shu et al., 2020, p. 171). Regardless, this thesis aims to study information costs reduction through social media and not classify whether that information is valid or not.

2.3 Social media use in small states

This theoretical framework has established three things, first, that small states pertain to higher levels of democracy and more stable democratic systems. Second, information costs play an important role in predicting citizens' voting behaviour and third, that social media help reduce these costs. The article of Eveland & Hively (2009) is valuble to link these findings. They point out the importance of political discussion in stimulating political participation and draw out three characteristics of political discussion that would influence political participation. The first is frequency, the second is network size and the third is network heterogeneity. I will explain these three characteristics in the next section and will outline how each of these characteristics can be applied to the topic of this thesis.

Frequency:

Eveland & Hively's (2009) study concludes that the frequency of political discussion does predict higher levels of political participation (p. 219). Social media provides a platform for discussion and expressing opinions. The expression of opinions is important as it motivates participation and mobilization in political causes (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016, p. 1861). Debating ideas, providing arguments, and reflecting on the discussions is a rich form of political information (Valenzuela, 2013, p. 924). Moreover, social media allows new ways of identity and group formation (Allaste & Saari, 2020, p. 140). This is achieved by sharing ideas with the online community. Joining groups, commenting, and sharing are percieved to have democratic value (Allaste & Saari, 2020, p. 140). Through the rational theory lens, the frequency of social media use reduces information costs to a great extent.

Network size:

The second characteristic that predicts political participation discussed by Eveland & Hively (2009) is network size. Their study concludes that larger network size in political discussions leads to increased participation (p. 219). Small states have specific social mechanisms such as role diffusion, role enlargement or role multiplicity (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 112). These social mechanisms create overlapping roles in people's personal and professional life, leading to complex webs of acquaintances where most people have friends in common (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 112). This can lead to the conclusion that social media functions similarly in small states, and that networks within the country are quite large on a national scale. Most people share social networks and have common friends (Baldacchino,

2012, p. 112). Nevertheless, as small states have smaller societies this argument might not apply as networks are smaller in nature. The aforementioned social mechanisms could still lead to larger webs of acquaintances when put in perspective with population size. Social media is based on social networking, and it can thus be hypothesized that small states have larger national networks of discussion.

Network heterogeneity:

Finally, the last characteristic of political discussion analysed by Eveland & Hively (2009) is network heterogeneity. Their study concludes that discussion diversity is negatively correlated with political participation (Eveland & Hively, 2009, p. 219). This means that political participation increases when discussions are less diverse. This perfectly relates to small states as they are characterised by shared norms and values. Often in small states there exists a single code or set of homogenous values (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 109). This leads to the hypothesis that political discussion online in small states would follow the same scheme and lack heterogeneity of opinions. This means once again that following this theory, social media use in small states is expected to have a positive correlation with political participation.

To summarize, small states are likely to be more democratic and stable than bigger states. In democracies, political participation is very important and can be stimulated through media use. Social media is a new technology that allows for new ways to exercise citizenship and discuss politics online. As the correlation between media use and political participation has been extensively studied, the remaining gaps in the literature are related to social media use. Social media are a relatively new communication platform, and there is a wide research gap regarding the implications that it can have on political participation. Additionally, even if the frequency of social media use has been studied in regard to political participation, the literature available clearly disregards small states. It can be hypothesized by combining studies made on social media use and on small states that the findings regarding political participation also apply to small states. Moreover, the findings on social media use in smaller states could be generalizable to bigger states at the municipal level.

3. Research puzzle & hypotheses

Following this theoretical framework, important gaps regarding small states remain in the literature. This thesis aims to contribute to the research about small states while focusing

on the social media and political participation aspects. The research question that this paper aims to answer is: What is the impact of social media use on political participation in small states? As discussed above, small state size can result in stable democratic systems, and smaller population size has been shown to correlate with higher levels of participation. As social media use is considered to reduce information costs, the first sets of hypotheses can be formulated:

H0: Social media use does not correlate with political participation in small states

H1: Higher levels of political participation in small states can be attributed to a more frequent use of social media.

The second set of hypotheses formulated helps further distinguish the impact of state size on the considered correlation. As studies show that small states can have stable and lasting democracies it is also interesting to investigate whether social media use is higher and if it impacts political participation more in small states.

H2: Smaller state size results in a greater positive correlation between social media and political participation

H3: State size does not have a significant impact on the correlation between social media and political participation

In order to answer the research question, in the first part of the data analysis, a quantitative analysis attempts to check the aforementioned hypotheses. The expectations are that similarly to bigger states; in small states, more frequent use of social media is likely to result in higher political participation. The second part of the data analysis elaborates on the findings of the quantitative part and helps further investigate the proposed hypotheses through a single case study. The single case study aims to fill gaps in the literature by giving reliable information on one specific state. This method seems to be the most relevant to study this topic as the statistical analysis provides broader conclusions and the case study focuses on analysing the variables in more depth.

This thesis aims to broaden the framework of the study regarding the correlation between social media use and political participation by applying existing theories to small states. As small states are often disregarded when such studies are conducted, this research

aims at focusing on social media use in small states and to what extent this impacts political participation in these states. This thesis further contributes to the research field by providing a single case study to investigate the causal relationship in more detail. Small states are relevant to study as the findings could be generalizable to bigger states as they provide somewhat of a prototypical smaller-scale case. Findings might not be generalizable on a national level for bigger states, but they can still provide relevant insight on municipal dynamics regarding political participation.

4. Conceptualisation and operationalisation

4.1 Small states

Small state size can be defined in many ways. Some definitions focus on the relative power of the state such as economic power, or military power (Panke, 2012, p. 315). Other authors take into consideration materialistic components such as population size (East, 1973, p. 557). Constructivist studies define smallness based on perceptions, both self-perception by the state itself but also as the external perception of smallness by other states (Browning, 2006, p. 673). In this thesis, state size is assessed through its population size. The case selection of small states is restricted to cases with less than 5.5 million inhabitants. However, state size is also viewed as relative to other states throughout the quantitative analysis and for this purpose, smallness operates as a control variable. This means that state size is controlled for on a scale as an interval-ratio variable. The purpose is to analyse whether smallness is a relevant predictor in the study.

4.2 Political participation

Second, political participation is a widely used term, but in this thesis, it is important to point out that it can be both online and offline. Offline forms of political participation include voting, election campaign activities as well as protesting for instance (Valenzuela, 2013, p. 927). Online participation can include participation in political discussions or signing online petitions (Chang, 2017, p. 386). In this thesis, political participation is measured on the basis of voter turnout rates. Although it is a very basic measure for political participation, it still seems like a relevant one as it is the most common indicator and is most often studied (Baek, 2009, p.377). The data is gathered from the European Union data sets that are available online for use (Eurostats, 2021). For the second part of the data analysis, according to the case selected

political participation can be analysed differently. The other forms of political participation that are considered are party membership as well as signing online petitions.

4.3 Social media use

Finally, social media use is a much harder term to operationalise. Social media refers to an interactive set of applications on which users can create and distribute user-generated content (eg. texts, photos, videos) (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 48). For this purpose, a proxy variable can be used to represent relatively accurate results of the frequency of social media use in the quantitative analysis. The proxy variable is "Frequency of communication via social media" which can be found on the Eurostat website (Eurostat, 2015) categorized by age, sex and educational attainment level. However, it does not give insight into whether citizens are exposed to political posts on social media. Additionally, internet access is treated as a relevant control variable as social media use is only possible with internet access.

Research design and case selection

This paper looks to investigate the potential relationship between social media use and political participation. The research design is nested analysis using a mixed-method strategy. This kind of analysis, introduced by Lieberman (2005), starts with a quantitative analysis or Large N Analysis (LNA) regarding the general universe of cases. It is then followed by a qualitative analysis or Small N Analysis (SNA) that is nested within the quantitative part. This means that the case selection for the SNA happens as a result of the findings of the LNA. This type of analysis has been increasingly used as the feasibility increased with the availability of data (Lieberman, 2005, p. 438). Moreover, the analysis can help draw conclusions both about the breadth and depth of the selected topic. As Lieberman (2005) puts it "The analytic payoff is greater than the sum of the parts" (p. 436). For this thesis, in the first part, a LNA is conducted to draw general conclusions on social media use and political participation all while controlling for state size. Then, in a second part, to broaden the research a case study helps understand how these variables interact with each other in a specific case. The case selection for the SNA follows from the statistical analysis.

The first part of the analysis assesses the impact that social media use has on political participation while controlling for state size. The case selection is restrained to 31 European states for which data was available. This group of states excludes several very small states due

to a lack of data. A multiple linear regression is conducted in order to estimate the different predictor variables for political participation. The dependent variable is political participation, and this variable is measured through turnout at the last parliamentary elections of the country. The independent variable is social media use. In order to assess whether state size plays a role in the correlation, population size and land area are added as control variables. The additional control variables used to get more precise results are, firstly, access to an internet connection and secondly, the real GDP per capita. Internet access is a relevant control variable to use as it predicts whether social media use is possible. GDP per capita is controlled to further understand if economical factors play a role in the correlation. Cases are selected for countries without a compulsory voting system. However, electoral systems were not controlled for in this study, but it is a relevant variable to include in future research.

Following the nested analysis method, the second part of the analysis is a qualitative case study of one country. The case is selected based on the outcome of the statistical analysis. This means that the case of which the correlation seems relevant to study in more depth is chosen and a qualitative analysis of the variables is conducted. A scatter plot helps to show the distribution of the cases studied. Through the scatterplot, either outliers or influential cases are chosen to conduct the qualitative analysis. According to the case selected the appropriate qualitative method is used. Lieberman (2005) provides two types of qualitative analysis that result from quantitative methods and these are Model-Testing Small N analysis (SNA) which occurs when the quantitative analysis supports the predicted hypothesis and Model-Building SNA which is conducted when the quantitative analysis fails to support the predicted hypothesis (Lieberman, 2005, p. 442).

5. Research methods & techniques

The nested analysis is the most adequate for this study as it is more complete and can provide more information than a separate LNA and SNA. The first part of my thesis is a statistical analysis of social media use and voter turnout. To have accurate results, I hand-coded different variables from different data sets and created a new data set that combines all the variables needed in this thesis. First, the Eurostat database was used to extract values for internet access in households in 2019 (the population are those aged between 16 and 74), and the frequency of communication via social media in 2015 (population older than 16). A weakness of the research methods is that the social media use variable records the values for 2015, which can be seen as outdated data but was the most relevant available data. The real GDP per capita and the population size was also extracted from the Eurostat database and is

dated 2019. Land area data was found on the World Bank database and added into the dataset. Finally, turnout rates were selected for the last parliamentary elections and were found on the IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance). The dates of the most recent elections vary from 2016 to 2021 which might also be problematic due to different time frames. The choice of the same type of elections (parliamentary) over similar dates of elections is made to avoid bias related to differences of engagement depending on the election type.

In the second part of the analysis, the case is selected according to the results of the LNA. If the LNA supports the hypothesis, the case selection happens "on the line" and is a representative case. Following Lieberman's (2005) scheme for a relevant nested analysis, the Model-Testing SNA is the best outcome of an LNA that confirms the predicted correlation. If the results of the LNA do not support the hypothesis, the case selection is made "off the line" to follow a Model-Building SNA (Lieberman, 2005, p. 442).

In order to analyse the case, a content analysis is conducted on several data sources. In order to triangulate between various sources of information, first, an interview is conducted to get direct insight into how social media plays a role in stimulating political participation in the chosen country. Second, Social media platforms used by government officials are examined, as well official government accounts. Additionally, as discussed above, online political participation takes form in signing petitions and sharing political information as well, these are analysed as well to assess levels of online participation. Finally, academic sources analysing the country are investigated to complete the findings.

6. Data analysis

6.1 Quantitative analysis

In this first part of the data analysis, two multiple regressions are conducted, the first one focuses on all states available while the second one only analyses small states. In the first regression, two models were conducted to investigate the hypotheses (see Table 1). One model represents the correlation between the dependent variable: turnout rates at the last parliamentary elections, and the main independent variable: the percentage of people using social media every day in 2015. The second model provides deeper insight into other variables that might influence the correlation. In the second model, the percentage of households who have internet access in 2019 is taken into consideration. To measure country size GDP per capita, population size and land area are added as extra control variables to investigate how state size influences the correlation.

Table 1: Linear regression model of turnout at last national elections

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Constant	26.648**	-60.979
	(6.865)	(42.976)
Percentage of people using social media every day in 2015	1.316***	1.592***
	(0.229)	(0.288)
Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019		1.001
		(0.542)
Real GDP per capita in 2019		0.000*
		(0.000)
Population in 2019		0.132
		(0.079)
Land area		-0.003
		(0.014)
R^2	0.579	0.730
Adjusted R^2	0.562	0.662
N	26	26

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

*** p <0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p <0.05

The results of this first multiple linear regression provide relevant information regarding the hypotheses. The model fit is quite strong for both models, the first model explains about 58% of the variation of the dependent variable and the second model about 73%. This is due to additional explanatory variables, but it still makes the second model a better fit for explaining the variations in turnout levels. Additionally, the F-value is significant for both

models leading to the conclusion that the independent variables reliably predict the dependent variable (see Appendix A). What the second model tells us is that if the percentage of people using social media every day increases by 1%, turnout rates for the country increase by 1.592%. This result is statistically significant as the p-value is inferior to 0.001. The GDP per capita variable is statistically significant but presents a value of 0, meaning it does not impact the correlation. Internet access is also a relevant predictor variable, if it increases by 1% turnout levels increase by 1.001%. However, internet access, as well as the other predictor variables, are not statistically significant. The assumptions were checked for and there seems to be no concern for any of the relevant assumptions (See Appendix B).

The results show that there is a clear positive correlation between social media use and turnout. This rejects the null hypothesis *H0* that there is no correlation between these two variables. The correlation is statically significant and represents reliable findings. The additional explanatory variables also seem to be predictors of higher turnout levels, but the results are not statistically significant. The rest of the control variables used as well present very weak and non-statistically significant results. State size does not appear to play a role.

The LNA still contains important limitations that are relevant to point out. First, the pool of countries studied are all located in the same area, Europe, limiting the scope of the analysis. Second, although all member states of the European Union (EU) were included, data was unavailable for very small states in Europe such as Liechtenstein and Monaco. This means that different results could have been found if these very small states were included in the study. Exactly thirteen small states[1] were excluded from the study due to lack of data. This is problematic as part of the hypothesis concerns state size. These results allow no conclusion regarding state size when generalizing to all of Europe and not simply member states of the EU. However, the study does not provide any counterargument to state size playing a role. Thus, the hypothesis *H1* that states that the correlation is positive for small states is supported. For the second set of hypotheses as state size does not represent statistically significant results, we can conclude that it does not play a role in the correlation and thus reject *H2*.

In order to fully assess this correlation in small states, a second regression analysis is conducted on small states only. The states chosen are those that have a population equal or inferior to 5.5 million inhabitants. The same number of states is excluded from the study due

[1] Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armenia, Albania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Andorra, Monaco, Liechtenstein, San Marino, Vatican City.

to lack of data. If the correlation between social media use and turnout levels is once again positive and statistically significant, the null hypothesis *H0* is fully rejected.

Table 2: Linear regression model of turnout at last national elections in small states

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Constant	26.789*	-26.284
	(10.043)	(73.001)
Percentage of people using social media every day in 2015	1.227**	1.813**
	(0.312)	(0.305)
Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019		0.617
		(0.835)
Real GDP per capita in 2019		-0.001
		(0.000)
Population in 2019		-2.561
		(1.852)
Land area		0.031
		(0.031)
R^2	0.659	0.944
Adjusted R^2	0.617	0.874
N	10	10

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

*** p <0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p <0.05

This second analysis is a better fit. The R^2 for the second model is about 0.94 which means the model explains about 94% of the variations in the dependent variable. However, that is explained by the very small number of cases. In this regression, if the percentage of people using social media every day increased by 1%, the turnout rates would increase by 1.227%.

The second model presents an increase of 1.832 in turnout rates for an increase of one unit in the main independent variable. However, this time population size does correlate with turnout rates. This correlation is negative meaning that if the population increased by one unit, then turnout would decrease by 3.188 units. That means that for each 1 million inhabitant increase, turnout rates decrease by 3.188%. However, as the results for population size are not statistically significant no reliable conclusion can be drawn.

In this regression analysis, results are less statistically significant than in the first analysis. The p values are lower for the main independent variable. In both models, the independent variable is statistically significant to the 0.01 threshold. The constant is not statistically significant. The lack of statistical significance is most likely due to the small number of cases. Only ten cases were analysed in the second regression and that is a clear limitation to the study and the results. The number of cases analysed is clearly too small for a conclusive regression analysis, but those were the cases with available data. Nevertheless, the analysis is still helpful to support the claim that more frequent social media use correlates with higher turnout rates.

Despite that, the results are still not statistically significant making generalizability quite complicated. Once again, the absence of very small states in the analysis is problematic. Additionally, when checking assumptions, multicollinearity is a serious concern meaning that it is harder to assess the individual importance of predictors (See Appendix B). This is because internet access and social media use for instance overlap as one depends on the other. Internet access predicts whether people can use social media or not. These results still provide relevant insight into the research topic. The data provides support for the hypothesis that increased social media use results in higher turnout levels in small states. Perhaps size is not statistically significant in the first regression as the positive correlation is seen in all state's sizes, but that still means that it is visible in small states as well. The results thus reject the hypotheses *H0* and *H2*. This means that the findings support the claim that social media motivates political participation in small states, but not necessarily more than in bigger states.

6.2 Case selection for qualitative analysis

In the second part of this thesis, the correlation between variables is studied in depth through a single case study. As Lieberman (2005) explains if the LNA supports the hypothesis the case selection has to happen "on the line". This means the case chosen is a representative case of the correlation between both variables. The SNA follows a Model Testing scheme meaning that it helps further support the hypotheses (Lieberman, 2005, p. 442). In order to

select the case, a scatterplot is conducted to find the cases that are on the line and select the appropriate country for the study.

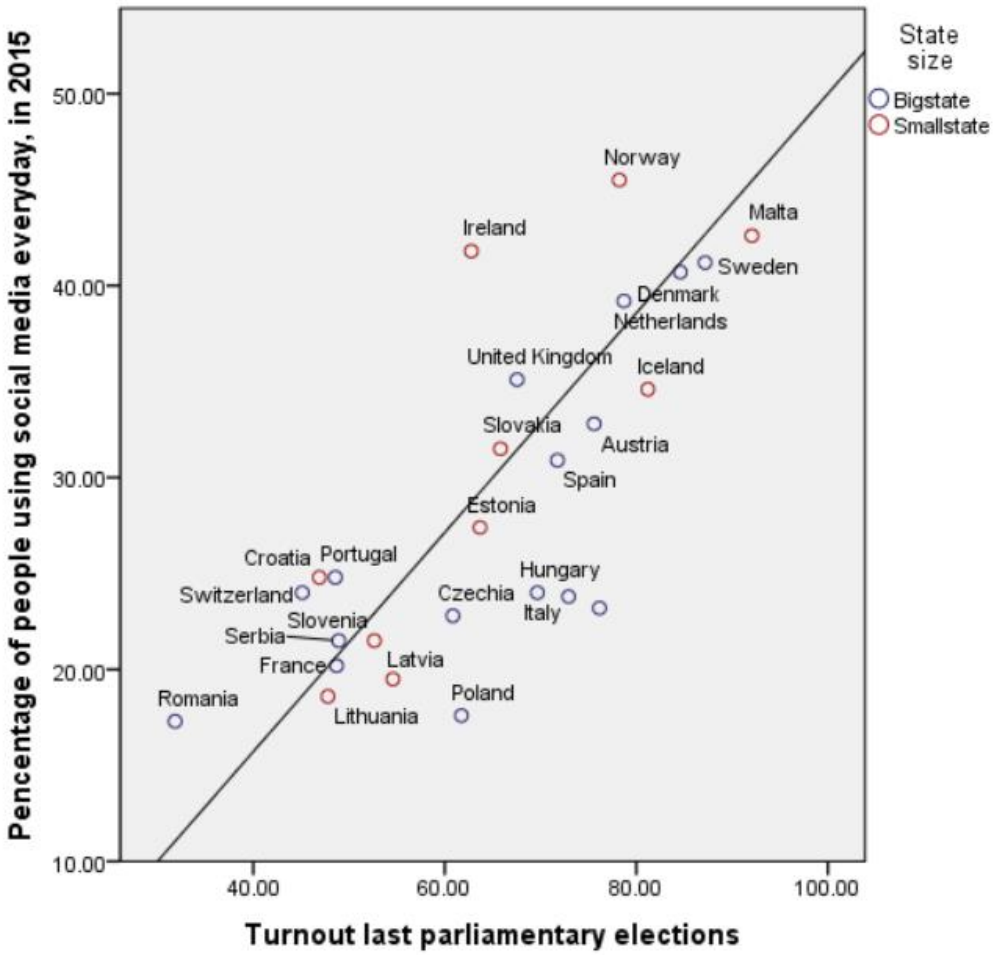

Figure 1: Turnout at last parliamentary elections according to social media use

The scatter plot presented above shows which cases are on the regression line. Blue cases represent states with a population of over 5.5 million inhabitants, and red cases represent what is classified in this study as small states. One of the cases that are closest to the line is Estonia. Considering the country's history as a pioneer in successful e-governance (Kitsing, 2011, p. 1), it seems like a very interesting case to study. Thus, the qualitative analysis is made on Estonia. Estonia has a population of 1.324 million in 2019. The percentage of people using social media every day in Estonia in 2015 is 27.4%. The only data available was from 2015. The turnout at the last parliamentary elections in 2019 was 63.67%. The country does not have a compulsory voting system. Internet access is quite high as well as 90% of the population has access to the internet (See Appendix C). Turnout as well as social media use are not particularly

high or low, which grants the case of Estonia a great representativeness for the study. The aim of this case study is to discover through what mechanisms social media use helps motivate political participation in a small state.

Estonia is a very relevant case to study when discussing technological developments. The country managed to build an "ecosystem where 99% of governmental services are online" (e-estonia, 2021). This means that certain services in the country allow for electronic democratic participation (Kitsing, 2011, p. 12). Following the rational choice theory, this significantly reduces participation costs as it removes costs such as going to the polling stations. Considering the online nature of governmental services, social media seems to be a relevant actor to study. If voting can happen online, it makes sense to conclude that most of the information also happens online.

The country is also interesting from a historical perspective as it was one of the ex-socialist countries of Europe (Kitsing, 2011, p. 1). The relatively recent collapse of the communist states resulted in a shorter time span of political development and legacy of mass mobilisation in post-communist countries (Van Biezen et al., 2011, p. 31). Estonia is included in the small number of states that had a successful transition to democracy (Bennich-Björkman, 2007, p. 316). Regardless of its communist history since its independence in 1991 (Bennich-Björkman, 2007, p. 318) Estonia managed to develop its e-governance better than other countries with similar backgrounds (Kitsing, 2011, p. 3). A key component to the successful transition lies in the technological changes and development of Estonia as a leading e-state (Allaste & Saari, 2020, p. 142).

6.3 Case study: Social media use in Estonia

Studies conducted in Estonia regarding political participation in the country showed that online and offline participation can be interrelated (Allaste & Saari, 2020, p. 142). This leads to taking into consideration further indicators of political participation than just turnout rates. In this study, party membership as well as online petition signing, will be examined. According to the interview that was conducted with the advisor to the Estonian embassy in the Netherlands Reincke (2021), offline ways of getting informed and campaigning are still very important (p. 7). Nevertheless, she also affirms that a lot of political information is disseminated online, through web pages, parties' social media (both personal candidates and party accounts). These platforms provide a great deal of information for voters and thus, help reduce information costs. (Reincke, 2021, p. 7). Through the rational theory lens, the reduction of both time and information costs are relevant predictors of participation in Estonia.

A measure of the role social media plays in informing the public in Estonia is in the regularity of the mention of social media accounts. Social media is often mentioned at the bottom of websites and official pages in order for users to be redirected to social media accounts. This is also perceived in various other countries and explains the role of social media in today's political life. For instance, E-estonia represents the innovation hub and executive centre that helped design the e-state of mind (e-estonia, 2021). This centre helps guide and direct companies, countries and people towards digitalisation. At the bottom of the website, the Facebook and Twitter icons are present. Once again pointing towards the importance of social media as information but also as a contact source. The same can be noticed when looking at the official website of the Estonian government, the bottom of the page presents the Twitter and Facebook accounts for the government (Vabariigi Valitsuse, 2021). This is not specific to the case of Estonia and can be generalized to other countries.

In Estonia, the three main social media platforms used to inform and get informed about politics are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Reincke, 2021, p. 3). Twitter and Facebook are platforms on which various members of government are present. When looking at Twitter accounts, the president of Estonia is quite active on social media and posts on a regular basis (Kaljulaid, 2021). The prime minister, as well as the minister of foreign affairs all have Twitter accounts that are often reposted by the official government Twitter account. Even the police have a Twitter account in Estonia (Politsei, 2021). YouTube on the other hand is used to stream press conferences for instance (Reincke, 2021, p. 3). YouTube provides less of a platform to start discussions but rather one to inform through videos. These indicators are also not specific to Estonia but provide indicators to the importance of social media as an information tool.

Another measure of what role social media plays in Estonian politics can be a Google search. For instance, when searching for the current president of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid, the second link that comes up is her Twitter account after the Wikipedia page dedicated to her. This points to the fact that when looking for information about politics social media is the second source after Wikipedia. Additionally, there are official social media accounts for the government of Estonia as well. The Estonian government even has a Twitter account in English (Estonian Government, 2021). This is partly for the Estonian communities that do not speak fluent Estonian, but also for overall international exposure (Reincke, 2021, p. 4). According to the advisor to the Estonian embassy in the Netherlands, the fact that the government members are so active on these platforms helps reduce information costs for voters (Reincke, 2021, p. 3).

6.4 Relating the theoretical framework to the case of Estonia

In Estonia, the small size of the country results in close relationships between citizens. These close relationships extend to the political realm between citizens and politicians. The chains of acquaintances are very short and talking to people of higher hierarchy is quite easy (Reincke, 2021, p. 6). Leaders are in contact with the population, and it is easier for citizens to talk to political figures or arrange meetings with them through common acquaintances (Reincke, 2021, p. 6). This relates to the stability of democracy as a result of personalistic relationships between leaders and voters (Veenendaal, 2018, p. 398).

"The fact that you can get to talk to maybe political leaders more easily, and you have the chance of seeing people more often, [...] you probably know something who knows someone and then can arrange a meeting which is not that probable in other countries" (Reincke, 2021, p. 6)

These close relationships create a feeling of deeper involvement in politics and also lead to increased political participation (Veenendaal, 2018, p. 398). Perhaps this can explain party membership ratios. Although they have been decreasing substantially in most post-communist countries, Estonia appears to be an exception to the pattern (Van Biezen et al., 2011, p. 31). However, according to Reincke (2021), it is the only component that is particular to smallness, close relationships with leaders. Besides that, she sees that other factors resemble other states (p. 6).

Social media platforms make this communication easier. As is the case in various developed countries, in Estonia, various governmental institutions and political leaders are present on these platforms. Analysing the Estonian community through the three indicators presented by Eveland & Hively (2009) is a helpful way to further understand the correlation between social media use and political participation. First, the frequency of social media use explains turnout rates. In Estonia, social media culture is very common, and it is easier for citizens to interact online and initiate political discussions online (Reincke, 2021).

"I don't know, this is not really based on research or something. But, but maybe Estonians don't like to communicate very actively, they are quite still and not talking very much. So maybe it's easier to write. And just to engage in discussions online." (Reincke, 2021, pp. 3-4)

This means that the frequency of online discussions is quite high, at least relatively to offline discussions. The Estonian culture seems to be the explanation for why people rather interact online (Reincke, 2021, pp. 3-4). For example, the online magazine Estonian World, has its own Facebook page (Estonian World, 2021). On this page, news is posted, and people express their opinions and views in the comment sections. The magazine labels itself as "the most popular English-language Estonian web magazine" (Estonian World, 2021). On the Facebook page, comments are present, but people tend to share or like the posts more. This means that the discussion is present, but it can be noticed that it is often topic based (Reincke, 2021, p. 7).

This also explains the platforms made available by the government for Estonians to politically participate from home, online. The Estonian government provides a platform to sign online petitions called "rahvaalgatus" (rahvaalgatus.ee, 2021). This platform provides an easier way to politically participate online. The platform provides different petitions for different topics and shows how many people signed each petition. Signing petitions is a form of political activism, and these platforms allow citizens to choose which subjects they take interest in and allows them to express opinions (Allaste & Saari, 2020, p. 146).

The second indicator is network size. Estonia, like other small states, has a very close community where most people have friends in common (Reincke, 2021, p. 6). However, network size seems to be constrained as people tend to stay in their bubbles. Indeed, as Reincke explains, even if Estonia is a small country, people's network tends to be limited to a specific bubble of acquaintances that does not change over time (Reincke, 2021, p. 5). A partial explanation to the polarization can be found in the large Russian speaking communities in Estonia; 29.6% of the Estonian population have Russian as their mother tongue (Jõesaar, 2015, p.45). These communities follow different news channels in Russian with different views compared to local channels (Jõesaar, 2015, p.48). Thus, this indicator does not apply to the Estonian case study as network size is limited and stays the same over time.

This limited circle is often based on political opinions which according to Reincke (2021) leads to polarized opinions (p. 5). This leads to the third indicator which is network heterogeneity. As the bubbles are constrained to the same people, the information shared in these networks is mostly the same.

"But people are getting more polarized, and then they're more stuck in their own bubble and just get the information that they always see and that everybody agrees with them,

or they see the channels, rather, they have the information that they like and agree with." (Reincke, 2021, p. 5).

Thus, social media networks in Estonia lack heterogeneity. The Russian speaking communities follow news in Russian while the Estonian speaking communities follow news in Estonian. This leads to two spheres of information with significantly different and polarized information fields (Jõesaar, 2015, p.48). Therefore, opinions are polarized in different bubbles and citizens hold conversions within their own bubble. When discussing matters in their communities they often find that everyone in the discussions agrees and shares the same views (Reincke, 2021, p. 5). According to Eveland & Hively (2009), a lack of heterogeneity in online discussions leads to higher participation rates. This last indicator thus applies to the case of Estonia as opinions are polarized and is a further explanation of social media usage increasing turnout.

To summarize the findings, Estonia does not pertain to particularly high or low turnout rates, which is why it is a relevant representative case to study. Through the interview and the theories, many explanations help understand what motivates Estonian citizens to vote. The social mechanisms are sometimes particular to the small size of the country and provide relevant support for the hypotheses *H1* and *H3*. In Estonia, social media seems to be a relevant predictor of turnout rates, however, the correlation appears to be similar to bigger states. Even is social mechanism might differ it appears that the correlation is not stronger in bigger states.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis analysed social media usage and political participation in small states. Small states are shown to have stronger and more stable democracies. Moreover, political participation in these states is shown to be higher. Many theories help understand this interaction. Rational choice theory, as well as Eveland & Hively's (2009) three indicators, are helpful in defining the nature of the correlation and understanding how political participation works and what factors motivate political participation. This thesis provides an application of these theories to a group of European states and then to the state of Estonia. It adds to the literature on political participation in small states, but also to the literature on social media use by looking at small states specifically.

The conclusion that this thesis leads to is that more frequent use of social media does result in higher turnout rates in small states. The analytical part of this thesis helped answer the research question, and the nested analysis provided general conclusions as well as more precise

ones. First, through the statistical analysis that provided statistically significant results of a correlation between frequency of social media use and turnout rates, the hypotheses *H1* and *H3* are supported. Second, through the analysis of the case study of Estonia, more specific conclusions are drawn, further supporting both hypotheses. In the case of Estonia, social media greatly reduces information costs for the population.

Future research on the topic is much needed, especially on the group of small states. A deeper analysis of cultural values and how they lead to different uses for social media would fill some gaps in the literature. Social media culture is different in every country and case studies of different small states might lead to various conclusions. Future research could further investigate whether small communities in general share a specific social media culture that is particular to the small population size and that predicts voter behaviour.

The findings of this thesis helped further expand the scope of research regarding small states. However, as the countries studied in this analysis are all located in the same region generalizability might not be possible. Perhaps it can be generalized to countries with similar socio-economic contexts as well as similar levels of democracy. The use of social media is not as liberal in autocracies and political participation is very limited or even non-existent. Nevertheless, as it was seen during the Arab Spring in 2011 that social media can sometimes emerge as a tool for democratization. Further studies can build on how social media offers an alternative way for expressing opinion in authoritarian states.

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Appendix A: SPSS Output of regression analysis

Regression 1: Linear regression model of turnout at last national elections

Syntax for case selection:

```
DATASET ACTIVATE DataSet1.
USE ALL.
COMPUTE filter_$=(Compulsory = 0).
VARIABLE LABELS filter_$ 'Compulsory = 0 (FILTER)'.
VALUE LABELS filter_$ 0 'Not Selected' 1 'Selected'.
FORMATS filter_$ (f1.0).
FILTER BY filter_$.
EXECUTE.
```

Syntax for regression:

```
REGRESSION
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA COLLIN TOL
  /CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
  /NOORIGIN
```

```
/DEPENDENT Turnout
/METHOD=ENTER Everyday
/METHOD=ENTER Land Internetaccess Everyday GDP Pop
/PARTIALPLOT ALL
/SCATTERPLOT=(*ZRESID ,*ZPRED)
/RESIDUALS DURBIN NORMPROB(ZRESID)
/CASEWISE PLOT(ZRESID) OUTLIERS(3).
```

Model Summary[c]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.761[a]	.579	.562	10.08864	
2	.854[b]	.730	.662	8.86093	2.375

a. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015

b. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015, thousand of sqkm, Pop, Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74), Real GDP per capita in 2019

c. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3364.912	1	3364.912	33.060	.000[b]
	Residual	2442.735	24	101.781		
	Total	5807.647	25			
2	Regression	4237.327	5	847.465	10.794	.000[c]
	Residual	1570.320	20	78.516		
	Total	5807.647	25			

a. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

b. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015

c. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015, thousand of sqkm, Pop, Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74), Real GDP per capita in 2019

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	26.648	6.865		3.882	.001		
	Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015	1.316	.229	.761	5.750	.000	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	-60.979	42.976		-1.419	.171		
	Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015	1.592	.288	.921	5.529	.000	.487	2.052
	Real GDP per capita in 2019	.000	.000	-.483	-2.209	.039	.283	3.537
	thousand of sqkm	-.003	.014	-.032	-.217	.831	.636	1.573
	Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74)	1.001	.542	.385	1.847	.080	.310	3.223
	Pop	.132	.079	.251	1.673	.110	.602	1.662

a. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

Regression 2: Linear regression model of turnout at last national elections in small states

Syntax for case selection:

```
USE ALL.
COMPUTE filter_$=(Compulsory = 0 & Pop <= 5.5).
VARIABLE LABELS filter_$ 'Compulsory = 0 & Pop <= 5.5 (FILTER)'.
VALUE LABELS filter_$ 0 'Not Selected' 1 'Selected'.
FORMATS filter_$ (f1.0).
FILTER BY filter_$.
EXECUTE.
```

Syntax for regression:

```
REGRESSION
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA COLLIN TOL
  /CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
  /NOORIGIN
  /DEPENDENT Turnout
  /METHOD=ENTER Everyday
  /METHOD=ENTER Land Internetaccess Everyday GDP Pop
  /PARTIALPLOT ALL
```

/SCATTERPLOT=(*ZRESID ,*ZPRED)

/RESIDUALS DURBIN NORMPROB(ZRESID)

/CASEWISE PLOT(ZRESID) OUTLIERS(3).

Model Summary[c]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.812[a]	.659	.617	9.36341	
2	.972[b]	.944	.874	5.36651	2.062

a. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015

b. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015, Pop, thousand of sqkm, Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74), Real GDP per capita in 2019

c. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1358.367	1	1358.367	15.493	.004[b]
	Residual	701.387	8	87.673		
	Total	2059.754	9			
2	Regression	1944.556	5	388.911	13.504	.013[c]
	Residual	115.198	4	28.799		
	Total	2059.754	9			

a. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

b. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015

c. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015, Pop, thousand of sqkm, Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74), Real GDP per capita in 2019

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	26.789	10.043		2.667	.028		
	Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015	1.227	.312	.812	3.936	.004	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	-26.284	73.001		-.360	.737		
	Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015	1.813	.305	1.200	5.951	.004	.344	2.905
	Real GDP per capita in 2019	-.001	.000	-.711	-1.743	.156	.084	11.915
	thousand of sqkm	.031	.031	.213	1.021	.365	.322	3.109
	Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74)	.617	.835	.253	.739	.501	.119	8.410
	Pop	-2.561	1.852	-.334	-1.383	.239	.239	4.177

a. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

Appendix B : Assumptions checks for regression analysis

Regression 1: Linear regression model of turnout at last national elections

Multicollinearity:

There is no concern for multicollinearity in the regression as the collinearity statistics VIF values are under 5, and tolerance values are above 0.1.

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	26.648	6.865		3.882	.001		
	Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015	1.316	.229	.761	5.750	.000	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	-60.979	42.976		-1.419	.171		
	Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015	1.592	.288	.921	5.529	.000	.487	2.052
	Real GDP per capita in 2019	.000	.000	-.483	-2.209	.039	.283	3.537
	thousand of sqkm	-.003	.014	-.032	-.217	.831	.636	1.573
	Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74)	1.001	.542	.385	1.847	.080	.310	3.223
	Pop	.132	.079	.251	1.673	.110	.602	1.662

a. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

Independent error:

Because the Durbin-Watson test results are not lower than 1 or higher than 3, there is no concern for independent error.

Model Summary[c]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.761[a]	.579	.562	10.08864	
2	.854[b]	.730	.662	8.86093	2.375

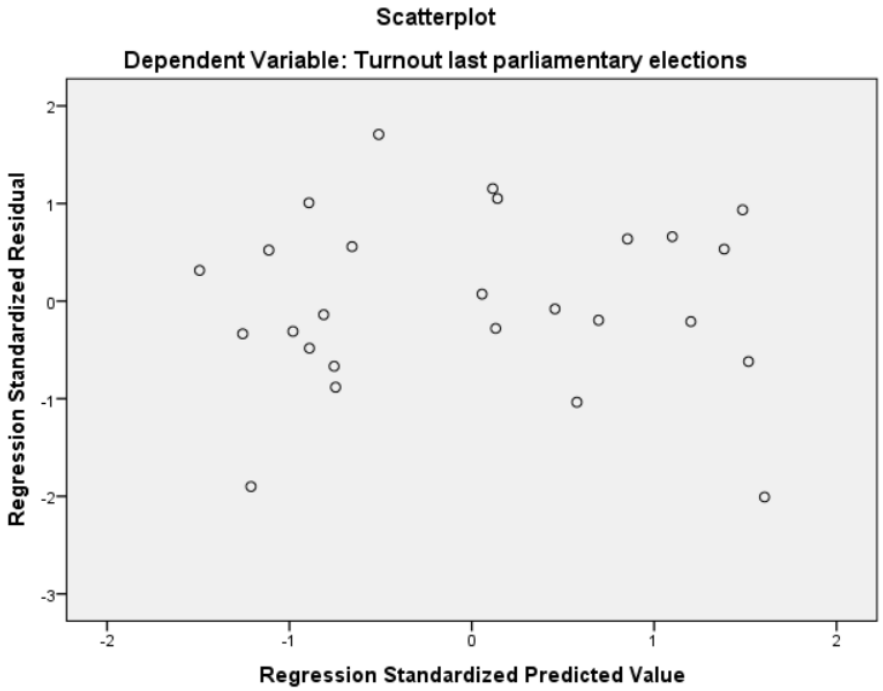
a. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015

b. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015, thousand of sqkm, Pop, Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74), Real GDP per capita in 2019

c. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

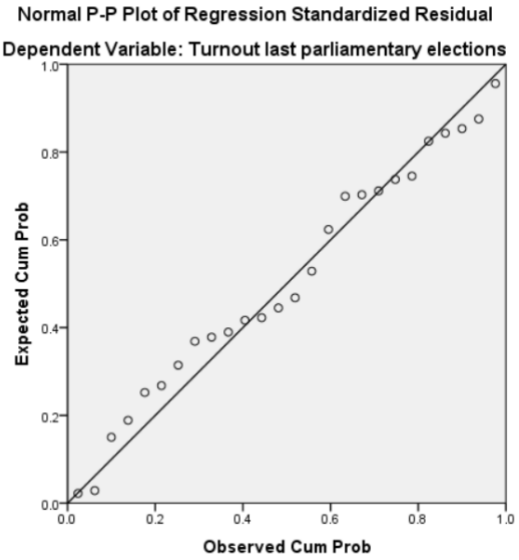
Heteroskedasticity and nonlinearity:

There is no concern for nonlinearity because values are randomly distributed on the scatterplot. Nor for heteroskedasticity because there is no apparent pattern.



Normality of errors

The normal probability plot shows values that are along the line, so there seems to be no concern for the normality of errors.



Outliers and Influential cases:

No outliers or influential cases that had two standard deviations or more distance from the mean were detected through the casewise diagnostics.

Regression 2: Linear regression model of turnout at last national elections in small states

Multicollinearity:

There is a significant concern for multicollinearity in the linear regression because the highest collinearity statistics VIF value is above 10, and the tolerance statistics present values under 0.1.

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	26.789	10.043		2.667	.028		
	Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015	1.227	.312	.812	3.936	.004	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	-26.284	73.001		-.360	.737		
	Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015	1.813	.305	1.200	5.951	.004	.344	2.905
	Real GDP per capita in 2019	-.001	.000	-.711	-1.743	.156	.084	11.915
	thousand of sqkm	.031	.031	.213	1.021	.365	.322	3.109
	Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74)	.617	.835	.253	.739	.501	.119	8.410
	Pop	-2.561	1.852	-.334	-1.383	.239	.239	4.177

a. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

Independent error:

Because the Durbin-Watson test results are not lower than 1 or higher than 3, there is no concern for independent error.

Model Summary[c]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.812[a]	.659	.617	9.36341	
2	.972[b]	.944	.874	5.36651	2.062

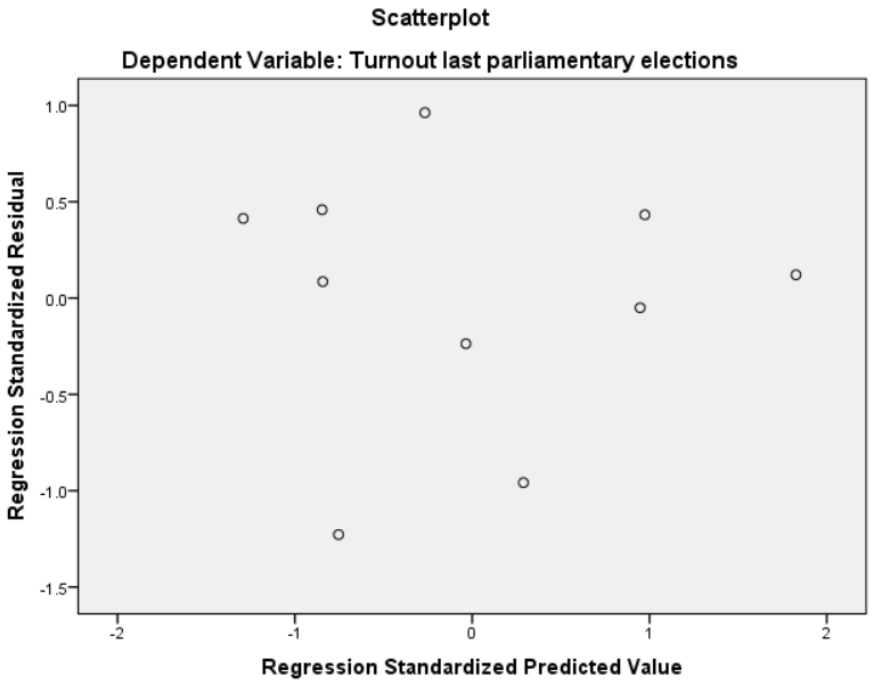
a. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015

b. Predictors: (Constant), Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015, Pop, thousand of sqkm, Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74), Real GDP per capita in 2019

c. Dependent Variable: Turnout last parliamentary elections

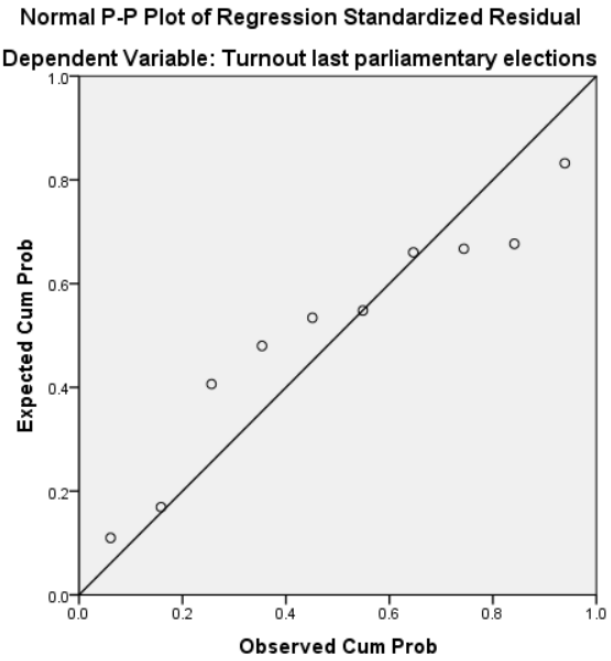
Heteroskedasticity and nonlinearity:

There is no concern for nonlinearity because values are randomly distributed on the scatterplot. Nor for heteroskedasticity because there is no apparent pattern.



Normality of errors:

The normal probability plot shows values that are along the line, so there seems to be no concern for the normality of errors.



Outliers and Influential cases:

No outliers or influential cases that had two standard deviations or more distance from the mean were detected through the casewise diagnostics.

Appendix C: Case summaries

Case summaries

Case Summaries[a]

	Country name	Pencentage of people using social media everyday, in 2015	Percentage of households who have internet access at home in 2019 (population aged 16 to 74)	thousand of sqkm	Real GDP per capita in 2019	Pop
1	Finland	35.50	94.00	303.90	37230.00	5.50
2	Slovakia	31.50	82.00	48.00	15860.00	5.50
3	Norway	45.50	98.00	365.10	69560.00	5.40
4	Ireland	41.80	91.00	68.90	60170.00	5.00
5	Croatia	24.80	81.00	56.60	12450.00	4.10
6	Lithuania	18.60	82.00	62.60	14010.00	2.80
7	Slovenia	21.50	89.00	20.10	20700.00	2.10
8	Latvia	19.50	85.00	62.00	12510.00	1.90
9	Estonia	27.40	90.00	43.50	15760.00	1.30
10	Malta	42.60	86.00	.30	21960.00	.50
11	Iceland	34.60	98.00	100.80	39150.00	.40
Total N	11	11	11	11	11	11

a. Limited to first 100 cases.

Appendix D: Interview transcript of adviser to the Estonian embassy

Interview transcript with Eve Reincke

Name of the interviewee: Eve Reincke

Position of the interviewee: Advisor to the embassy

Name of the interviewer: Zeineb Ayari

Date of the interview: 7 May 2021,

Nature and length of the interview 30 min, Zoom meeting,

Location of interviewee: The Hague, Netherlands

Location of interviewer: The Hague, Netherlands

Both interviewee and interviwer consented to the conduction and recording of the interview for the purpose of this bachelor thesis.

Interviewer: So, first of all, would you like to be anonymized or not? In the interview do you mind if I put your name in my paper?

Eve Reincke: Oh, yes, you might put my name. Oh, yes, sure.

Interviewer: Thank you very much. So maybe we can start with an introduction. So like, your name and your position, etc.

Eve Reincke: Yes. So I am Eve Reincke, working at the Estonian embassy, as an adviser to the ambassador, but actually to the entire embassy. And I work on different sectors actually. So this work is quite broad, from politics to press and media relations, and culture, and business diplomacy. And basically the only thing I'm not working on, it's the consular stuff.

Interviewer: Okay, well, that's perfect, because my thesis, as you saw already is about media and social media use and how that can promote political participation. So yeah, we'll start by introducing again, really quickly. So I'm doing this study on small states. And I'm trying to see how social media use impacts political participation? These are studies that have been made before, but rarely, in smaller states. So I think that social media use in small states also promotes political participation. At least that's what I'm trying to investigate in my thesis. I decided to do a case study on Estonia and the interview will be a big part of this qualitative analysis. So thank you very much. Um, so the first question I had for you is that, so we consider that Estonia is a pioneer state in e-government. So it's incredibly developed, it's one of the first states to have such a huge amount of government services online. And political participation can happen online, which is very different for other states, and very innovative and great. So considering everything is online, do online platforms, such as social media play an important role in political life for the citizens of Estonia?

Eve Reincke: Yes, I think the answer is yes, it does. And there are, of course, there are different opportunities because there are some official platforms for participating. I don't know, if you're interested in the links, I could send you afterwards a couple of links. I think one of these is also in English. And this is quite interesting. Now, because you can, just a second [...] Because there is one official page. And that's quite good, I think because you can see different people can start different like petitions, but also, if they have some kind of issue that they want to have discussed, or they think that there should be some, some change in

some kind of legal action. So this is where they can actually work with their ideas and also gather signatures. So this is, this is quite interesting. So you can see the topics and what the issues are. And then you can also see how many signatures they have at this point. So this is quite interesting to see. Because, of course, all the topics themselves are in Estonian, but some of the information is in English. And we can see, for example, how many signatures or what you can do exactly, I'll send you this link, afterwards,

Interviewer: That would be very helpful.

Eve Reincke: Yes. And then there are also for example, official pages for different drafts, for example, legal drafts for public consultation, but this is of course no social media, like a more official site. So it's not really that you could think you have to be more interested and you have to just engage in some extra effort to come there because in social media, sometimes you know the information comes to you more easily but this is something that you should search yourself.

Interviewer: So is social media used by the government to reach citizens? So you mentioned the links. So I'm guessing that's a government action that they put into place so that people can express their opinion and participate? And if yes, to what extent is this government reach to inform the public and reduce their information costs when it comes to political participation?

Eve Reincke: It is it certainly is. Because, you also said it yourself that you came across the Twitter account of the government, but also, of course, the Prime Minister-president, they all use Twitter, but also Facebook. I think Instagram is not really used for political issues. YouTube is actually also one of the official channels of the Estonian government, but they usually use it I think, for example, for streaming press conferences, and, and things like that. So we could also mention YouTube. And of course, it does reduce the costs, but something that is forgotten. This was also among the questions that you had, is that what it actually means in the long run? Because of course, because of social media, there's also much more confusion and do you have one account, but there are a lot of others and just to you have also had to deal with misleading information and even deep fakes as having heard lately. So this is, of course, also increasing. So at some point, or still, even though we have the social media options, we still need the personal contact and really going to places which are of course, now

very difficult, because COVID is not really happening. But still, this personal contact with people is, of course, also very important and traditional media still as well. Of course, it's more, it's much easier to announce things or to start a discussion on social media than traditional media, but it's still very important.

Interviewer: Okay. And so if we look at again, how digitalized Estonian society is and Estonian governmental structures are, how important would you say social media is in Estonian culture? So is it a thing, do all ages, age ranges? use social media? Is everyone on social media? Because as I said, I saw that the President is on the Foreign Affairs Minister, everyone is on social media, even the police have a social media account I saw on Twitter. And that's very interesting. So I was wondering, in the culture of Estonian society, how common is it to use social media?

Eve Reincke: It is very common, I think, I think really everybody's doing it also in the business world and I guess there for their actions, Instagram, is maybe even more important lately. But for, for government institutions, and I think Twitter and Facebook, are the most important ones and YouTube. And I think, really the different age groups to use even. I mean, yes, really, there are just different youngsters use more Instagram and middle-aged and older people, more Facebook, lately. So yes, I think it's quite common, maybe, maybe, I don't know, this is not really based on research or something. But, but maybe Estonians don't like to communicate very actively, they are quite still and not talking very much. So maybe it's easier to write. And just to engage in discussions online.

Interviewer: So it's easier for them to start political discussions and get informed online than to actually go out and have discussions with people.

Eve Reincke: Yes, I think so. I think so. But there's also, of course, something that this counter side that it's maybe it's more difficult to see what actually happens to your ideas and whether it's maybe like a different world like this online world and the real world so there could be this perception that so I read some, some research that was done about youngsters. And they said that this online world is something different from the real world. And so if we say some people participate online, it's very difficult to see whether and how will this will lead to or what kind of impact it will have or what kind of concrete actions it will lead to this, this is something that should always be very clearly stated.

Interviewer: Okay, so, going back to the government, Twitter accounts, I saw that the government has an English Twitter account. And I was wondering if that is for citizens that do not speak Estonian because I know that there are some minorities that speak Russian, for example, in Estonia, or is it more for the international community and to reach like outside of Estonia when coming about government issues?

Eve Reincke: I think it's more for the international community. It also has the role, of course, of serving other minorities or non-Estonian speaking people in Estonia. But because, since you also know already and say that the population is quite small, it probably wouldn't make much sense to have different channels, or different accounts for let's say, in English, and then one for the International one for the local communities who don't speak Estonian. So this should serve both purposes, but I think it's working even better for engaging things or informing the international community.

Interviewer: I also saw that the English speaking account has more followers than the Estonian that's why I was asking the question. I was wondering how come because I was guessing it might be the minorities that don't speak Estonian in the country.

Eve Reincke: Yeah, yeah. It could be but not that massively, probably because this should be the people from other countries internationally.

Interviewer: Okay. So, some political science theories say that reduced information cost lead to higher political participation. I think we've already covered this more or less, but so yeah, do we think that social media is reducing inflammation costs for citizens in Estonia?

Eve Reincke: Yes, yes. But then this is the type of thought that I had that may be in the long run. But this is something that I'm just like, you know, thinking myself based on the latest development that we could have this extra cost, the burden of dealing with the consequences of misinformation, and deep fakes, and stuff like that?

Interviewer: And do you think there's a lot of fake news and misinformation that goes around and social media as well?

Eve Reincke: I think it's the same in the other countries, so so this is also one of the questions maybe I'm already coming to it. But it's really important that we also see these you know, how the social media works and how this algorithm, work that once you're in your own bubble, then you only get to see the information directly to this bubble. And so this is actually the same even it's a small country and as you said to know one another that that's true. But still, we see the same, like things going on, like in Europe, broadly, or in the United States, or in different countries in the world. But people are getting more polarized, and then they're more stuck in their own bubble and just get the information that they always see and that everybody agrees with them, or they see the channels, rather, they have the information that they like and agree with. So but this is also the point where I think that the traditional media maybe has to have this role and just to be less biased. So this is why the role is still important as well.

Interviewer: Okay. Yeah, I see. So yeah, this actually leads us to the next question, which is, Estonia is a small state, as people tend to have different interpersonal relations. And people know another, they have a set shared of values. To what extent does the smallness of the state play a role in how social media works in the country? So you already mentioned polarized opinions and things like that. But you also think that the close communities and the fact that people know one another makes it easier to discuss or do you think it doesn't really play a role?

Eve Reincke: So I think I, I would agree with this first part that people really know one another, the lines are really short and that you can easily talk to different people even higher in the hierarchy. But this doesn't really lead to a shared set of values. So that's the point that it's still, like in other countries that people have maybe different ideas and different opinions set of values and they tend to group themselves among the persons who think in the same way or have the same opinion.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think any other components might play in social media use because of the smallness of the country? Besides the polarization and the close relationship? You said with like, leaders, it's easier for people to reach out to like high, highly ranked people. Do you think anything else plays a role in how social media works? Because of the smallness of the country?

Eve Reincke: I think these are the main factors. I wouldn't even know what to add something really. Yes, I guess that these are the main factors but the main slogan being indeed that the in that sense, it still resembles the situation in other countries, it's not that different, even though it's small, just Indeed, the fact that you can get to talk to maybe political leaders more easily, and you have the chance of seeing people more often, and it's easier to come across once you really have an idea then you probably know something who knows someone and then can arrange a meeting which is not that probable in other countries.

Interviewer: So everybody has like friends in common with everyone. And everyone ends up knowing everyone in the country.

Eve Reincke: Yeah, it's a bit of course not all like 100%, but when you compare to other countries and try to make some generalizations then yes.

Interviewer: Okay, very interesting. So as voting can also happen online in Estonia, which is really intriguing to me, and very interesting. I'm very interested in how all of this e-governance works. I think it's amazing. Do you think political information about elections, so campaigning and campaign actions, also happens largely online? And through social media? Or is it still more like traditional media? Or people going out in the streets giving out flyers? Or not? Since the voting even happens online?

Eve Reincke: It's both it's still both. There is a lot of online, of course, I mean, from the web pages of, the parties to social media, like the personnel accounts or party accounts, there is a lot of information available, but But still, also the traditional methods are used. So yes, still, the politicians go around and open streets or, or where people gather at supermarkets, or shops or shopping centres. So this is actually happening parallelly, of course, everything. But this is not typical. Because now because of COVID there, almost nothing happened, of course, during the last year, but this is really, because of a very specific reason so that we can really make any conclusions based on that we should just state that this is was an extraordinary situation. But otherwise, yes, it's still working, I think both ways are just working on in real life and working online with your electorate.

Interviewer: Okay. Before, they used to be like traditional campaigning platforms, and now that they're social media as well, do you think that that increased, maybe people will go vote

because it made it easier for people to get informed about other things or people that weren't reached before by the campaigning?

Eve Reincke: It could be because but it's still it's interesting, for example, youth, I ran into a research paper, engaging youth in political participation, also about social media and online, and it was from 2018. So it could be the same, but of course, it's in Estonian, but it should be this sort of executive summary on something in English. So I'll see whether I can send this because it's also quite interesting. So it states that it looks like a very logical consequence for you that they are more politically active, but at least back then in 2018, they were still actually not that active politically because they did other things on social media. And then just maybe just in cases, they were much more interested for example in voluntary work and things like that but this also very much depends on the topic. Now, for example, the climate is of course a big issue for you all over the world. So when there are discussions about the climate they are of course much more prone to interact and if we have something about pensions or things like that, so I guess it's very much topic based and at least two years ago, based on some research papers, you couldn't really say that that the youth first you know like very active and always having it say, they participated quite modestly because they use social media for other just to interact with friends or for just checking some videos or movies or things like that. But there was one difference and this was voluntary work and relate this topic-based approach that once I think that this is you know, like the most important thing the welfare of animals or environment or things like that, then they were willing to have a say.

Interviewer: Okay, okay. And so considering the answer you just gave me about how youth is not as maybe active on social media. Do you think that the age groups of people that are more active politically on social media? Are older people, like you said on Facebook and Twitter and youth use more Instagram to share and like talk to friends or something? But getting informed, is it also mostly older people are also youth like when, for example, government actions are made up to inform the population? Do they focus more on youth? Do they focus more on older age groups? Or is it also topic-based?

Eve Reincke: Yes, I think it's topic-based because all age groups are actually involved. And there are different activities or, or different ways, of course, reaching out, but none of the age groups is really excluded. So it's meant for everyone, but based on the exact topic or maybe the exact activity, that could be different differences. So this is topic-based to put it shortly.

Interviewer: Okay. I think I had one more question. And it is that I found online, the E-Estonia website. And I was wondering what exactly that was, I saw that it's a platform that guides people towards digitalization, but I didn't get it that much. I wanted to ask you if you know more about this.

Eve Reincke: Yes, there are really different e-services that you can use and the E-Estonia is this is like sort of an umbrella term for all these e-services. For example, also for E-governance. And trying to promote this what has already been done in Estonia and to share this information knowledge and experience with other countries. I think the things that is most used is this electronic signature, which is of course, also important for voting online. This is what you use, you have these different opportunities from a sort of ID card code, but it could also be on your mobile. So this is one of the examples, e-signature now but also it gets more technical about how the system is built up exactly. And how let's say different databases, interact from E-health and go into a doctor to buying a house or getting married or getting divorced, or things like that. So how will these registers interact with each other? This is one of the things but of course, also, all the different based on the sector, the different counterparts that are on also for education, for example, their special system and, and things like that. And then there's also one initiative called e-residency, that Estonia promotes that foreign people could become an E-resident of Estonia. And this basically means that they can use the E-services that are offered by the Estonian states and they don't have to live. Most of them don't live in Estonia, but then they can still use the services and they can, for example, set up a company. So mostly, I think this E-residency is used by business people.

Interviewer: Is it like like have a kind of nationality, but online?

Eve Reincke: Yes, maybe it's something like that, but it doesn't give you the rights that the nationality would give. So you can't it's not a travel document you can't really travel without there's not a visa or it's not something like that. But you can identify yourself online, for example, banking, or signing a document.

Interviewer: Okay, through like E-Estonia platforms, right?

Eve Reincke: Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: That's very interesting. Okay. Yeah. Also, the last thing I want to say is that I saw that most like official websites or like government website, E-Estonia, things like that. All of them at the bottom. There's always the Twitter and Facebook, little icons. So I think we can I mean, agree that social media is a big part of political life nowadays, I think for everyone because most official websites even in other countries. But yeah, I think what would you think about that the fact that there are links to Twitter and Facebook accounts for almost every government website, every Political persona everyone.

Eve Reincke: Yes, Yes, I think so. Yes, I agree.

Interviewer: Okay. I think that was all questions I had. I don't know if you want to add anything to what we discussed.

Eve Reincke: Just that, I'll send you a couple of links.

Interviewer: Thank you. That's very nice. Um, that would be very helpful. And, yeah, thank you very much for accepting to do this interview with me. And that would be very helpful. And I think Estonia is amazing. Honestly, I come from Tunisia. So in my country, everything is still on paper to get like passports done anything done is on paper. So I really think it’s amazing that in Estonia, everything is online. Everything is digitalized. And it's a really interesting country to study for these kinds of topics. So once again, thank you.

Eve Reincke: Yes, you're welcome. You're welcome. And good luck with your thesis, of course, it’s a lot of work I can imagine. This thing once it's finished and you have something you can of course, always send it. It would be interesting to read some kind of summary or will it be in English

Interviewer: Yes in English, If you want, I can send it once it's over.

Eve Reincke: Certainly.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you very much, and have a nice day. Bye-bye.

Eve Reincke: Yeah, you too. Bye.