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CONSISTENT CHOICE AT THE BALLOT BOX: PERCEPTIONS THAT MATTER IN LATVIA AND ESTONIA

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Abstract

Distribution of parties along the left-right continuum historically has been the issue of coalition stability, governmental accountability and even stability of political system. Left-right spectrum is widely used in comparative research as a guide between voters and politicians making easier to understand political preferences.

The focus of this study is to test 1) whether the left-right continuum is evident and meaningful in Latvia and Estonia 2) whether voters have fairly accurate perceptions of parties' left-right positions in Latvia and Estonia and whether they vote according to their self-placement on left-right scale, 3) whether voter's self-placement can be explained by individual socioeconomic (income, education, position in work place) status or ethnolinguistic belonging (ethnic group, conversation language at home, conversation language in childhood, ethnic belonging of mother and father). Data on basis of voter analysis was obtained from EU Commission Funded FP6 EUREQUAL project (PI Professor Stephen Whitefield, University of Oxford), "Social Inequality and Why it Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and its Citizens: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective" Data on party each placement is gathered by the authors.

Results show that voters have fairly accurate perceptions of the left-right position of parties or at least the position where party representatives place each party, supposing that voters chose the closest party to one's self orientation at the ballot box. Nevertheless the determinants of self-placement are not very clear as only in Latvia education, personal income and position at work influence the self-placement of the respondents while no coherence of social economic status was observed in Estonia. Also influence of ethnolingustic factors was observed neither in Latvia, nor Estonia, though both nations are considered as one of the ethnically most divided societies in Europe.

Keywords: elections, left-right continuum, ethno-linguistic belonging, socio-economic factors.

Introduction

Topicality of electoral behaviour research in post-Soviet countries is rather new – it emerged with the restitution of countries' independence, but in the international research it dates back to accession to European Union (European Election Studies (2004), Euromanifestos (2004), European Social Surveys (starting from 2004)). So far research, especially with applied quantitative methods in examination of electoral behaviour in Latvia and Estonia, was impeded by lack of data for the whole period in general or mutually incomparable data due to the statistic methods in each country or due to outdated data (World Value Surveys (1990, 1996, 1999). Taking into consideration all the aforesaid, the **scientific problem** of the article is whether the left-right continuum is evident in Latvia and Estonia - whether theoretical assumptions correspond to the behaviour of the voters in practice, is it a meaningful tool in the research of electoral behaviour of voters in Latvia and Estonia – does the opinion of voters and parties regarding their placement on left-right continuum match and do the voters vote for corresponding or closest party if compared to their self-placement on continuum. The **novelty** of the research refers to analysis of coherence between left-right placement of voters in Latvia and Estonia (mass survey data) and data on parties' self-placement and evaluation of the placement of other parties in Parliament elected in 2006 in Latvia and 2007 in Estonia.

The **object of research** is the perceptions of voters and parties about their placement on left-right continuum in elections. **The aim** of the article is to highlight the left-right continuum as meaningful tool in the research of electoral behaviour and to ascertain main factors influencing voter self-placement on the left-right continuum in Latvia and Estonia. Meaning of placement of political attitudes on left-right continuum will not be discussed in the research and left-right continuum is used without specifying whether it is accepted in the country as classificatory of classically conservative liberal ideology or role of the state in economics,

whether it shows the issues of social and economical inequality in the society or important social and cultural issues for residents and political elite. To achieve the aim three **tasks** are to be solved: (1) to build an appropriate theoretical framework highlighting importance of left-right continuum in elections as well as identifying factors influencing formation or change of left-right self-placement (2) to apply appropriate set of data and methodological approach; (3) to test a) whether voters have fairly accurate perceptions of parties' left-right placement in Latvia and Estonia and whether they vote according to their self-placement on left-right scale, b) whether voter's self-placement can be explained by the individual socioeconomic status (income, education, work place position) or ethnolinguistic belonging (ethnic group, conversation language at home, conversation language in childhood, ethnic belonging of mother and father).

Correlation (Pearson correlation coefficient) and multivariate linear regression analysis applied to Data from the EU Commission Funded FP6 EUREQUAL project (PI Professor Stephen Whitefield, University of Oxford), "Social Inequality and Why it Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and its Citizens: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective" and data on parties self-placement and a placement of each party by other parliamentary parties elected in 2006 in Latvia and 2007 in Estonia gathered by the authors will be used as the **research method**.

Theoretical framework

In examining the ideological continuum within the context of parties' competition in elections, Downs (1957) developed a spatial modelling concept which assumes that voters in general tend to choose a party in elections which corresponds (or lies closest) to their self-placement in the left-right continuum. A series of other researchers in their works point at this connection regardless of the different explanations on meaning of left-right scale (Lipset,1960; Converse, 1964; Klingemann, 1972; Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976; Conover & Feldman, 1981; Laponce, 1981; Fuchs & Klingemann, 1989; Knutsen, 1999; Inglehart, 1985; Van der Eijk, 2001; Kroh, 2003; McCarty & Poole & Rosenthal, 2003; Tadosijevic, 2004; Anduiza – Perea, 2006; Dalton, 2008; Haupt, 2010; etc.). Laponce (1981) entitled it "political Esperanto" – a language allowing parties and voters to understand each other and serving as a communication code among representatives of parties, mass media and residents (Freire, 2008). Its meaning and social basis can change over time (Inglehart, 1985). However, other researchers believe that along with putting forward a thesis of "end of ideology" (Bell, 1960) the left-right placement today has lost its meaning or has become insignificant (Lipset,1981; Baudrilliard, 1981; Giddens, 1994; Mair, 1998; Żiżek, 2002; Michnik, 2008; etc). Also our previous researches on electorate behaviour in Latvia and Estonia (Vikmane & Kreituse, 2009) does not confirm empirically the theoretical notions of electorate's behaviour developed in Western Europe and USA and mainly based on data and practice of consolidated democratic Western European countries. Topicality of mismatch is indicated also in the international scientific conference "Global Theory, Local Practice" organized in Tallinn (Estonia) University in 2010, and bringing together PhD students from all areas of social sciences and the humanities in Baltics who have experienced methodological mismatch problems in their research - where the traditional theories of their discipline do not seem to provide them with completely adequate answers to their questions.

Factors structuring individual left-right orientation are varous. Freire (2006; 2008) considers that social factors are important dimension in explaining individual left-right orientation. He divides social factors into three broad dimensions: socio-structural dimension, organanization dimension and identity dimension. His studies show that all factors must not be present all at the same time thus independent components (for example, socio –structural dimension) should also be considered as social factor effects (Freire, 2008). Class factor based on employees variable (employers and self employed, higher level, middle level professionals, non-manual workers and manual workers), education, houshold income and church attendance is used as variables in socio-structural dimension in his study. Also the bottom-line of Resource theory (Verba & Nie, 1978) is a statement that electoral involvement is generated by education and income variables. Socioeconomic status is formed out of two or three components: education, income and occupation. Theory is being criticized for its inability to explain the electoral behaviour in comparative dimension (it cannot individually explain the vast difference between electoral activity in countries with similar welfare level (LeDuc & Niemi & Norris,1996) yet in this case we are interested in using variables in order to understand their impact on self-placement of individuals on left-right scale that would result in according electoral choice rather than to measure electoral activity in general.

Even though socioeconomic factors cannot serve as the only explanation of electoral behaviour still USA and many Western European countries have typical observation on strong connection between education level and income and electoral involvement (Pettersen & Rose, 2002). Research shows that the meaning of socioeconomic status correlates negatively in comparative dimension of countries and correlates positively in comparative dimension of individuals. Correlation formed by taking various political activities as one of

variables and education level and family income as other variable (Verba & Nie & Kim, 1978). Lipset (1960) indicates that the social group of individuals is related to education level, level of political involvement, level of isolation and economical insecurity and other factors by emphasizing that these tendencies are interrelated. Research by Bauer (1990) shows that formal education is the most powerful prophet of voting and inevitable result of elections is the choice of party. Income level has similar importance: the higher the socioeconomic status of the person, the more favourable it is disposed towards the participation in elections.

Conway (1985) believes that residents with high income definitely take part in elections more willingly than persons with low income. It has several explanations – one states that residents with higher income are more interested in governmental politics in private economic issues, for instance, tax policy, relationships between employers and employees. More critical evaluation is given to the occupation's impact on electoral activity since many new professions have emerged in the length of time while others have lost or acquired their historical prestige thus making data interpretation difficult.

Even though socioeconomic theories are often considered as milestones of political behaviour explanation yet socioeconomic factors cannot fully explain determinants of society's behaviour (Murray & Vedlitz, 1977) especially in ethnically divided society (Tam Cho, 1999). There is an opinion that ethnic favouritism can be observed in electoral behaviour of ethnically divided society because political elite expects support from voters in elections just like voters with certain ethnic origin expect more social, economical and political advantages as they vote for the same political elite (Chandra, 2006). Ethnic belonging even may lie with social, economic or political benefits it brings (Da, 2006). Since Estonia and especially Latvia is one of ethnically most divided societies in Europe (Luhiste, 2008; Commercio, 2007), one cannot ignore the possible importance of these factors. Also data used in this research show relatively high part of respondents who indicate at their belonging to ethnic minorities; 72% of respondents in Estonia consider themselves Estonians, but only 56% of respondents in Latvia relate themselves to the major ethnic group – Latvians.

Data and methodological approach

Data on election results was obtained from „Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija" (The Central Election Commission of Latvia) and „Vabariigi Valimiskomisjon" (Estonian National Electoral Committee). Data on party placement was obtained from party top management (board members, secretaries-general and alike) opinion poll (N=7 for Latvia and N=6 for Estonia) where they placed their own party and other elected parties along 10 point left-right scale. Data on political orientation of residents, socioeconomic, ethnic and linguistic factors as well as future voting for parties according to the left-right self-placement in 10 point scale was obtained or calculated from EU Commission Funded FP6 EUREQUAL project (PI Professor Stephen Whitefield, University of Oxford), **"Social Inequality and Why it Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and its Citizens: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective".** General cluster covers 1058 respondents in Estonia (N=1058) and 1001 respondents in Latvia (N=1001) out of which 753 forms in Estonia and 976 forms in Latvia have respondent's political attitude measured within the framework of 10 point left-right continuum. 489 forms in Estonia and 544 forms in Latvia answer the question regarding the choice of the party in Parliamentary elections if they take place a day after. Survey's field work took place in 2007. One should take into consideration that not all forms were filled in completely; nevertheless the number of respondents who filled in forms properly was sufficient for data analysis and hypothesis verification, pointing at trends that allows making credible conclusions within the framework of this research.

In order to establish whether there is coherence between the mutual appraisal of political parties within the framework of left-right continuum of political orientation and votes casted by voters regarding their self-placement of left-right political orientation, a correlation analysis was applied. In order to analyze the correlation between self-placement by residents in left-right continuum and their socioeconomic status as well as ethnic and linguistic belonging, correlation analysis and multivariate linear regression were applied as research method. Correlation analysis was applied to establish the closeness of inter-coherence of values by using Pearson's correlation coefficient calculations, while multivariate linear regression was picked to determine the impact of various socioeconomic, ethnic and linguistic values on self-placement of respondent's political attitudes provided that it depends on the said factors.

In regression analysis data on respondents' self-placement in 10 point left-right continuum obtained from their response to the question "Many evaluate political attitudes as "right" or "left"; where would you put yourself in this scale when you think of your attitude towards the political processes?" was used as dependent variable**.**

Data on respondents' individual income, position in the place of employment (based on employees' variable), education, ethnic belonging, language at home, language in childhood as well as ethnic belonging of respondent's mother and father were taken as independent variable. Data was regrouped for the needs of research in order to obtain data from Latvia and Estonia which could be

mutually compared. Thus data on individual income was regrouped in order to comply with 3 categories – less than minimum wage in each country, minimum wage ("Eurostat") to gross average wage („Statistics Estonia"; „Centrālā statistikas pārvalde"), more than average wage in the country. Data on education was regrouped in order to comply with three categories – below secondary education, secondary or special vocational education and higher education. Data on ethnic and linguistic belonging was regrouped in order to comply with 2 categories – majority (Estonian in Estonia and Latvian in Latvia) and minorities. Position in the place of employment must be regarded in reverse order by starting with self-employed, higher level and middle level executives, office managers and staff who are not in charge of other employees.

Accordingly, the following regression model is formed:

$$y = b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_3 + ... + b_mx_m,$$

where y – dependent variable, x_i - mutually independent variables which influence dependent variable, b_i - coefficients which indicate the number of influences, *m* – number of independent variables.

Analysis and results

Survey shows that mean value between respondents' answers in Latvia is 5.78 but in Estonia 5.62 (Podemski, 2009). One must take into account that mean mathematical value of scale is 5.5. Even though in correspondence with Rein Taagepera, which took place while writing this article, he indicated at shortcomings of 10 point scale, especially stressing the problems with interpretation which could arise with the mean value 5.5 where respondents would conceive of 5.5. as 5 points, yet research by Kroh (2004) shows that the difference between credibility in 11 point scale and 10 point scale is insignificant (credibility in 11 point scale is 0.97 but 10 point scale it is 0.93) if compared with application of 101 point scale (0.76).

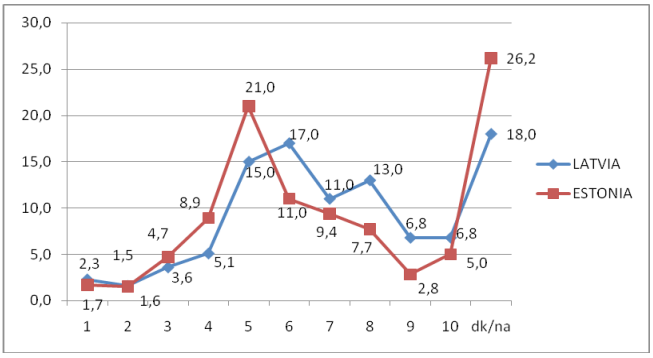

Figure 1. Percent (%) distribution of respondents according to self-placement in the left-right 10 point scale in Latvia and Estonia

Source: EU Commission Funded FP6 EUREQUAL project (PI Professor Stephen Whitefield, University of Oxford), "Social Inequality and Why it Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and its Citizens: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective".

One can observe (Figure 1) larger part of residents having their self-placement radically left (3.9%) and radically right (13.6%) than in Estonia (3.2% and 7.8% respectively) while less number of respondents did not want to respond or could not identify themselves in the left-right continuum (18% of respondents in Latvia, 26,4% in Estonia).

Correlations between election outcome and survey data show that there is a close correlation (r=0.74; p=0.01) between the results of 9th Saeima elections and survey results and very close correlation (r=0.92; p=0.01) between Riigikogu results and survey results where respondents answered to the question „For which party would you cast your voice if parliamentary elections were tomorrow?" (Table 1; *w* and *z*). It indicates at sufficient stability of electorate regarding the choice of party and data credibility for this research in order to find out whether there is a correlation between the self-placement of very parties in mean value of left-right 10 point scale and value which is formed out of parties' supporters included in this survey regarding their self-placement and by calculating their mean left-right self-placement value (For instance, the mean value of self-placement in left-right scale of respondents who would vote for Peoples Party is 7.3 while, for instance, mean self-placement of supporters of For Human Rights in United Latvia is 4.0). Results of correlation analysis show that there is very close relation (r= 0.89; p=0.01) in Latvia but less yet close relation (r=0.73; p=0.01) in Estonia between the self-placement of parties in the framework of 10 point scale and self-placement of respondents in 10 point scale provided that respondents vote for the party or party union which is closest to their political attitudes in the left-right continuum (Table 1; *x* and *y*).

Table 1. Election results for 9th Saeima elections and 2007 Riigikogu elections, self-placement of parties and residents' future voting for parties, including their self-placement in the left-right continuum in Latvia and Estonia

Latvia	w	x	y	z
TP	19,6	8,3	7,3	7,4
ZZS	16,7	5,6	6,8	8,3
JL	16,4	6,6	6,6	9,5
SC	14,4	3,6	4,5	11,9
LPP/LC	8,6	7,5	6,0	5,1
TB/LNNK	6,9	7,8	6,7	4,6
PCTVL	6,0	3,0	4,0	2,6

Estonia	*w*	*x*	*y*	*z*
Reform	27,8	8,2	6,7	20,4
Kesk	26,1	4,0	4,8	16,4
IRL	17,9	7,8	6,8	6,6
SDE	10,6	3,7	5,1	4,8
Rohelised	7,1	6,3	4,4	6,8
Raahvaliit	7,1	5,5	5,6	2,6

Source: „Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija" (The Central Election Commission of Latvia); „Vabariigi Valimiskomisjon" (Estonian National Electoral Committee); data from party survey; data from EU Commission Funded FP6 EUREQUAL project (PI Professor Stephen Whitefield, University of Oxford), "Social Inequality and Why it Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and its Citizens: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective", where w – election results in (%) (Latvia 2006; Estonia 2007), x – party placement along 10 point scale, y-respondent votes for parties according to the left-right self-placement in 10 point scale if parliamentary elections took place the next day, z – respondents' votes per parties (%) if parliamentary elections took place the next day.

What constitutes self-placement of political attitudes in the left-right continuum?

Correlation among survey data (Table 2) shows that statistically important correlation among variables are found only mutually among ethnolinguistic values both in Latvia and Estonia. Strong correlation between ethnic belonging and conversation language at home (r=0.86 in Estonia and r=0.87 in Latvia at p=0.01), between the ethnic belonging of respondent's mother and respondent's ethnic belonging and conversation language at home (r=0.72 and r=0.68 in Latvia, r=0.69 and r=0.69 in Estonia at p=0.01), as well as conversation language in respondent's childhood and his ethnic belonging and current conversation language at home (r=0.89 and r=0.90 in Latvia, r=0.90 and r=0.93 in Estonia at p=0.01) was found in both countries. It must be added that the ethnic belonging of respondent's father did not have a connection to respondent's ethnic belonging or current conversation language at home in Estonia (r=0.02 and r=0.01; p=0.01). Father's influence on ethnic belonging and conversation language at home of Latvian respondent currently is weaker or is not observed (r=0.31 and r=0.03; p=0.01) if compared to mother's influence on respondent within the ethnolinguistic context.

Table 2. Correlations among socioeconomic, ethnic, linguistic factors, and left-right self placement in Latvia and Estonia

LV	*a*	*b*	*c*	*d*	*e*	*f*	*g*	*h*	*i*
a	1								
b	0,01	1							
c	0,02	-0,03	1						
d	0,06	-0,02	0,01	1					
e	0,05	-0,01	0,01	0,87	1				
f	0,01	0,03	0,26	0,02	0,01	1			
g	0,06	0,00	0,04	0,90	0,89	0,00	1		
h	0,07	0,02	0,03	0,30	0,31	0,03	0,33	1	
i	0,06	-0,01	0,01	0,68	0,72	-0,03	0,73	0,28	1
EE	***a***	***b***	***c***	***d***	***e***	***f***	***g***	***h***	***i***
a	1								
b	0,01	1							
c	0,02	-0,03	1						
d	0,06	-0,02	0,01	1					
e	0,05	-0,01	0,01	0,87	1				
f	0,01	0,03	0,26	0,02	0,01	1			
g	0,06	0,00	0,04	0,90	0,89	0,00	1		
h	0,07	0,02	0,03	0,30	0,31	0,03	0,33	1	
i	0,06	-0,01	0,01	0,68	0,72	-0,03	0,73	0,28	1

Note: $p \leq 0.01$

Source: EU Commission Funded FP6 EUREQUAL project (PI Professor Stephen Whitefield, University of Oxford), "Social Inequality and Why it Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and its Citizens: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective", where a – left-right self placement, b – position at work, c – personal income, d – language at home, e – ethnic belonging, f – education, g – language in childhood, h – ethnic belonging of father, i – ethnic belonging of mother.

Results of multivariate regression (Table 3) show, that self-positioning in Latvia is influenced by both respondent's education and income and position at the place of employment. Regression coefficients are statistically credible in significance level $p \leq 0.05$. Education (b=0.578) has the most influence on self-placement – the higher the education of respondent, the more "right" the political opinions are, while respondents with lower education have more "left" political opinions. Slightly less influence on self-placement of respondents is generated by their individual income (b=0.336). The larger the income of respondent, the more "right" his political opinion is in self-placement. The less the income of respondent, the more he or she evaluates himself or herself as ''left'' oriented. Completely different trend reveals in the independent value in place of employment (b=0.318). Regression analysis shows that employees without subordinates rather judge their political views as "right" if compared with sole proprietors or self-employed who tend to position themselves more as "left" oriented. In this regard contrary situation is observed in Estonia where the only value which has statistically credible impact on significance level p=0.06 is respondent's position in work (b= -0.117), yet the indicated spread is considered to be too large since influence coefficient can vary between 0.002 to -0.287 thus one cannot establish a considerable trend. In Estonia also no influence of other socioeconomic indices

on respondents' self-placement in left-right scale could be found. Neither in Estonia nor Latvia a statistically credible coherence between ethnic or linguistic variables and self-placement of respondent's political attitudes in left-right continuum can be observed.

Table 3 Multivariate regression analysis with respondents' self-placement in the left-right continuum in Latvia and Estonia as dependent variable

Latvia	*Coef.*	*St. Error*	*t Stat*	*P-value*	*Lower 95%*	*Upper 95%*
Intercept	0	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
b	0,32	0,04	8,05	0,00	0,24	0,40
c	0,34	0,10	3,28	0,00	0,14	0,54
d	0,64	0,34	1,89	0,06	-0,03	1,31
e	0,03	0,32	0,10	0,92	-0,60	0,66
f	0,58	0,10	5,90	0,00	0,39	0,77
g	0,35	0,38	0,91	0,36	-0,40	1,09
h	0,06	0,09	0,66	0,51	-0,12	0,24
i	0,17	0,18	0,96	0,34	-0,18	0,51
Estonia	*Coef.*	*St. Error*	*t Stat*	*P-value*	*Lower 95%*	*Upper 95%*
Intercept	0	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
b	-0,18	0,06	-3,14	0,00	-0,29	-0,07
c	-0,08	0,09	-0,93	0,35	-0,26	0,09
d	-0,70	0,56	-1,24	0,22	-1,80	0,41
e	0,82	0,48	1,72	0,09	-0,12	1,75
f	0,11	0,13	0,84	0,40	-0,14	0,35
g	-0,03	0,68	-0,05	0,96	-1,37	1,30
h	-0,12	0,13	-0,90	0,37	-0,37	0,14
i	-0,31	0,26	-1,16	0,25	-0,82	0,21

Note: $p \leq 0.05$

Source: EU Commission Funded FP6 EUREQUAL project (PI Professor Stephen Whitefield, University of Oxford), "Social Inequality and Why it Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and its Citizens: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective", where b – position at work, c – personal income, d – language at home, e – ethnic belonging, f – education, g – language in childhood, h – ethnic belonging (father), i – ethnic belonging (mother).

Conclusions

Results of this research show that the left-right continuum is still topical and significant in terms of research even if understanding of the left-right continuum or even its content has changed. Also both in Latvia and Estonia evaluation by voters and parties about their political orientation in left-right continuum generally match - on average voters in previous parliamentary elections in 2006 in Latvia and 2007 in Estonia have voted for those parties with which they feel the closest connection regarding their own placement in the left-right scale while mutual evaluation of political orientation by parties generally match with voters' understanding about parties' place in the left-right continuum.

Still, within the framework of this research, it was not possible to find out exactly what factors form self-placement of voters' political orientation. In Latvia one can observe the impact of education, individual income and position in work on formation of self-placement, while in Estonia one cannot observe similar statistically significant correlation. Ethnic or linguistic factors such as belonging to the ethnic group, parents' belonging to a certain ethnic group or language at home or in childhood do not play important role either in Latvia or Estonia though both nations are considered as one of the ethnically most divided societies in Europe.

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