Groupuscular identity-creation in online-communication of the Estonian extreme right

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Abstract: For explaining the dispersed extreme right movements that are presently flourishing in the online sphere, British historian and political theorist Roger Griffin has elaborated the concept of groupuscular right. The groupuscular right can be characterized by the non-hierarchic and the rhizomatic structure of intra-groupuscular communication. Our study on Estonian groupuscular right complements it with the ideas of cultural semiotics that help to explicate self-descriptions of particular groupuscular nodes (e.g., blog posts) but also to analyze their relations with other extreme right groupuscules and with the radical online sphere as a whole. Although the extreme right’s communication has become more heterogeneous in its form and content, it is still possible to distinguish central and peripheral meanings. Our approach allows us to understand a seemingly paradoxical problem: why, despite of the plurality of different viewpoints available on the web, are groupuscular communications still dominated by strict and homogeneous ways of modeling information.

Keywords: theory of communication/culture, extreme right, online communication, cultural semiotics, code text

In the post-Breivik era, public (and also academic) discourse abounds with statements that declare the alarming activation of extreme right groups that use online-resources to spread their ideas and self-organize. Frequent references are made to the tragic actions of “lone wolves,” for example the Utøya massacre (2011) or nail-bomb attacks in London organized by David Copeland (1999).

Many studies have approached extreme right online discourse by analyzing the official web-pages of extreme right parties or other institutions (see Atton 2006; Hainsworth 2008; Sommer 2008; Caiani et al. 2012; Angouri and Wodak 2014, etc.). We agree that the online communication of extreme right...
parties and non-party organizations indicate important transformations of extreme right ideology and its manifestations, but we think it is necessary to stress that those sources do not reflect the most radical ideas the spectrum of the extreme right. Rather, these sources tend to be in accordance with the attitudes of the political mainstream. On the other hand, many authors stress that dispersed extreme right online communities are the most significant generators of polarized and radical ideas (Auers and Kasekamp 2009; Mudde 2011; Poleshchuk 2005; Fekete 2012; Caiani and Kröll 2014, etc.). Griffin (2003: 45) has outlined that on the websites of the non-institutionalized extreme right “researchers can find abundant evidence that the strains of palingenetic ultranationalism that animated the ‘age of fascism’ in inter-war Europe have not died out but, freed from the role of providing the lingua franca of mass movements, have actually diversified” (Griffin 1999: 43–45; Kaplan et al. 2003: 150; Madisson and Ventsel 2016).

The Estonian extreme right has also been most thoroughly studied in the context of party-politics (Auers and Kasekamp 2009, 2013; Kasekamp 2003; see Mudde 2005; Poleshchuk 2005). However, informal or loosely-organized extreme right network has been explained by only a small number of authors (Siibak 2014; Madisson 2016; Madisson and Ventsel 2016). In the Estonian parliamentary elections on 1st March 2015, the Eesti Konservatiivne Rahavaerakond (EKRE; ‘Conservative People’s Party’) secured 8.1% of the votes and gained seven seats in parliament. It was the first time in more than twenty years that a party, which describes itself as a national conservative force but which has been widely understood as radical right in public discussions and academic discourse (see Auers and Kasekamp 2013, 2015) managed to secure seats in the Estonian parliament. EKRE gained popularity with racist slogans such as “If he’s black, send him back” and with a strong opposition to same-sex marriage (Auers and Kasekamp 2015: 145–146). The rise of such a party was quite unexpected for Estonian wider public. Most likely, EKRE’s emergence came as unanticipated because of the lack of exploration of the alternative parts of Estonian extreme right informational sphere, e.g., blogs, forums, and social networking sites, which played an important role in the concentration and polarization of xenophobic and nativistic understandings. Our study attempts to fill this important gap and scrutinize the online communication of Estonian extreme right.

The wider aim of our approach is to create a conceptual framework that helps to understand the specifics of processes of identity-creation and general meaning-making which prevail in the contemporary informational network of the extreme right. The objective of our study is not to observe the contemporary extreme right as a manifestation of social distress. We do not want to focus on
different levels of potential dangers and social impact of extreme right online activism. Those questions demand sociological methods (e.g., auditorium interviews) of exploration. The primary benefit of a semiotic approach is that it allows us to study specific extreme right ways of self-description and world-modeling, and with this expertise it is possible to understand their conceptual horizon. We believe that it facilitates interactions with extreme right communities and may help to open them up to a more relativized and pluralistic understanding of the world. It is also important to keep up with codes and signification hierarchies that prevail on the extreme right online communities, because it may assist in detecting the radicalization of so-called “lone wolves” or the organization of potential hate crimes.

Roger Griffin has studied the extreme right grass roots activism that has spread mainly in online environments in the most focused way. To describe contemporary dispersed extreme right movements, Griffin (1999, 2002a, 2003) has elaborated the concept of groupuscule. Griffin stresses that although his academic attention is concentrated on extreme right movements, the groupuscularity is also a characteristic of other extremist movements (e.g., extreme leftists and radical religions; Griffin 2003: 47). We believe that Griffin’s concept is fruitful for describing the homogenous informational environment that connects extreme right communities, and enhances understanding of the ideological ground of the contemporary extreme right. Griffin defines groupuscules as follows:

... in the context of extreme right-wing politics in the contemporary age, groupuscules are intrinsically small political (frequently meta-political, but never primarily party-political) entities formed to pursue palingenetic (i.e., revolutionary) ideological, organizational or activist ends with an ultimate goal of overcoming the decadence of the existing liberal democratic system. (Griffin 2003: 30)

Groupuscules may have various physical manifestations: web-pages, magazines (Griffin 2002a: 4), but also underground gatherings of extreme right activists. According to Griffin (2003: 33) groupuscules create a rhizomic structure: they form a cellular, centerless and leaderless network with ill-defined boundaries and no formal hierarchy or internal organizational structure to give it a unified intelligence.

On the other hand, Griffin does not offer a thorough theoretical framework that could be used to analyze the functions that extreme right groupuscules have in a wider socio-cultural context or for understanding their specific logic of identification. Griffin himself (2002a: 8, 2003: 30) stresses that the groupuscular right is not a finished analytical tool and he calls other researchers to contribute empirical studies which will help to qualify and refine his ideas. Our study
complements Griffin’s approach, the concept of *groupuscule*, with two key concepts from cultural semiotics: *semiophere* and *code-text*. This synthesis enables us to explicate the communication between different nodes of extreme right networks, but also to explain how different groupuscular centers interact with the surrounding socio-cultural context. Although the overall aim of this article is geared towards the theoretical development of Griffin’s ideas, we also illustrate our understanding with an analysis of Estonian extreme right web-pages.

Our analysis is based on non-participatory observation that we performed from the beginning of 2012 to the middle of 2014. The general aim of our observation was to identify the main centers of the Estonian extreme right network and also to discover their dominant modes of self-description. We started our analysis with mapping the meaning-making tendencies of Estonian extreme right and forming hypotheses. It lead us to construct a theoretical framework which also started to direct our focus of the research. Thus, we based our study on abductive logic: the study material influenced the theory and, in turn, it also lead us to interpret the illustrative examples in certain manner. For ethical considerations we have analyzed only those web pages that are publicly accessible. By taking into account the number of visits, the frequency of quotations and the concentration of extreme right content, we determined that the following web-pages can be treated as a representative center of Estonian extreme right groupuscules: *Rahvuslane*¹ (‘The Nationalist’; 2370 postings), *NS blogi*² (‘NS blog’; 304 postings), *EESTI RAHVUSLIK BLOG*³ (‘Estonian Nationalist Blog’; 158 postings), *Ole Teadlik*⁴ (‘Be Aware’; 29 postings) and *BH Ruzzland*⁵ (120 postings). The proportion of extreme right content varied greatly between different web sites as well as between single texts, but in general all the web pages that we observed predominantly manifested an extreme right ideology. The posting frequency, the number of visitors and the number of quotations varied greatly in different periods. Some sources that we observed have been erased and some blogs have limited their access, e.g., *blog NS* that has not been accessible since summer 2013. On the other hand, the network of the Estonian extreme right is quite vibrant and new web pages are constantly emerging.

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¹ http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/
² http://staap02.wordpress.com/ (now it is available via new address: http://koobas.net)
³ http://rahvuslik.blogspot.com
⁴ www.oleteadlik.ee
⁵ http://bhr.balanss.ee/. This web-page is a part of international extreme right community Blood and Honour.
1 The peculiarities of extreme right online communication

It is not easy to identify extreme right movements because labeling something as ‘extremist’ is often seen as a stigmatizing act. Extremism indicates deviation from norms toward radical polarization, thus it certainly carries some negative connotations. Since defining something as extreme implies an interaction with the norm, extreme right movements are always highly dependent on what they are contrasted with. There are not many movements that declare themselves extreme right, on the contrary, they often try to silence these kinds of designations. In his research dedicated to comparing different academic definitions of extreme right Mudde (2007: 12) concludes that there does not exist a solid and unequivocal definition of the extreme right but on the heuristic level it is possible to outline sets of tendencies and features by which some movements can be identified as more extreme right than others. Mudde points out that different definitions outline five basic characteristics: nationalism, xenophobia, racism, anti-democratic sentiment and support for a strong state (Mudde 1995: 206, 2000: 11), that are necessarily essential to enable to classify a party or a movement as “extreme right” (Hainsworth 2008: 69).

As mentioned above, the concentration of extreme right content varied greatly cross different web sites but also at the level of individual postings. As many of the observed postings directly quoted or referred to texts originating in the mainstream media (mainly from the Estonian newspapers Postimees and Eesti Ekspress), then we cannot say that our sources were consistently characterized by the core-characteristics of radical rightism: nativism, xenophobia, racial superiority, etc. But on the other hand, all the web pages that we observed exhibited a generally extreme right rhetoric. The most popular topics were: the need to preserve indigenous Estonian-ness, speculations on how a Zionist/Masonic cabal is jeopardizing the existing world order (Estonia and other nation-states included); the idea that cultural and racial mixing is essentially dangerous; a conviction that Estonia should withdraw from decadent international unions, e.g., the European Union, United Nations, and NATO (Madisson and Ventsel 2016; Madisson 2016).

Several studies have stressed that the means of hypermedia have enabled new types of extreme right communication. Dispersed online communities have begun to play a significant role in mediating radical nationalist content but also in articulating and networking extremist ideas (Daniels 2008, 2012; Nakamura and Chow-White 2012, etc.). Contemporary extreme right communication has moved to homepages, social media groups, chat rooms and forums that circulate
information about various extreme right projects and gatherings (concerts, festivals, demonstrations, etc.; Virchow 2004: 62). Online platforms offer a convenient way to share extreme right ideology and timely information. Furthermore, these kinds of sites make it possible to develop like-minded social capital: they enable individuals to find friends who share extreme right world-views and even to pursue romantic relationships with other users\(^6\) (Back 2002: 640; Kaplan et al. 2003: 154). Thus, online environments can function as unprecedented informational reservoirs the enable to crate meaningful connections with like-minded people from all over the world.

Griffin (2002a: 4) points out that groupuscular network is maintained by web-pages of individual extreme right activists who create radical content and share links to like-minded thinkers. Numerous small but interlinked extreme-right groupuscules constitute “an ideological energy field far stronger than any of its individual nodes” (Griffin 2002a: 5). Different nodes of groupuscular network are held together by constant interaction and information-sharing which often exceeds the borders of countries (Daniels 2012: 16; Kaplan et al. 2003: 153). This tendency is facilitated by the fact that English has become an international lingua franca in large part thanks to the explosive spread of the Internet (Griffin 2003: 28).

These types of interactions enhance the common knowledge shared between groupuscules and it may create a substantial but hermetic informational space. “Participants in ideologically homogeneous online groups share similar perspectives, challenging views are not expressed and the available arguments are one-sided” (Wojcieszak 2010: 639). If similar arguments are expressed in many groupuscular nodes from all over the web, this may generate a conviction that extreme right views are widely accepted and justified. We noticed that in the Estonian groupuscular network it is quite common to share links to foreign content (especially to some blogs and YouTube videos, mainly in English), and they also often translate or summarize content from other languages. The extreme right web pages that we observed are quite well known to the Estonian countercultural public, and many articles are widely shared, discussed and commented upon simultaneously in several sources (also, cross-references and quoting/referring to each other’s content is very common). It is important to note that extreme right bloggers also share news and articles from mainstream media sources that are somehow connected with nationalism or traditional values.

Rich representational resources of hypermedia create favorable possibilities to produce various forms of participatory creation: informational collages that often combine several sources and different semiotic modes. It is noteworthy, that the tendencies of derivative co-creation (parody, pastiche, mash-ups, etc.) that have accelerated in online-communication, play a significant role in the formation of communities, e.g., in the context of articulating common values (Shifman 2011: 189–191). Several authors (Back 2002: 634; Daniels 2008: 12) have pointed out that visual modes have become more influential in the online sphere, e.g., it is quite common to create visually conspicuous racist or homophobic video-games to recruit new members. The extreme right web sites we analyzed also utilized different semiotic modes, postings often contained different hyperlinks to YouTube (music videos lectures or films). Some sites had a special gallery that consisted of collections of links, but also uploaded copyrighted texts (e.g., the documentary “Soviet Story”) and derivative texts (memetic videos or humorous/grotesque pictures, made in the spirit of participatory culture). Those visual texts usually illustrate xenophobic or homophobic values or depict opposition to authorities in the Estonian state or European Union.

Instant and convenient online-communication has become one of the most significant breeding grounds of leading discursive trends of contemporary extreme right. For example, specific up-to-date expressions or argot which enables to distinguish insiders form outsiders (Campbell 2006: 277) and system of secret codes. A similar conclusion has been drawn by Andra Siibak, who conducted a survey on the Estonian social networking site Rate.ee. Siibak demonstrates that the representations of the extreme right ideology have become much more complex and ambivalent in recent years. Radical rightists have started to use various secret codes – e.g., number combinations, acronyms or fragments from meaningful texts (e.g., song lyrics, poems, aphorisms, etc., but also inside jokes and phrases exchanged in offline contexts). Those messages seem meaningless to a wider public but insiders who know those codes can exchange their private messages in public channels like social networking sites, blogs, and forums (Siibak 2014: 220–224)

Compared to with inter-war movements the contemporary extreme right has a much more heterogeneous and loosely organized nature. Griffin accentuates in several articles that radical forms of extreme rightism have survived in our modern world (which generally respects the rights of minorities) mainly because

7 http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2014-02-18T08:36:00%2B02:00&max-results=10
of the possibilities of hypermedia. Security and intelligence organizations often have trouble controlling the radicalization of extreme right online communities because by closing one website they cannot be sure that similar content will not be represented on some other node of the groupuscular right (Griffin 2002a: 6, 2003: 46). The Estonian Security Police have also noted that the spread of extreme-right ideas is accelerating in online environments. It has been pointed out that the biggest potential threat associated with the contemporary extreme right is the radicalization of small groups of activists. This may be facilitated by the fact that in online environments, Estonian extreme right activists have access to polarized ideas from around the world (Annual review of the Estonian Security Police 2012: 5). At the same time, the contemporary extreme right has significantly changed its rhetoric: recognizable Nazi symbolism is no longer overtly deployed, and radical statements have been considerably toned down (Annual review of the Estonian Security Police 2012: 4)

2 Groupuscular field as a semiosphere

Griffin has stated in many articles that groupuscular communication mirrors the main features of hypermedia (and its logic of text creation; 1999: 45, 2002a: 6, 2003: 47). Griffin stresses that the groupuscular filed is most accurately described as rhizomatic in nature. Thus he defines groupuscules as leaderless and centerless cellular rhizomatic networks which have ill-defined boundaries and “no formal hierarchy or internal organizational structure to give it a unified intelligence” (Griffin 2003: 34).

We find this problematic because in explaining the structure of extreme right online communities and information creation, Griffin applies characteristics which are commonly used to describe the abstract qualities of hypermedia-texts, e.g.: non-hierarchical or web-like structure, intrinsic multiplicity, the lack of center or the main axis of organization, fluid or temporary nature. These concepts, which are mainly associated with rhizomatic structure, are relevant for mapping the endless potentialities of meaning-making on the World Wide Web as an enormous holistic system (Eco 2003). It is not feasible to use these abstract concepts to explain specific practices of interpretation and information-creation. Once the interpreter intervenes in the ideal hypertextual system – which has by definition no inner hierarchies or center – then the progression of information will be organized by core ideas and values that are dominant on the horizon of interpretation of a particular reader/viewer (Kress 2005: 4; Landow 2006: 221; Ryan 2006: 146). In our case the interpreter can be understood as an extreme
right community as a whole, but it can also be an individual who participates in radical online communication. It is important that when we include this kind of interpretive unity in informational networks then some nodes become inevitably more important than others. Despite the fact that an interpreter can theoretically visit all parts of an informational field, available via hyperlinks, it is more likely that they will visit sites that are favored by the extreme right authorities and spokespersons, or that have achieved the respect of the community in some other way (e.g., presenting information in attractive way, frequently updating content, using proper subcultural codes, etc.).

We should not underestimate the heuristic value of Griffin’s observations. The means of hypermedia have created unprecedented possibilities of interaction between different extreme right groups (in spite of geographic constraints). But it is also important to point out the other level of groupuscular communication – the crucial role of meaning-hierarchies and particular signification peculiarities. The shortcoming of Griffin’s elaboration of the groupuscular right is the under-theorizing of inter- and intra-groupuscular communication. The primary mechanisms of meaning-making that organize the navigation in groupuscular informational fields are left without a thorough explanation.

In what follows, we approach online communication of the contemporary extreme right by using the notions of semiosphere and code-text.

2.1 Groupuscular meaning-making

In different periods, Juri Lotman used various concepts to delimit and explore semiotic unity, e.g., text, culture, semiosphere, and semiotic monad were at various times Lotman’s terms of choice in his efforts to explicate semiotic wholeness. In his later period, Lotman replaced text with semiosphere, which indicates a more dynamic aspect of culture. “Relative to the whole, located at other levels in the structural hierarchy, they [semiosphere/text] reveal an isomorphic quality. Thus, they are, simultaneously, the whole and its likeness” (Lotman 2005: 215). For reasons of clarity we mainly use the terms semiosphere and semiotic unity in this article, only in the case of quotations we will retain the original formulation.

In the case of the meaning-making of the extreme right online communities, we can treat particular groupuscules as individual semiotic unities: a particular posting, popular discussion topic and the whole groupuscular network of extreme right information can be all treated as individual semiotic unities. The groupuscule is a meaningful whole as well as an active generator of meaning. The integrity of a groupuscule is provided by borders. From the perspective of cultural semiotics the border of semiotic unities sets measures for the intrusion
of information, filters outside information, and sets off the mechanism of reprocessing outside information into the inside (Lotman 2005: 208–209). Different extreme right groupuscules unite people who use online-environments for formation and affirmation of their identities (Daniels 2012: 4). One widespread tendency is to create niche-communities that are often accompanied by radical and polarized processes of identification (Castells 2009; Sunstein 2009; Wojcieszak 2010). As previously mentioned, extreme rightists hold a peripheral position in public discourse. That kind of marginal status as a “public voice” explains the fact that the dominant strategy of self-identification that we detected during our observation was the depiction of the extreme right community as a victim or sufferer. Extreme rightists often saw themselves being persecuted or unfairly excluded from public debates. The specification and the degree of discreteness of particular villains depends in many ways on the topic of an individual post, but we also detected typical figures of enmity. In a single post we meet a collection of the most common antagonists: the mainstream media, corrupt politicians, but also a precisely articulated enemy – Herman Van Rompuy, the President of the European Council (1 December 2009–30 November 2014):

... nationalists – so-called extreme rightists or populists- if we use the language of journalists or cartel-politicians, are being repressed already in their workplace. ... As the dictatorship is still in its early stage then direct imprisonment and killing is not yet taking place but it is reasonable to guess that it will happen. ... Guidelines for that have been set from the highest possible level, namely the president of the European Council (also called European Supreme Council) Herman Van Rompuy has claimed that nationalism and nation-states are the utmost enemies of European Union.8

The European Union and its subdivisions are depicted as hostile and dangerous. This has been expressed in many different ways but one central topic represents the amorality of European structures. Extreme rightists think that a principal action for undermining traditional family values is the promotion of homosexuality by the politics of European Union:

The defenders of traditional family from all over the European Union are preparing for the battle because European Parliament may approve the directive which establishes a legal protection for homosexual “families” in all member-states, and it also forbids to criticize them by the law of hate-speech. This is the next step in tainting the ancient family-traditions of Europe.9


9 http://www.oleteadlik.ee/vihkamiskuriteod-saavad-kohustuslikuks-kogis-osariikides/
On the other hand, the groupuscular extreme right has a heterogeneous inner structure. As soon as two semiotic unities make contact, forming a common semiotic mechanism, they proceed from the state of mutual neutrality to the condition of mutual complementarity and they start to cultivate their own specific character and mutual contrast (Lotman 1997: 11). The same semiotic unity can enter into different unities at higher structural levels as a sub-structure. Thus it can maintain its wholeness while being a part of higher semiotic wholes, and in that sense by not being identical with itself, “it inevitably presumes a complex polyglotism of its internal structure” (Lotman 1997: 12). On the meta-level of groupuscular semiosphere, we can detect the temporary mapping of various borders. Reputedly, hypermedia has made copying and adapting the information in new contexts very easy and in recent decade there has developed a sharing-culture of intriguing (or otherwise noteworthy) extreme right content. If a particular groupuscule starts to interact with other entities of groupuscular fields, then it does not remain identical with itself, on the contrary, its nature is greatly defined by specific relations with other groupuscules, i.e., its specificity can appear only via interactions with other groupuscules. For example, hyperlinks, added to a particular posting, may refer to possible communication partners and together they create a wider semiotic unity that re-defines the identity of a blog. The web-pages that we analyzed are quite well-known to so-called Estonian countercultural public. Some articles are often commented, discussed and re-posted in other blogs (also, there appeared mutual quoting and re-posting between the web-pages we studied). It is also quite common that bloggers translate foreign extreme-right texts into Estonian or make summaries of them for their target auditorium.

Ongoing interactional meaning-making takes place, as these groupuscular nodes may vary in the sense of activeness or ideology, they can offer something for all extreme right tastes. For example, there is content for people that are fond of the philosophy of Julius Evola, but at the same time there is also something for the fans of White Noise or the admirers of the Third Reich (Virchow 2004: 69). But on the other hand, we can see several common denominators, shared by all groupuscular nodes, which foster integration at some level: e.g., opposition to multiculturalism, belief in white supremacy, Euroscepticism, and so on (Virchow 2004: 70). In the extreme right postings we analyzed, there is a noticeable juxtaposition of varying topics: Plato and

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10 Usually the main gap that NWO narrative cannot fill is the topic of principle inequality of different races.
national-socialism; Runes – a true alphabet; Ancient Sumer and Estonia; Our true religion – Paganism; The myth of the slave; Music and videos, etc.\textsuperscript{11} As well as: Myths of Russia; True Islam; Weekday of Empire of Evil; Freedom etc.\textsuperscript{12} or The World; The Planet; Science, Health.\textsuperscript{13}

On the other hand, extreme right groupuscules also rely on articles that have been published in the mainstream newspapers (predominantly Postimees and Eesti Ekspress) and thus have passed the normative control of the editors. It is clear that in the extreme right communication those newspaper articles achieve a different meaning than in their initial context. In mainstream media they may represent marginal voice that is demonstrated as a contrast for dominant information. But in groupuscular field this may serve as a sign of approval and acceptance of “our” (i.e., extreme rightists’) voice in public channels. We can see the development of possible meaning-hierarchies already here, but it appears much more clearly if we explain groupuscular meaning-making in the light of one key characteristic of semiosphere: the interdependence of core and periphery.

2.2 The hierarchical nature of groupuscular meaning-making

Methodologically every semiosphere can be studied as a separate totality, but every totality in culture that can be analyzed is simultaneously part of a larger totality (Torop 2003: 335–336). There is an endless dialog between a part and a whole. This is connected with the fact that at the level of the general groupuscular (semio)sphere – but also at the level of a particular groupuscule – communication is constituted by establishing relations between the core and periphery. According to Lotman, core-structures are strictly organized and they are dominant because they work on the level of self-description. In the core they develop a central system of meta-description that is used for describing the core itself but also the periphery (Lotman 2005: 213). Core-structures play a significant role in processes of groupuscular identity-creation. One of the main indicators of core-periphery relations is the tendency of some topics to become inter-groupuscular umbrella topics. For example in the beginning of 2012 the topic of ACTA\textsuperscript{14} (The Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement), especially the notion of the

\textsuperscript{11}http://staap02.wordpress.com/
\textsuperscript{12}http://bhr.balanss.ee/
\textsuperscript{13}www.oleteadlik.ee
\textsuperscript{14}In winter 2012 ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement) led to numerous public demonstrations and also the formation of Rahvakogu (‘The Panel of the People’) in Estonia. The main point of discontent was the extent of this agreement; people were worrying that, as an international treaty, ACTA would stay out of reach of the legal system of particular countries. There
corruption of different administrative structures of the European Union (and in
general the decadence of liberalism and the new world order) functioned like an
umbrella-topic for Estonian extreme right groupuscules.

The hierarchical organization of the groupuscular field is indicated by a
widespread tendency to quote other extreme right bloggers for confirmation and
legitimize one’s ideas. The groupuscular field has its opinion leaders, whose
posting are most often viewed and quoted. In the Estonian groupuscular field
the most quoted sources are the blogs Rahvuslane,\footnote{http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com} NS Blog,\footnote{http://staap02.wordpress.com/ (it is now available via a new address: http://koobas.net)} and DeCivitae.\footnote{http://www.decivitate.ee. This blog does not usually exhibit radical characteristics of extreme right rhetoric but it is often referred in groupuscular network because it expresses conservative values.}
Some of their postings are reposted in several other blogs. The formation of such
authorities involves a plethora of considerations: for example the top-bloggers
are constantly actively posting, they are also consistent in the level of radicalism
of their content and they often add many references to reliable extreme right
content. The contextual nature of center-periphery relations depends on the
relations of extreme rightists and alternative media. Extreme right bloggers
often position themselves as active members of civil society whose mission is
to detect and explicate the gray areas that are caused by a decadent establish-
ment or the corrupted mainstream media which is which is at its service. They
organize petitions and public letters and often proudly refer to them in their
blogs. Identification with citizen-journalism or grassroots activism in quite wide-
spread in the level of self-descriptions of the extreme right. This can be
explained by the general tendency to contextualize the Internet as an alternative
public sphere. In the sphere of alternative media, extreme right groupuscules
function as a periphery. They eagerly share links to central alternative autho-
rities, e.g., Wikileaks or Anonymous.\footnote{http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/ (31 January 2012, time 12:35)} Despite that fact that far right group-
uscules tend to stress it in their self-descriptions, we cannot treat these groups
as instances of classical citizen- or grassroots-media. Because extreme right
networks are essentially unwilling to respect the plurality of different viewpoints
(Atton 2006: 585–586), Groupuscules are not characterized by the ambition to
generate dialog or synthesis, but rather by the concentration and fixation of
predetermined views.

was assumed that countries have to solve the counterfeit-crimes in new organization that stays
out of reach of UN and other well-known institutions; and is thus practically uncontrollable.
ACTA played a significant role not only in debates of parliament but also in the self-descriptions
of Estonian extreme right (Madisson and Ventsel 2016: 91).
It seems that when Griffin characterizes the groupuscular right by the absence of core and periphery, he is operating under the assumption that technological characteristics structure the online environment in a rhizomatic and non-hierarchical manner. However, he does not take into account several aspects, namely, the fact that the opposition of center-periphery has a relational nature, signification-processes are hierarchical, and they play a significant role in organizing groupuscules. As a historian, Griffin puts the central emphasis on explicating the context of formation of contemporary groupuscular right, and also on comparing it with inter-war fascism. We agree that the groupuscular right has much weaker hierarchies than extreme right parties, but it is nonetheless an exaggeration to claim that they are entirely missing. We believe that the processes of formation of groupuscular center-periphery relations can be explained by Lotman’s concept of code-text.

3 Code-text as a central automodelling structure of groupuscules

Semiosphere functions as a space of meaning-making and self-descriptive processes – that are built on opposing particular semiotic unity to other external unities and acknowledging its own specificity – play a central role in it (Lotman 2005: 211). In order to understand the meaning-making of contemporary extreme right, it is important to explain the peculiarities of self-descriptive processes of groupuscular field. According to Lotman, the process of self-description brings out the dominants and builds upon them a unified model which functions as code of a self-reliance or self-deciphering of a particular whole. Self-model is a powerful tool of cultural “regulation,” it provides a structural consistency and it determines some of its qualities as informational reservoir (Lotman 2010: 64). By creating a model of itself (and for itself) the semiotic unity organizes itself hierarchically, by canonizing some types of information and eliminating the others (Lotman and Uspenski 1984: 3). We think that it is fruitful to conceptualize the central self-model of the groupuscular field as a code-text.

Lotman explains that a code-text is a textual system that originates from a cultural memory of particular collective. A code-text is a certain kind of interlink that, instead of being an abstract collection of rules for constructing a text, is a textual system with a rigid syntactic order. Different signs of a code-text can be divided into various sub-structures, but despite this the code-text remains unambiguous “for itself”: “on its own level, the code-text is a unitary
phenomenon in both content and expression” (Lotman 1988: 35–36). All in all, we can say that code-text is an invariant system of relations which originate from the collective memory of a particular community and the main role of code-text is to put particular pieces of information into habitual templates of meaning.

Many studies (Ballinger 2011; Bratich 2008; Fenster 2008; Griffin 1999, 2002a, 2003, etc.) have pointed out that an important core of extreme-right meaning-making is the notion of a malicious secret plan of the decadent elite, whose ultimate goal is to establish a totalitarian global order. Those inquiries are sometimes criticized for stigmatizing their research object because they depict extreme rightism as a generator of pathological ideas, as a dangerous and paranoid world-view (Mudde 2011: 79). We think that conspiracy theory should be treated as a vital cultural code-text whose usage is not confined only to the meaning-making of peripheral groups. Conspiracy theory appears in various discourses: in commonsense explanations, in public political statements but also in popular science writings and in artistic texts (Madisson 2014: 279). Thus, it is very important to notice the gradation: in extreme right ideology there exists the specific mechanism of associations, based on conspiracy theory, in particularly concentrated form.

Conspiracy theories articulated by the extreme right can be usually categorized as New World Order (NWO) conspiracy theories (Ballinger 2011: 102; Bratich 2008: 125–126; Fenster 2008: 72; Madisson forthcoming). To put it very briefly, this is a super-conspiracy concerning an international system of evil that has determined important social events for a long time (Barkun 2003: 4). It is assumed that groups that hold global economic or political power (e.g., the UN, WTO, EU, Trilateral Commission, Bilderberg Group, etc.) are taken over by conspirators, and that those organizations actively work to undermine the existing (democratic) world order and subvert the independence of nation-states (Ballinger 2011: 99). The above-mentioned institutions are seen as different layers of a hierarchic conspiracy-system. The uppermost position of this hierarchy is often attributed to an ancient enemy of extreme right demonology: the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG; Spark 2003: 537). It is believed that the aim of these conspirators is to create a global totalitarian regime which can be achieved only by weakening and ridiculing their sacred identity-markers, e.g., race, national feeling, (Christian) morality. Extreme right explanations stress that it is much easier to brainwash spineless people who have a mixed bloodline. NWO theories that became extremely popular in 1990s, via the works of professional conspiracy writers like Alex Jones, Glenn Beck, and David Icke have also found their way to a contemporary audience (Ballinger 2011: 72).
In the following we try to demonstrate how the code-text of NWO conspiracy theory organizes the online communication of the Estonian groupuscular right.\textsuperscript{19} As previously outlined, groupuscular field is organized by a code-text that talks about the decadence of an existing (liberal democratic) system and the threat to nation states (Griffin 2003). Cultural homogenization, economic globalization and mass migration are seen as indicators of the success and omnipresence of the conspiracy. Groupuscules do not limit themselves only to complaining about the decadence of existing world order but they also articulate scenarios of radical reforms which help to facilitate the rebirth of new nation states and nationalist mentality (Griffin 2002b: 28).

The articulation of the relevance of NWO conspiracy varies, of course, in different representations, but it is a typical explanation-frame that is familiar to the whole groupuscular field. In NWO narratives the ultimate cause of all important social events is connected with the malicious intentions of conspirators. The specificity of the code-text guides interpreters to see causal connections between events that have taken place in different times and places and that usually seem totally unconnected to bystanders.

The tendency to fit seemingly unconnected elements within a code-textual frame is clearly present in the following blog post that discusses the potential impacts of ratification of ACTA:

... ACTA would change too many important principles that our society is based on:

a) The definition of Historical Truth. Holocaust denial and disputing of Nuremberg will be criminalized.

... 

c) Thought-crimes will be criminalized (see Orwell’s \textit{1984}) – taboos will be constructed, public discussion will lead to punishment.

d) the definition of criminal organization will be changed – self-interests will not be an argument anymore, idea-exchange will be sufficient for that.

e) Instead of punishing for particular actions there will be punishing for having a public opinion in a matter of Truth-questions. Expressing an opinion that you don’t like someone/something can be enough ...

... 

g) It will not matter anymore if the group that is being criticized exists or not. Freemasons don’t have to prove anymore that they don’t exist.

\textsuperscript{19} Madisson has explicated heterogeneous socio-cultural functions of conspiracy theories in her previous article (see Madisson 2014), in this analysis we focus the specific function which code text has in extreme right communication.
h) New juridical terms will be imposed systematically – public peace (compare with lack of public interest), other public space (Internet, of course!)

i) Some more juridical terms: hatred, hate speech, they even do not have proper equivalents in Estonian.\(^{20}\)

In this example ACTA is depicted as a part of vast decadent plan that the malicious establishment (“states,” “freemasons”) has organized in order to subordinate its (regular) citizens. The elite determine people’s freedom of speech and its limits (“there is defined Historical Truth,” “thought-crimes are criminalized,” “those who have an opinion in the matter of The Question of Truth are punished,” “systematically public peace,” “other public space”). It is important to note that examples concerning Historical Truth are taken from one the most exploited discourses of extreme right – freedom of speech in the context of “Holocaust revisionism/denial and criminalization of ‘trivializing’ Nuremberg.” The problematics of ACTA are fitted into a code-textual framework in a way that connects (and unites) text fragments from different discourses (juridical, historical, ethical-philosophic, political, etc.). Behind every such text fragment is seen the threat of weakening freedom and privacy as designed by a malicious elite. We also analyzed another post where the code-textual structure is manifest in a very concentrated way. In the following post we note a strong emphasis on ideological struggle:

Why representatives of the most bloodstained ideology that is Communist parties are allowed in Europe, and they are present also in the level of European Parliament? But at the same time National Socialism is seen as some misanthropic ideology. And in the level of EU everybody are extremely tolerant towards Communists, but Islam is also tolerated regardless it is really misanthropic and sadistic. ... The National Socialism of present day is not the same as in Hitler’s times, everything needs to be adapted and improved. For example, the problem of Jews has turned much wider problem of immigrants. But the main characteristics are the same and they are entirely correct. But they cannot be put into practice because it is impeded by the enemy of nation-states (also nation-states are declared as the greatest enemy of EU!) which is rapacious capitalism with its amoral propaganda. It is a Satanic ideology that enslaves nations and seeds multiculturalism.\(^{21}\)

This post refers to the endangerment of the white race: the spread of Communist and capitalist ideology and multicultural mentality have brought along with them the problems of massive migration, decrease of morality and political persecution of nation states. Note the anti-Semitic tonality\(^{22}\) of the post: Jews as the principal


\(^{21}\) http://rahvuslik.blogspot.com/2013/03/hitleri-voit-oleks-paastnud-valge-rassi.html

\(^{22}\) In Eastern-European countries the Jews are often the most constituent element of the extreme right demonology, the Jews have been accused of having a decadent culture, i.e., unpatriotic and cosmopolitan, which is essentially dangerous for the nation states (Fekete 2012: 3).
enemies of National Socialist ideology function as the center of the code text – they are depicted as a hidden source of moral decadence which is needed to manipulate important political developments. Bloggers also see another group of enemies in the contemporary context: immigrants. Those two categories of enemies are seen responsible for the rise of Communist parties (“representatives of bloodstained ideology”) who demonize the national, and more concretely National Socialist, world-view. This representation of the enemy is similar to Adolph Hitler’s rhetoric regarding Jewish Bolshevism. Extreme right rhetoric has implicit connections with Christian discourse: they are opposed to Islam, which is seen anti-human (“misanthropic and sadistic”), but also to Capitalism’s worship of material values. Capitalism is described using negative religious connotations, here using the epithet ‘Satanic’. As in the previous example, here the code-text organizes seemingly disconnected parts of political and historical discourse into one whole. Lotman also indicates that a code-text unites into a unified text elements which, from a so-called “outside” perspective, remain unconnected. But from the insider’s perspective the code text is a cultural text – a significant guideline for interpreting different events (Lotman 1988: 35). A code text functions as an informational center which gives rigid and one-dimensional meaning to principally different text-elements that are initially independent (e.g., Communists, capitalists, Islamists are all identified as similar – as an enemy manipulated by Jews to enslave the white race). In different posts there is of course a different range of events and phenomena that are interpreted in light of the NWO code text but we can identify the persistence of a certain hierarchy and the specific nature of associations: it is repeated again and again that Jews have infiltrated into different organizations and acquired global power. It is also assumed that one of their aims is to undermine the cornerstones of nationalist world-view. Elements that do not fit into the code text or that might arouse other explanations for the socio-cultural status quo are pushed to the periphery as irrelevant.

Historically, in Estonia and (in Eastern-Europe in general) anti-Semitism has had an important role in the formation of the relations of the own and alien. In 1925 the autonomy is of ethnic minorities of established in Republic of Estonia (1918–1940) and it also applied for the Jews. The German occupation (1941–1944) ended this autonomy, already on January 1942 it was declared at Wannsee conference that Estonia was the first Judenfrei (‘free of Jews’) country in conquered Eastern areas. After the World War II the anti-Semitic politics was continued by Soviet Occupation forces, on the level of public rhetoric it was called as a part of the fighting with “cosmopolitism” (see Ventsel 2010). The so-called “Jewish question” and “wrong fifth entry” (that is, the ethnicity entry that stated “Jewish”) in passports sanctioned the possibilities of entering to university and the future career and the other ways of public engagement. In the 2000s the topic of anti-Semitism has risen in public debates in the context of remembering the World War II and in discussions about the involvement of Estonians in local holocaust (1941–1944).
4 Conclusion

The aim of our study was to complement Griffin’s concept of the groupuscule with the notions of semiosphere and code text, from repertoire of cultural semiotics. We tried to show that this synthesis helps to explicate the communication between different nodes of the groupuscular network, as well as interactions with the surrounding socio-cultural context. Although our article was first and foremost theoretically oriented we also tried to exemplify our claims with an analysis of Estonian extreme right web pages.

The most important contribution of our study is that, by supplementing the approach to groupuscular informational networks with the concept of semiosphere, we avoid the technological determinism that Griffin attributes to signification practices that take place in online media. It seems that he imputes technical features of the online environment (e.g., rhizomic and non-hierarchical nature, lack of center and periphery etc.) in a one-to-one manner to groupuscular meaning-making. Our analysis indicated that this kind of generalization is not justified, and in the context of studying extreme right online-communication we have to take into account also the hierarchies that organize the meaning-making. It is important to recognize that although extreme right communication has become much more flexible and heterogeneous (comparing with interwar times), it is still possible to detect central and peripheral meanings. The concept of code text helped to explain the specific online communication of groupuscules and the inner-hierarchies of their signification processes.

On the basis of our analysis of the reception of ACTA in extreme right online communication we can conclude that the concept of code text enables to explain the dominant framework of associations that organizes extreme right meaning-making and connects it with the communal memory. The framework of NWO conspiracy theory functions as an important code-textual center that guides the mapping of social reality of individuals navigating the groupuscular network. NWO code-text guides interpreters to notice causal connections between events and phenomena that have taken place in different times and locations which usually seem totally unconnected to bystanders. It promotes an understanding of being rounded by a secret (usually Jewish) society that is systematically jeopardizing the white race, nation-states, traditional family models and pushes alternative ways of understanding the world to the periphery (see also Madisson 2016). Semiotics of culture offers a unified meta-language which widens the analytical tools of contemporary extreme right. In brief, it was one of our main contributions in developing Griffin’s concept of groupuscule.
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