# Towards Rediscovery of Social Class after the Post-Communist Transition: A Comparative Neo-Weberian Analysis of Baltic States

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Class effects in Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Lithuania are compared in the framework of the Neo-Weberian social class theory (EGP class schema), using European Social Survey (ESS) Round 4 (2008–2010) data, just at the time when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania completed their transition to market economy and liberal democracy. Finland, perceived in the post-communist Baltic countries as a model or a "real utopia" state, is used as benchmark for a comparative estimation of the strength of class effects. The main findings of the statistical correspondence analysis are the following: (1) Class inequality of life chances is more pronounced in the post-communist Baltics than in Finland; (2) Paradoxically, class effects on ideological orientations and party voting are more prominent in Finland, where class inequality is less pronounced.

**Keywords:** Neo-Weberian class theory, EGP class schema, life chances, class inequality, class voting, correspondence analysis

## INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH QUESTION, DATA AND METHOD

The fall of communism for many scholars was just another proof for the "death of class" thesis (e.g. Beck 1992, 2000; Giddens 1994; Pakulsky, Waters 1996; Kingston 2000). The recent (2008–2009) global financial crisis, tamed by the "socialism for the rich" economic policies, belied

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the "death of class" thesis and resuscitated the interest in the class analysis (see, first of all, Piketty 2014). However, even in this rather favourable context the renaissance of class still did not resurface in the public discourse of the post-communist societies, where public opinion leaders and mainstream mass-media still observe "the taboo of not talking about class in public" (Ban 2015: 648). The aim of this paper is to contribute to breaking the post-communist class taboo. In doing this, we join the expanding circle of the researchers who plead to rescue the concept of class for a sociological analysis of post-communist societies (e.g. Blom, Melin, Taljunaite 2000; Česnavičius et al. 1999; Eglitis, Lāce 2009; Helemäe, Saar 2012, 2015; Titma, Murakas 2004; Crowley 2015; Matulionis 2005; Ost 2005, 2009; Helemäe, Saar 2012, 2015; Tittenbrun 2015).

We will explore whether the class was really dead in the post-communist Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) at the time when they were finalising the post-communist transition. To formulate our research question without metaphors, we will explore how strong was the impact of class membership on the life chances, ideological orientations, and political behaviour in these countries at the time of new ordeals by the worldwide economic crisis of 2008. There is a broad consensus among transitologists (e.g. Clark 2002; Kollmorgen 2013: 93; Ó Beacháin et al. 2012) that post-communist transition was over in these countries by this time.

Assessing the class effects in post-communist Baltic countries, we will compare them with those in Finland, which in the interwar time was internationally perceived as the fourth (3+1) Baltic country. This research design most directly follows the example set by the studies of Finnish sociologists Raimo Blom Markku Kivinen, Harri Melin, and Jouko Nikula (see, e.g. Blom et al. 1991; Blom, Melin 2000) where they researched the making of the middle class in the post-communist and Nordic countries. In our contribution, this comparison will serve to assess whether the alleged waning of class in the post-communist Baltic countries progressed less or more in comparison with Finland, reputed as one of the most open and globalised post-industrial European societies.

In order to answer our research question, we employ data of the European Social Survey (ESS). While Estonia participates in the ESS since Round 2 (which was conducted in 2004, ESS R2), Lithuania joined in 2008 (ESS R4). Latvia did participate in the ESS R3 (2006) and ESS R4, but dropped out of the ESS R5 (2010) and ESS R6 (2012). Until Latvia will participate in the ESS again, ESS R4 (2008–2010) data remain a rather unique source of cross-country comparable data to analyse class structures of all three Baltic States applying a uniform class analysis framework.

Importantly, we do not reanimate the Marxist approach to the class analysis or the theory of class struggle. Instead, we apply the Neo-Weberian class theory developed by Robert Erikson, John Goldthorpe and Lucienne Portocarero (in short, EGP theory; see Erikson et al. 1979; Erikson, Goldthorpe 1992; Goldthorpe 1996, [2008] 2000; Česnavičius et al. 1999: 28–53). It is a mainstream approach in the current research of social structure, its transformation, and social mobility in the old EU member states (cp. Rose, Harrison 2010). Therefore, we assume reader's knowledge of the EGP class schema and proceed straight to the presentation and discussion of our findings about class effects on life chances (in the second section), continuing with those about ideological attitudes and voting (in the third section). Lithuanian readers may also consult our earlier contribution (Morkevičius, Norkus 2012), where we applied the EGP scheme to post-communist Lithuania and critically discussed the received research on its social structure, grounded in different approaches. This contribution extends our former analysis to 3+1 Baltic States, applying a cross-country comparative approach.

The correspondence analysis (CA) is our statistical tool to analyse class effects, famously used for a similar goal by Pierre Bourdieu ([1979] 1986). It is a graphical method which allows plotting a joint graph of the categories of variables (or of rows and columns of an input cross-tabulation of categorical variables). Spatial locations of categories of variables provide a visual picture of the association patterns between the variables that are analysed. Simply put, the closer any two points (representing categories of variables) are projected on the map, the more related they are. Overlap of two categories of different variables means that exactly the same individuals selected the same two answer categories for these two questions. The more distant the points are from the origin, the more distinctive they are from the sample or population average profile. Therefore, points close to the origin of the map are not very interesting for the interpretation of the results. Correspondences between the points representing classes and categories of other variables far away from the origin indicate a strong impact of class on life chances, ideological orientations, and political behaviour of individuals.

## LIFE CHANCES AND CLASS

According to Weber's ([1922] 1976: 177–180, 531–540) classical explication, class position is the main determinant for the variation of life chances under conditions of capitalism or market society. In the market society, high financial income is the key resource for a good life, and income groups (e.g. high, middle, low) are even perceived as classes in "folk sociology". "Both Marxist and Weberian class analyses differ sharply from simple gradational accounts of class in which class is itself directly identified within inequalities in income, since both begin with the problem of the social relations that determine the access of people to economic resources" (Wright 2005: 18). Thus, income is not part of the definition of class, but a dependent variable potentially explained by class position. Persons employed in occupations with advantageous class positions (market position + work position) receive higher incomes and have better chances to live a good life.

However, income is just an intermediate variable in the explanation of good life chances. High income provides resources for a good life, but it can be spent badly (e.g. for drugs). Nevertheless, it is easier to live a good life on a large income than to live a good life on a small income. Importantly, not just the size of income matters, but also its steadiness. Having an unsteady income inflow has a negative impact on life chances. Individuals in advantageous class positions have a greater social safety net (measurable, for example, by expectations to become unemployed). Similarly, the conditions of health (controlled for age), satisfaction with life, and subjective happiness are direct indicators of the quality of life. Therefore, further in this section we explore how much differences in class positions matter for the variation in the chances to live a good life in the 3+1 Baltic States[2].

There is a clear correspondence between the class position and the income of respondents as the 10th decile (highest income) is strongly related to the higher service (I) and self-employed small proprietors with employees (IVa) classes, whereas the 1st decile (the lowest income) is related to the farm workers (VIIb) and unskilled workers (VIIa) classes. This correspondence is quite similar in all 3+1 Baltic States. Moreover, these findings are corroborated with the relation between the class position and respondents' subjective evaluations of their household income. While members of the higher service class (I) reported living comfortably on their present income in all 3+1 Baltic countries, class effects for the classes with weak market and working place positions in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are more pronounced

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[2]    Only for few selected findings we provide figures in the text due to a limited space available.

compared to Finland, where only unskilled (VIIa) workers reported difficulties of living with their present income. In the remaining three countries, agricultural wage labourers (VIIb), routine non-manual employees (both higher and lower grade, i.e. IIIa+b), unskilled (VIIa) and skilled (VI) workers (depending on the country) reported at least some difficulty to survive on their present income.

Similarly, there is a correspondence between respondent's class position and opinion about the likelihood that during the next 12 months there will be some periods when they will not have enough money to cover household necessities. Importantly, there were no differences between Finish and other Baltic manual workers (VI and VIIa classes) in perceiving the probability of becoming unemployed during the next 12 months which allows us to conclude that their class position is the most unsafe in all 3+1 Baltic States. On the other hand, there is more variation in the perceptions of job safety among the more advantaged EGP classes. In Finland, self-employed small proprietors (IVa, IVb and IVc) consider themselves as the safest, while in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, safety feelings about possible future unemployment are mostly associated with the higher service class (I). The explanation for this difference may be that many self-employed in post-communist countries are small entrepreneurs not by their own choice. They were forced to start their own businesses after losing their previous jobs, while in Finland the bulk of small entrepreneurs are running an inherited family business.

The impact of age on the class position (overrepresentation of the elderly persons among farm workers) complicates the interpretation of the graphical output presenting correspondences between class positions and subjectively perceived health (see Fig. 1)[3]. Nevertheless, here one observes quite a similar picture to that reflecting relations of class positions and perceived income sufficiency: class effects for advantageous market and working place class positions are rather homogenous in all 3+1 Baltic States. However, only in the post-communist Baltic countries a correspondence between the disadvantaged class position and the "bad" or "fair" health exists. Intriguingly, we found the class effect for respondents with a good health in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which was related to the lower routine non-manual employees (IIIb) class. This finding might be putatively explained by the strong representation of young female employees in this class.

There is also a clear correspondence between the class position and subjective well-being as measured by two traditional items: satisfaction with life[4] and subjective happiness[5]. Good news about the living conditions in the Baltic States may be the absence of very dissatisfied or unhappy classes (except for the unskilled workers class (VIIa)). On the positive side of subjective well-being, the class effect is most clear in Estonia, Finland and Lithuania where the higher service class (I) is very happy and very satisfied.

## IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS, VOTING AND CLASS

Intriguingly, the correspondence analysis revealed quite strong class effects on the ideological attitudes with regard to the Estonian higher service class (I). While in all 3+1 Baltic States members of the higher service class tend to endorse inequality in income levels, place

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[3] Question: "How is your health in general? Would you say it is … very good; good; fair; bad; or very bad?". The last two categories (bad/very bad) were merged for the statistical analysis.

[4] Question: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as whole nowadays?" (0 – extremely dissatisfied to 10 – extremely satisfied).

[5] Question: "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?" (0 – extremely unhappy to 10 – extremely happy).
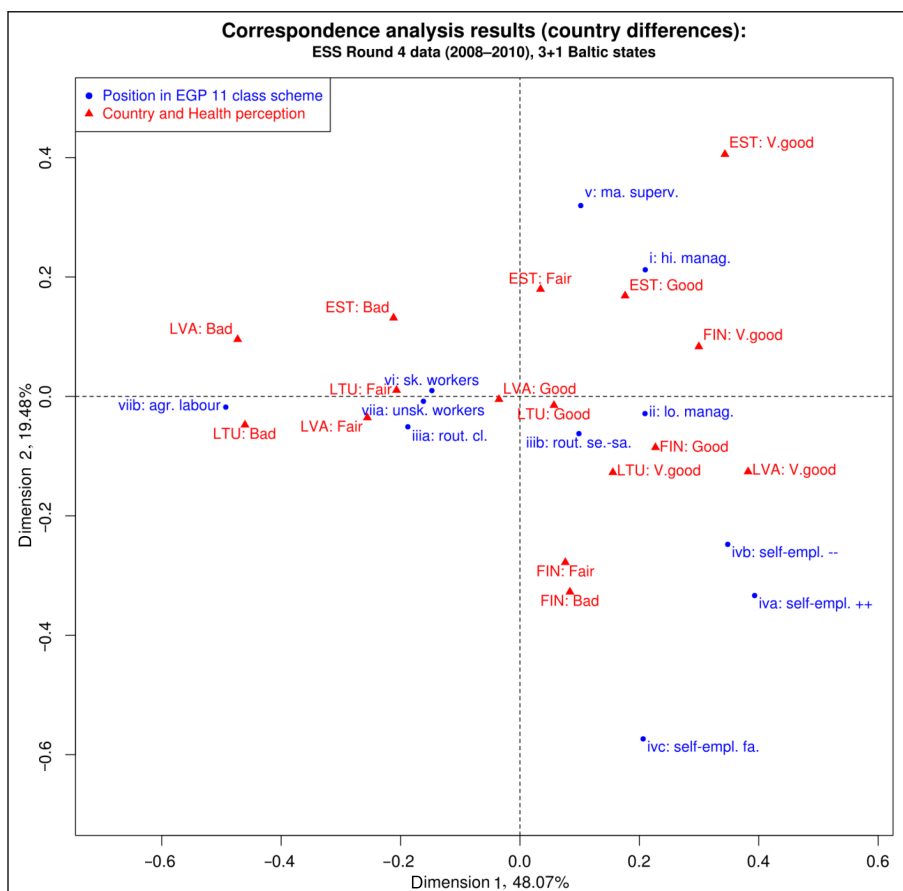
**Fig. 1.** Correspondence analysis of subjective health[3] and class position in 3+1 Baltic States

Notes: Design-based Wald test of association (F = 4.748; ndf = 150; ddf = 7837; p-value = 0); principal co-ordinates of CA (symmetric normalization); Lithuanian data is not design weighted.

Data source available online at: www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=4. Accessed 20 December 2016.

themselves on the right side of the left-right political spectrum, reject progressive taxation and declare their overall satisfaction with the working of democracy in their country, the perceptions of Estonian representatives of this class are the most consistent. In general, this is also the case for the small proprietor employers (IVa) class and the petty bourgeoisie (IVa+b) in Finland. Their "class sisters" in other Baltic States display less consistent "class attitudes". On the other hand, classes with the disadvantaged positions on the labour market and the working place tend to lean towards leftist attitudes. However, their preferences differ from the marginal distribution much less in comparison with the advantaged classes.

In all the 3+1 Baltic States the advantaged classes I+II (and in some cases IVa+b classes) are more interested in politics than their disadvantaged counterparts and less frequently (or never) have difficulties to understand what is going on in politics. Similarly, the same difference

holds when comparing participation of different classes in parliamentary elections. In this case the service class (I+II) is the most active "voting class" in all the 3+1 Baltic States. One can observe a rather clear pattern between class positions and voting preferences in Finland[6], where the votes of manual workers were divided mainly between Social Democrats, the post-communist Left Alliance, and the right populist, True Finns Party. The service (I+II) and petty bourgeoisie (IVa+b) classes voted for the "bourgeois" National Coalition Party, and the rural voter preferred the Center Party, which descended from the Agrarian Party (see Fig. 2).
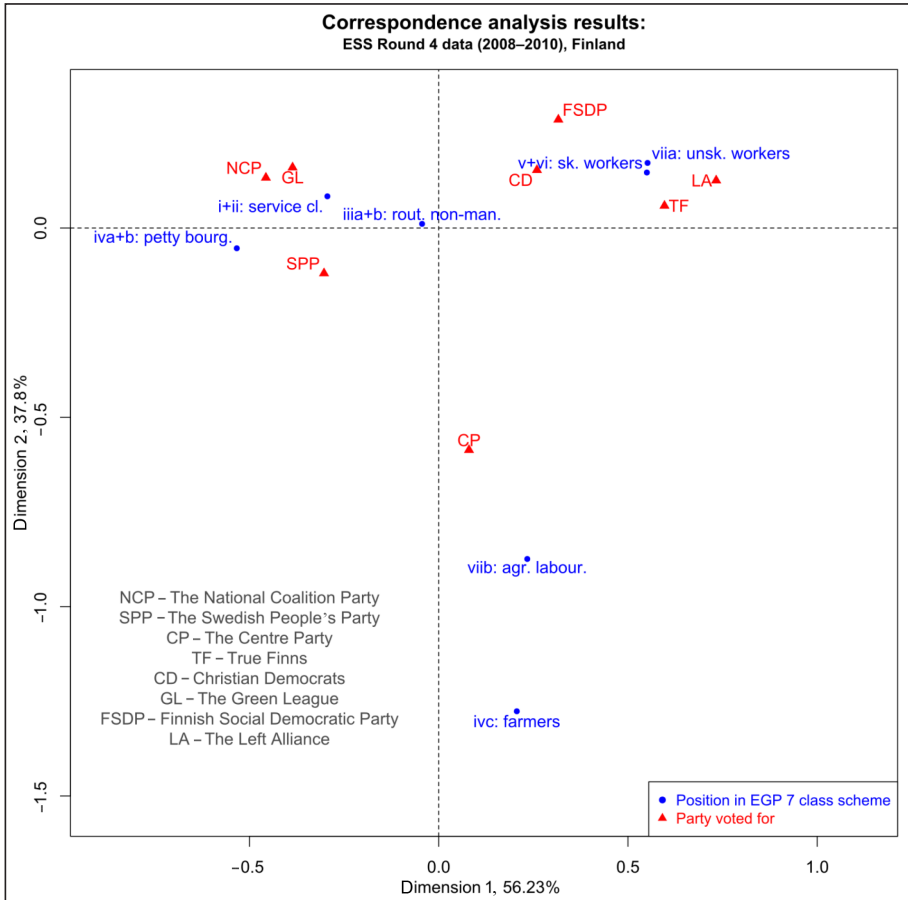


**Fig. 2.** Class and party voting in Finnish parliamentary elections (18 March 2007).

Notes: Design-based Wald test of association (F = 7.71; ndf = 42; ddf = 7837; p-value = 0); principal coordinates of CA (symmetric normalization).

Data source available online at: www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=4. Accessed 20 December 2016.

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6   This was the election to Finnish *Eduskunta* on 18 March 2007.

7   The data are about the election to Estonian *Riigikogu* on 4 March 2007.

No such clear pattern emerges in the neighbouring post-communist Estonia (see Fig. 3), where ideologically diverse Social Democratic, Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, and Estonian Reform Parties collect the votes of white collar classes[7]. While there is a close correspondence between the manual workers' class position and voting for the Centre Party, this correspondence is not an unambiguous manifestation of the class effect. Rather, it may be the outcome of the congruence of class differences and ethnic cleavages as the Russian-speaking population is over-represented among the manual workers (V+VI and VIIa) in Estonia (see Fig. 4), and the Centre Party wins most of their votes. The same interpretation may be applied to Latvia where minorities populate the skilled workers' (V+VI) class to a large extent and representatives of this class vote for the Concordia Centre and for Human Rights in the United Latvia Party.
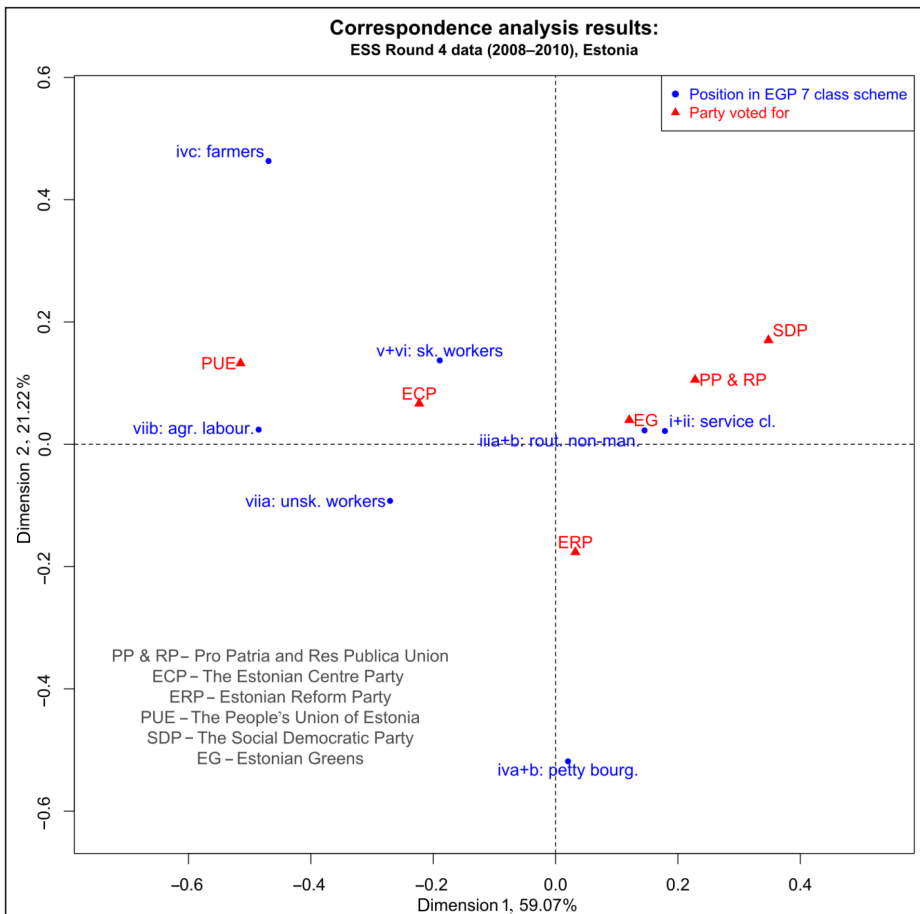


**Fig. 3.** Class and party voting in Estonian parliamentary elections (4 March 2007)

Notes: Design-based Wald test of association (F = 2.433; ndf = 30; ddf = 7837; p-value = 0); principal coordinates of CA (symmetric normalization).

Data source available online at: www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=4. Accessed 20 December 2016.
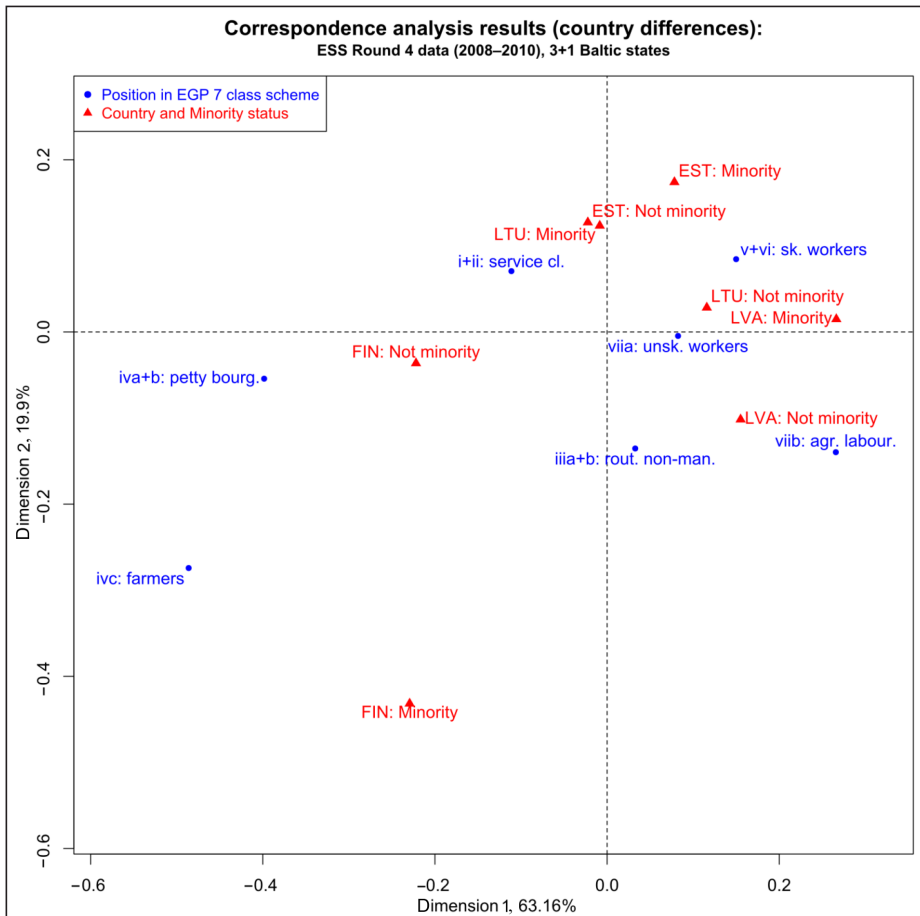
**Fig. 4.** Class position and ethnic majority/minority membership in 3+1 Baltic States

Notes: Design-based Wald test of association (F = 6.911; ndf = 42; ddf = 7837; p-value = 0); principal coordinates of CA (symmetric normalization); Lithuanian data is not design weighted.

Data source available online at: www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=4. Accessed 20 December 2016.

The absence of a clear class voting pattern in Lithuania, where ethnic differences matter least, may be considered as an indirect evidence in favour of this interpretation.

## CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

Our analysis of the ESS R4 data did not find evidence for the death of class in the wake of the post-modern individualization and neoliberal globalization in the Baltic countries (cp. Ost 2009; Słomczyński, Shabad 1997, 2000; Evans, de Graaf 2013; Helemäe, Saar 2012; 2015). Even if class is already "dead" somewhere, this is certainly not the case neither on the Northern (Finland) nor on the Southern shores of the Finnish Bay. The class impact on life chances of the disadvantaged classes is more pronounced in post-communist Baltic States.

Chances to live a good life for a manual worker, a farmer or a salesperson clearly differ from those of members of service or proprietors' classes. This is, however, much less true in Finland than among the populations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Paradoxically, although the class impact on life chances is weaker in post-industrial Finland than in the post-communist Baltic States, the association between class member-ship, on the one side, and political attitudes and voting behaviour, on the other, is stronger in Finland. In the latter country we did find a very clear association between the class posi-tion and ideological views and voting, and this association is clearly in line with the "class politics" ideas. In the post-communist Baltic States the disadvantaged classes have more reasons to engage in "class politics" because of a greater inequality of life chances. However, this is not reflected in the class voting patterns of these countries. How could we explain this paradox?

In our opinion, the most credible explanation might be a greater continuity in the evolu-tion of Finnish society. Successful defence of national independence (together with a "capital-ist" market economy) in the interwar period helped to preserve a party system, grounded in class divisions and ongoing democratic class struggle (Korpi 1983). These phenomena are still "alive" in the post-industrial capitalist era after 1990 (Pesonen, Riihinen 2002). Classes "must have some degree of demographic identity before they can acquire a socio-cultural identity or provide a basis for collective action" (Goldthorpe 1984, 20). During the violent introduction of state socialism under the Soviet occupation and the "shock therapy" style restoration of market economy, classes were "liquidated", then resurrected in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, while changes in the class structure of Finland were smooth and continuous, preserving also traditions of class politics from the industrial capitalist era.

What about future? If classes change their representatives very rapidly and an individu-al's class membership is only of an ephemeral duration, it cannot be expected that class-spe-cific patterns and lifestyles would develop. It follows that it also cannot be expected that indi-vidual interests will be organized on the basis of class. However, if intra- and intergenerational class mobility will slow down or stop, one can expect the emergence (or resurgence) of class politics on the Southern shore of the Finnish Bay. Otherwise, one can expect that surviving class political patterns in Finland will dissipate as time goes by, possibly superseded by some new divisions in the wake of immigration, making the cleavages and political agenda of this country more similar to that of its "Baltic sisters" in the South.

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# Iš naujo atrandant socialines klases po pokomunistinio perėjimo: lyginamoji neovėberiška Baltijos valstybių analizė

*Santrauka*

Naudojant Europos socialinio tyrimo (EST) 4 bangos (2008–2010) duomenis, neovėberiškos klasių teorijos (EGP klasių schemos) pagrindu lyginamas klasinės priklausomybės priežastinis vaidmuo Estijoje, Latvijoje, Lietuvoje ir Suomijoje tuo metu, kurį tranzitologai laiko Estijos, Latvijos ir Lietuvos perėjimo į rinkos ekonomiką ir liberaliąją demokratiją pabaiga. Suomija, kuri pokomunistinėse Baltijos šalyse laikoma pavyzdine arba „realios utopijos" valstybe, naudojama kaip etalonas palyginti klasinės priklausomybės įtakos stiprumą. Svarbesni statistinės atitikties analizės atradimai yra šie: pirma, palyginus su Suomija, klasinė „gyvenimo šansų" nelygybė didesnė pokomunistinėse Baltijos šalyse; antra, paradoksalu, bet klasės įtaka ideologinėms orientacijoms ir balsavimui stipresnė Suomijoje, kur klasinė nelygybė yra mažesnė.

**Raktažodžiai:** neovėberiška klasių teorija, EGP klasių schema, gyvenimo šansai, klasių nelygybė, klasinis balsavimas, atitikties analizė