Summary
The main aim of this dissertation is to explain why political participation in post-communist societies is so much lower than in Western democracies, considering social trust as a stimulus for political engagement. The empirical puzzle of the research draws from the observations that since its democratization in the early 1990s, the post-communist region has experienced a dramatic decline of both participation in electoral politics and social movements. The lack of civic and political engagement in post-communist countries is perceived as one of the hardships of democratic development in the region. Although formal institutions in the post-communist region are displaying attributes of consolidated democracies, citizens generally feel distant from political life, and are unaware of political decisions and means to influence politics.

Admitting that an institutional approach does not provide a full answer to the question why citizens feel detached from politics in post-communist societies, theorists often recoil on cultural arguments. The cultural-based approach derives from the deeper reflections on the communist past and the continuity of both social and personal memories. This dissertation suggests that low levels of political participation in post-communist democracies result from low levels of social trust, which was heavily ruined during the communist regime and right after its collapse. Social trust in this research is considered as both explanandum (chapter 3) and explanans (chapter 2).

In the theoretical framework laid out in chapter 2, first, social trust is defined as generalized impersonal trust in other people, including strangers, whom a truster is not necessarily familiar with. The notion of generalized trust stands in contrast with particularized trust, or trust inside specific groups. Social trust generally it refers to trust in the citizenry as a whole.

Second, social trust is regarded as an independent variable of political participation. Social capital theories argue that social trust sustains a cooperative social climate, civic norms and a regard for public interests. Thus, social trust is conceived to be conducive to democracy. More specifically, referring to a wide scholarship of social capital and political/civic culture, socially trusting people are more prone to participate in public affairs. This study differentiates between three forms of political participation, namely, voting, party politics (conventional, other than voting) and movement (non-conventional) participation. It is also presupposed that social trust has not only direct positive effects on political involvement, but also leads to political efficacy, which in turn stimulates individuals to embark on political actions. In other words, my assumption is that social resources (social trust) translate into political resources (political efficacy). This dissertation distinguishes between external and internal political efficacy. External efficacy expresses the feeling that “my voice is heard” by the government, while internal efficacy is the conviction that I am skilled enough to influence politics. Social trust enhances political efficacy in a way that socially trusting people more likely acquire political knowledge and information in general about
the subjects to be acted on and the methods to employ such actions. Moreover, social trust empowers citizens politically, as they believe that institutions we deal with are fair and people we trust are going to behave by the rules.

In chapter 3, social trust is scrutinized as a dependent variable. Using a comparative historical approach, this dissertation considers the development of social trust in post-communist societies. More particularly, this chapter discusses how communist legacies affected the essence of trust and, moreover, how social trust developed in the period of democratic transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The chapter explains how communism and the democratic transition had a formidable negative impact on trust, as well as on the abilities of citizens to cooperate for a common good. First, communism deterred individuals from participating in organizations by making this form of participation obligatory. The notion of volunteering as such was discredited. Second, civic and political involvement falls short because of the post-communist disappointment. The economic hardships and efforts invested in “insuring basic survival” leaves no room and no motivation for civic engagement. Third, due to oppressive government, political censorship and harsh economic conditions, post-communist citizens are used to spending their time in family and friendship-based networks instead of spreading their contacts outside these circles. The legacy of spending time within close-knit networks accurately characterizes the contemporary post-communist society. In turn, as an effect of a vicious circle, since citizens are not being keen on expanding their social contacts with strangers, they lack to opportunities to increase social trust.

The theoretical chapters are followed by empirical chapter 4. Two country-sets – mature and post-communist democracies – are compared based on the European Social Survey 2008 data. The chapter investigates the causal relationship between social trust and political participation at the individual level. It posits political efficacy as the linking variable of this relationship. The results show that social capital theories largely hold true: social trust is indeed positively related with all forms of political participation in both mature and post-communist democracies, although I observe some variation between countries, especially for party politics activities (not voting). For instance, in nine countries (out of 27 cases) I found negative connections between social trust and party politics. So it also might be true that social trust is not necessary an attribute of someone getting actively involved in political parties and campaigning.

The results also showed that the pattern of social trust affecting individual’s decision to vote is generally similar in both country-groups. The research corroborates the hypothesis that socially trusting people vote because they tend to be politically trusting (proxy of external efficacy in the ESS dataset). However, voters who are more socially trusting do not necessarily feel more politically aware (proxy of internal efficacy): political awareness plays an independent role above and beyond social trust.
Moreover, political trust does not influence participation in party politics activities in mature democracies, but it does so (positively) in post-communist democracies. When it comes to movement participation, the direct effect of political trust is negative in both country-sets. In other words, citizens need to trust others, but at the same time distrust their politicians, in order to express their demands by protesting. Thus, the results support my assumption that in movement politics, an individual indeed relies on his/her fellow citizens. This holds for both mature and post-communist countries. Political awareness positively affects movement politics, independently of social trust.

All in all, the relationship between social trust, political efficacy and the types of participation are, with a few exceptions, more or less the same in the East and West. It means that, at the individual level, post-communist citizens’ decision to participate in politics is driven by the same factors that determine voter turnout in the mature democracies. Western models of political participation work relatively well for voting turnout and movement participation (and less for other party politics activities) in new democracies.

The second empirical part of this dissertation (chapter 5) focuses on the possible explanations why citizens in post-communist democracies engage less actively in politics. The individual and contextual predictors of participation by conducting multi-level regressions were tested – namely, economic, political and cultural components that in all define the “stage” of post-communism. The analyses revealed that the observed country differences in political activeness can be partly explained by different distributions of individual characteristics between countries (so-called compositional effects).

Moreover, the analyses display that the country level characteristics remain very important for both institutionalized and non-institutionalized participation. Not only democratic experience is important, but also corruption, lack of effective government, and economic backwardness have a negative effect on political participation levels. Furthermore, contextual social trust proved to be positively related with being active in movement and party politics. However, the specific effect of post-communism is difficult to pin down, because many important variables (like corruption and social trust) correlate so strongly with each other. Therefore, one cannot easily single out only one contextual effect. Obviously, post-communism comprises a whole set of interrelated dimensions and it is difficult to disentangle all the context level variables. More generally, the findings indicate that the cultural and institutional contextual aspects were less relevant for predicting institutionalized participation, but it in particular accounted for participation in movement politics.

Furthermore, chapter 5 focused on the interplay between social trust, forms of political participation, and the cultural, socio-economic, and institutional context. The most remarkable finding concerned the interaction between the contextual circumstances and the individual effect of social trust in shaping political participation. The results showed that in more trustful, prosperous
and advanced societies, social trust has a stronger positive effect on voting. Involvement in institutionalized politics is negatively related with social trust, and this negative association is stronger in unprosperous and corrupt societies. Finally, the results showed that social trust stimulates protest participation, and this effect is stronger in societies that are less socially trustful, less affluent, more corrupt, have less effective governments, and a shorter democratic legacy. In post-communist societies the merit of social trust on protest participation is generally more pronounced: in these countries an increase in social trust motivates citizens to involve in movement activities more vigorously compared to people from Western democracies.

The last part of this research investigated the relationship between social trust, political efficacy and political participation in post-communist Lithuania, using the national post-election survey of 2012 (chapter 6). The results showed that social trust is indeed positively associated with citizens’ propensity to vote, but it is not significant for participation in other party politics activities. Regarding the mediation effects, social trust leads to voting via both external efficacy and political trust. In other words, social trust positively affects whether a citizen in Lithuania trusts the institutions and whether s/he considers these institutions being responsive to peoples’ needs; in turn, political trust and perceived responsiveness fosters voting.

The mediation analysis furthermore revealed that the indirect effects of social trust on protesting via both internal and external efficacy are significant. The more people feel that the Lithuanian government is responsive, the more they tend to protest. Remarkably, when it comes to protesting, external efficacy and political trust work in different directions: perceived responsiveness leads to activism, while at the same time my findings demonstrate that political distrust yields apathy.

Moreover, it is worth observing that although social trust has no direct impact on movement politics, I found a highly significant effect of social embeddedness. Civic engagement strongly affects the odds of individuals to be involved in political activities. And the opposite is also true: the lack of political engagement in Lithuania is caused by a lack of civic engagement. Interestingly enough, the findings imply that formal social networks are apparently not connected to a sense of social trust. The descriptive analysis disclosed that the relationship between these two variables is very weak, if not non-existent. Social trust is not associated with participation in two other formal networks either, namely trade unions and religious communities.

In sum, this dissertation increased our understanding of the development of post-communist civil society from a historical and contemporary perspective. It explains the deterioration of social trust during the communist regime and after its fall, and points out how low levels of social trust undermine individuals’ willingness to participate in politics. This study adds to current scholarship that the weakness of civil society and low levels of citizens’ political involvement in East-Central
Europe is associated with the low stocks of social capital, that is, low social trust and limited social contacts. By doing so, this study underlines that Eastern European democracies are still fragile in terms of the penetration of the political system from below. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) wrote, there is not much democracy in a country where only few citizens engage in decision-making. Mass withdrawal from political participation leads to the risk of “selective democracy” and creates the opportunity for political elites to center their policies around the radicalized voters and exclude potential rivals. This “childhood illness” of post-communist systems might constitute a threat for democracy, therefore it is so important to study what bring people both to the ballots and to the streets and how to enhance different forms of civic and political activities. After all, it is much easier to implement political reforms than to foster a cultural shift towards more democratic values.