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## Informal Support Networks in a Changing Society – are Family-Based Networks Being ‘Crowded out’?

Kairi Kasearu & Dagmar Kutsar\*

### Abstract

Using data from two nationally representative surveys (Estonian Living Conditions survey 1994, n=4,455; Estonian Social Survey 2004, n=8,906), we assess whether informal support networks have changed during the ten year period in Estonia. We hypothesize that during this period due to the establishment of a new welfare system and an overall increase in living standards, on one hand, and diversification of family forms and increased geographic mobility of the population on the other, family support networks have lost their functionality. Our findings show that informal support has decreased between relatives, while mutual helping activities with non-relatives – neighbours, colleagues and friends – have remained almost at the same level. We suggest that the developments in the Estonian society are ‘crowding out’ the instrumental support exchange in the kinship system and empowering social networking with non-relatives.

**Keywords:** informal support networks, support exchange, social capital, welfare state.

### Introduction

Individual wellbeing is affected by a variety of factors ranging from psychological, social to environmental. One among them in temporary societies is the social network where the individual is embedded. Social networks are relevant sources of support, help, advice, information, etc., and form the basis of one’s social capital. From the components of social networks, the family system could be seen as the dominant actor determining the individual wellbeing by providing a bonding type of social capital according to Putnam (2000)<sup>1</sup>. However, in contemporary societies due to structural changes (social protection provisions, high mobility, migration, diversification of family forms, etc.) other types of social capital – the bridging and linking – may become a more reliable part of one’s coping strategies.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Estonian society has gone through rapid changes in practically all spheres of life: from ideational value changes at the individual level to the structural social, economic and political changes at the macro level. The structural changes have also challenged family life and intergenerational relations. At the beginning of the 1990s, the spread economic hardships, inadequate social benefits and services empowered the reliance on the family-based assistance. According to Pichler & Wallace (2007), this trend is characteristic to the Eastern European post-socialist countries, where the bonding type of social capital is dominating over the other types. But the development of the social protection system and overall economic growth since late 1990s in Estonia, increasing rates of social and geographical mobility and migration, changing leisure patterns and other developmental factors, may have introduced reasons for ‘crowding out’ family-based informal networking in terms of mutual assistance.

Still the surveys have shown that the exchange of support between parents and children remains important throughout the whole individual life course, regardless of the existing social protection system (Arber & Attias-Donfut 2000). On the basis of several studies, Schwarz, Trommsdorff, Albert

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<sup>1</sup> According to several social scientists, social capital refers to social networks, mutual assistance, norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. Putnam (2000) introduced the idea of three types of social capital – bonding, bridging and linking.

& Mayer (2005) draw attention to the fact that in Western countries a large amount of financial, instrumental and emotional support is still given by parents to their adult children. Moreover, the support flow between generations is kept alive during all times of an individual's life, whereby the support patterns may differ at different points in one's lifetime. For example, the financial support is more often downwards flowing from parents to children than vice versa (Cooney & Uhlenberg 1992, Rossi & Rossi 1990). In contrast to financial support, the instrumental and emotional support from adult children more often equals or surpasses that of parents' (Kohli & Künemund 2001, Attias-Donfut, Ogg & Wolff 2005). However, there is modest knowledge found on how intergenerational solidarity functions in a rapidly changing society. We suppose that especially during the times of rapid changes the bonding relationships are activated because people are more in need of support while facing 'the new,' compared to those who live in societies with less rapid societal transformations. We hypothesize that the establishment of a social protection system will challenge changes in the support networks. The present study explores the question whether in the societies where the societal, economic and political changes occurred very rapidly as it was the case in the post-socialist countries during the transition period, the informal support networks are re-constructed and does the bridging type social capital 'crowd out' the bonding one.

## Theoretical considerations

The theoretical framework of this study follows a social capital approach and the reciprocity hypothesis of informal support with the aim of reaching an understanding on the changes in social support networks between relatives and non-relatives. We follow the idea that the social networks provide support and access to resources. They consist of contacts and group membership based on obligations, shared identities and social exchange. The support exchange is explained mainly by five different motives: altruism, exchange, reciprocity, affection and norms, and legal obligations of responsibility (Künemund 2008). Altruism is based on the idea that individuals have a moral duty or obligation to provide help in a situation of need.

The hypothesis of the reciprocity of support assumes that individuals give to others because they expect them to receive in return (a two-way altruism). Reciprocity stands for the idea that receiving some kind of support places an obligation to respond by giving something back or at least to show gratefulness (Gouldner 1960). However, the reciprocity approach allows also some asymmetry between what is initially received and what is later given, for instance, the financial help is returned as emotional or instrumental support (Künemund 2008:109). Giving help to relatives is shaped by cultural norms; in the case of Estonia, this is a legal obligation of close relatives. According to the Estonian Family Law Act (RT I 1994, 75, 1326), children are obligated to take care of their elderly parents. In contrast, the postmodern societies are characterized by the weakening of traditional ties and norms. According to Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002), family relationships are no longer characterized by rules and rituals and the central position is taken over by intimacy and affection, which on the other hand is more difficult to secure and maintain. Thus, one could expect that the social networks are also changing: today they are less determined by norms and traditions and more based on mutual affection. This phenomenon could be explained through 'new forms of social capital emerging from a context of fluid, diverse social interactions' (Edwards, Franklin & Holland 2003:17).

Regarding the social capital approach, on the one hand, we follow the idea of Lin (1999, 2000) according to whom social capital is seen as an investment and a use of embedded resources in social relations for expected returns. Although most often social capital is connected with positive consequences, it could also be negative by its nature (Portes 1998). Concerning the support networks, the high reliance on informal support increases the dependency and control over the individual life, at the same time it may restrict individual freedom.

On the other hand, we take into consideration Putnam's distinction of different forms of social capital: the bonding, bridging and linking (Putnam 2000), where support and help from kinship members may be regarded as a bonding type of social capital. Though the individualization has put family relations under pressure, the families are more fragile and diversified (high numbers of

separations and divorces, blended families, single parent families, etc.), and referring to Fukuyama (1999) the weakening of bonds within families could lead to an increase in social ties outside the family. Moreover, the bonding social capital is based on exclusive ties of solidarity and, thus, compared to the bridging one could be less of use when attempting to collect rich social capital (Putnam 1998). Therefore, Robert Putnam emphasizes the idea that the replacement of family bonds with informal networks of non-relatives can promote the creation of social capital more widely in a society.

### Societal context determining the patterns of informal social support

The current paper follows the idea that the exchange of informal support depends on the position and the role of the family as a care-giver in the society, determined by the presence of institutional support networks in the society. According to Allan Walker (1996:28), the state influences the family provided help through the way it organizes and provides services to individuals in need and also through general economic and social policies, which set the framework of material and social conditions within which individual families find themselves. Consequently, according to national legislation that differs from country to country, families have different levels of obligations in care-giving to their members and the state has different arrangements for support.

We could assume that in stabilized Western societies the intergenerational relations are following the established paths without any sudden and dramatic shifts. These paths are most often described by social scientists as a situation of 'crowding out', where family lessens its obligations and the needed support is more often provided from outside the family system – by the institutions of the welfare state, its public, private or the third sector or by the informal non-family networks (Cox & Jakubson 1995, Reil-Held 2006, Künemund & Rein 1999). The developmental path goes from private care and support, which was traditionally provided inside the family system by its members, towards the support systems that are located outside of it. However, this model can be disrupted by the change or collapse of the societal order when the former social protection system breaks down. As a consequence, to cope with a changed situation the family provided support and care may return as an essential survival strategy. In Estonia at the beginning of the 1990s, when independence was restored, the society faced difficulties by introducing a new social protection system, which would fit the new market economy and the democratic society better than the collapsed old one. At the same time, people struggled with the side effects of societal transitions: high unemployment, low earnings, end of subsidies, a shortage of commodities, etc. The economic decline was dramatic, for example, during the transition period in Estonia national production decreased by two-thirds. GDP decreased by 33% in 1991-93. The increase in price levels outpaced increases in incomes. Thus, the need for additional assistance was rapidly growing. At the same time, new principles of the new order and new welfare policy relied more on individual self-help. The implementation of the principles of the market economy led to a new system of social protection, where personal responsibilities, individual efforts and self-help were playing highly influential roles by creating the welfare resources needed for better coping with everyday life (Kutsar 1997). Proceeding from this explanation, we assume that in this situation of multiple societal changes the informal help and support between relatives as well as between the generations are extensively needed. According to Ferge (2001) the collapse of the Soviet Union shifted the paternalistic care of the state of the Soviet ideology to the family self-reliance strategies, where especially women had to pick up the informal care-work, including the burden of intergenerational care and support. However, we suppose that the societal developments towards a new welfare state have been 'crowding out' the family-based assistance and the family members have been losing their status as the first role players in the social support networking.

In addition to the societal changes, the intergenerational exchange of support has been put under pressure by different demographic changes and the intergenerational 'reciprocal relations are increasingly dependent on changing family structures and networks' (Harper 2004:27). The general transformations in the family sphere, such as the increased average life expectancy (Lauterbach 1995, Bengtson *et al.* 2003), the postponement of family formation (Bengtson 2001), the heterogeneity and diversity of the kinship structures and functions (Bengtson 1993), have challenged intergenerational relations and support to change. In addition to these general family transformations, which are

the characteristics of Western societies in general, Eastern European countries may have faced the weakening of family ties during the four or more decades of state socialist rule ‘because of the regime’s tendency, following from its totalitarian elements, to break up the power of the family, first by taking the socialization of the young out of the hands of the family, and second by making it difficult for parents to transmit status and material capital to their descendants’ (Kohli *et al.* 2000:90). Therefore, it could be assumed that in the Baltic States the younger generations grew up in a society where family ties were important but not politically empowered. However, in the beginning of the 1990s the Soviet type paternalistic care found its end and this created the need for stronger family-based support as an individual survival strategy. This turnover made family bonds as an everyday necessity politically visible and paved the way towards liberal welfare state policies.

Furthermore the changed societal context may have an impact on support patterns. In a situation of need, those who are able (in terms of space and time, health and economic conditions, etc.), are giving support and, therefore, the former and traditional patterns of giving and receiving support may not be relevant anymore. Furthermore, according to Titma, Tuma & Silver (1998) the new societal situation has reconstructed the social positions of individuals as it was the case in Estonia. Therefore, the first institution that had to take over the responsibility of their members’ wellbeing was the family. Also the need for support of individuals is determined by their personal needs. Eggebeen and Davey (1998) have shown that in times of need (*e.g.* death of partner, health problems, loss of job) the support from children to parents increases.

### The determinants of giving and receiving help at individual level

Giving and receiving help is influenced by various individual characteristics, which in turn are related to the concepts of need and capacity. For instance, in general men have wider social networks and they interact in more heterogeneous groups (Widmer 2004). In case of support flow between parents and children, the scholars have shown that the connection between age and giving and receiving support is not linear (Cooney & Uhlenberg 1992, Harper 2004) and it is strongly related to the health of a parent, while the worsening health of a parent increases the help and care from a child and at the same time diminishes the possibility of parents returning the help (Cooney & Uhlenberg 1992, Harper 2004). The informal support flow between kin is strongly affected by the family size. Hank (2007) argues that when parents have more children, the chance of parents living close to at least one child increases and the possibility to have frequent contacts with children also increases with the number of children. Apparently, in case of small families, the other network members, for instance friends and neighbours, will take over the supporting role of the kinship members.

The support exchange is influenced by the greater heterogeneity and diversity of kinship structures and functions (Bengtson 1993). The families are more fragile, it is shown by the high number of divorces and re-marriages. The individuals establish several relationships over the course of life and it is quite common to have children from different relationships. These structural changes in the family institution are preconditions for the re-construction of social support networks. Several studies have shown that the change in marital status of an individual involves changes in intergenerational relationships (Attias-Donfut & Wolff 2000, Dykstra 1997, Eggebeen 2005, Kaufman & Uhlenberg 1998, Marks & McLanahan 1993, Pezzin & Steinberg Schone 1999, Shapiro 2003, Spitze *et al.* 1994). For instance, regarding divorce, the support given from parents to their divorced daughter increases, in particular if the daughter has a child (Marks & McLanahan 1993, Attias-Donfut & Wolff 2000, Hansson 2004). But divorced sons neither receive nor provide as much help and support as married sons do (Spitze *et al.* 1994, Dykstra 1997). Milardo (1988) has pointed out that after divorce the friends and non-relatives become more important in men’s social networks, but for women bonds with kin are of central importance. Some other authors have drawn attention to the dependency of support exchanges on the marital status of the older generation. For instance, divorced parents may have less contact with their adult children (Lye 1996). On one hand, this depends on the gender of the divorced parent – men have a higher probability of losing contact with their children, (Seltzer 1994, Kaufman & Uhlenberg 1998, Shapiro 2003) and receive less informal care from grown-up children (Pezzin & Steinberg Schone 1999). However, remarriage or serial long-term cohabitations could lead to new

structural and functional changes of informal networks, whereby the networks could have new sets of ties, but these ties are characterized by low density (see: Wider 2004). According to Kutsar (1996), so the effectiveness of a support network grows only to some extent. Those with loose social networks give and receive less help than the respondents with a medium sized social network, and from some point its effectiveness will not increase any more even if the contacts grow broader.

Social support networks may differ according to social class. For instance, in Western countries, the higher educated individuals are more mobile and live farther away from their parents (Kalmijn 2006). Moreover, they may value more the bridging type of social capital and, thus, their support networks may consist of more non-relatives than large numbers of family members. On the other hand, a higher educational level may mean higher income and better chances to purchase services as well as safeguard one's old age. Apparently a very crucial factor of support exchange is the employment status. Evidently long-term unemployed and inactive persons are more dependent on financial support received from their family members and, therefore, they could be more willing to provide instrumental help in return. However, Ikkink *et al.* (1999) found that with regard to whether or not children are employed, there is no effect on the amount of support addressed to parents.

Finally, some previous studies have paid attention to cultural and ethnic differences in intergenerational relations (e.g. Hogan *et al.* 1993). In the current study, we will apply the variable of citizenship that may reflect the cultural and national differences of the respondents to some extent. After Estonia restored the independent statehood, the Parliament (*Riigikogu*) introduced relatively strict citizenship law, which left almost 1/3 of the population without state citizenship. This group of persons with undetermined citizenship was mainly composed of Russian-speaking people, who migrated to the Baltic region after the Second World War. The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the social, economic and political situation of the non-Estonians: they lost their former social position, their identity as Soviet citizens; the Russian-speaking community became more closed, isolated and fragile, both culturally and socially (see: Kutsar 1997). Therefore, we assume that because of the highly vulnerable social and political situation, the informal support networks among Russian-speaking population gained more importance compared to the ethnic group of Estonians. However, after the re-independence many Russian families found themselves in a situation, where the family system was split across different countries with limited cross-border communication, a fact that tremendously hindered the informal family support networking between generations.

Based on the previous review above, the aim of this study is to investigate the change of social support networks over a period of ten years (1994–2004). We will explore whether the established social protection system, overall increase in living standards, diversification of family forms and changes in overall life styles by 2004 have 'crowded out' the family-based help and whether the composition of informal social support networks has changed or whether they have stayed similar to the situation in 1994. Moreover, we will examine the determinants of help giving and receiving in different age groups and ask whether the mutual exchange of support with relatives and non-relatives is shaped by similar characteristics in two points of time.

## Method

### Data

Data for this study are taken from the Estonian Living Condition Survey<sup>2</sup> which was carried out in 1994 (4,455 respondents) and from the Estonian Social Survey<sup>3</sup> which was carried out in 2004 (8,906

2 The Estonian Living Condition Survey was initiated by the Institute of Applied Social Research FAFO in Oslo and carried out as a joint effort of the Institute FAFO, the Ministry of Social Affairs of Estonia and the University of Tartu (see: <http://www.fafo.no/norbalt/index.htm>).

3 The Estonian Social Survey is carried out by Statistics Estonia since 2004 as a country study of the EU SILC. The reference population of the ESS consists of all private households, whose usual place of residence is in Estonia, as well as their current members. Persons living in institutions (orphanages, care homes, convents, hospitals, prisons, etc.), amounting to about 1% of the population of Estonia, are excluded from the survey. The Estonian Population Register of Estonia administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs serves as a sampling frame representing the population. (Statistics Estonia 2010)

respondents). The respondents of both studies were drawn from a nationally representative random sample of non-institutionalized adults, aged 16-79. The data were weighted to adjust for the differences in probability of selection and to make them better representative to the Estonian population of this age group.

## Measures

Because the composition of informal support networks is age-dependent, we divided the respondents into three age groups: the younger generation (16-30 yrs), the middle generation (31-59 yrs) and the older generation (60+ yrs). To capture the flow of assistance between generations, the respondents were asked whether different kinds of instrumental help (in housework, childcare, small services (borrowing something), shopping or making other arrangements, personal services, car transportation, house repair or construction, and gardening or work in the fields) had been given and/or received in the past 12 months outside the household. Then the respondents were asked to identify the recipients and givers of help by answering whether the parents, siblings, parents-in-law, other relatives, neighbours, friends, colleagues from work had given or received any kind of the listed help.

First of all, we will describe the pattern of informal support networks of the different age groups by demonstrating who are the main recipients and donors of help in any age-group. In the next step, we will estimate the determinants of mutual help. In our study, we will apply four dependent variables that measure the unpaid assistance given to family members or kin (parents, parents-in-law, siblings, children, grandchildren) and to non-relatives (neighbours, friends, colleagues), as well as assistance received from relatives and non-relatives across different age groups.

*Independent variables.* Education and the income level are the independent variables of our critical interest. The level of education is measured as a categorical variable: primary or basic education; secondary or tertiary education. The financial situation of the respondent is measured by quintiles of the household income, which are added to the models as continuous variables (from 1 to 5). To assess the gender differences, we will apply a dummy variable (1–man; reference category – woman). The other explanatory variables entered into the model are as follows. The marital status of the respondent is measured by three categories (1–single, 2–divorced, widowed or separated; the reference category–married or cohabitant). The respondent’s family situation is characterized by household size: whether the respondent has child(ren) younger than 18 years (1–yes; reference category–no) and whether he/she has brothers and sisters (1–yes; reference category–no). The employment status is measured by two categories: whether the respondent is employed or inactive (unemployed, retired, student, etc.). We will capture the differences between ethnic groups by the variable measuring ethnicity (1–Estonian; reference category–non-Estonian). We will also include a measure of a respondent’s subjective health (1–very bad, ..., 5–very good). For our analytical purposes, we recode the health variable into three categories: 1–bad; 2–neither good nor bad; and 3–good. Finally, we will control the statistical models for the respondent’s age. Cases with missing information for control variables will be excluded. The final number of cases in the regression analyses is 4,413 (in 1994) and 8,860 (in 2004).

## Results

*The proportion of giving and receiving help in different age groups.* It follows from the analysis that the mutual informal support was the highest among the individuals aged 16-30 in the year 1994, when 76% of the respondents said that they had given help to relatives or non-relatives; however, ten years later the proportion of help-givers had dropped to 60%. Among the age-group 31-59, the proportion of help donors stayed relatively constant (68.6% in 1994 and 70.2% in 2004). The older age-group showed a decreasing pattern of giving help by over 8% points (from 50.2% to 42% in ten years time).

With respect to receiving help, in the younger age-group 58% of the respondents in 1994 and 45% in the year 2004 claimed they had received some help. Among the middle and older age-groups, the proportion of recipients of help showed rather an increasing trend (from 50% to 52% among the middle age group and from 47% to 52% among the older age group). As a matter of fact, the overall support flow has not changed as much as expected and we could witness the highest decrease only among the younger age group.

**Table 1.** The mean number of support givers and receivers in networks by age groups and the year of the study (means and standard deviations)

	16-30-years old				31-59-years old				60+ years old			
	1994		2004		1994		2004		1994		2004	
	M	Std.D	M	Std.D	M	Std	M	Std.D	M	Std.D	M	Std.D
Number of donors	1.51	1.79	0.66	0.96	1.19	1.55	.80	1.04	1.24	1.67	0.92	1.17
Number of recipients	2.19	1.80	1.14	1.32	1.80	1.72	1.35	1.39	1.01	1.29	0.66	0.99

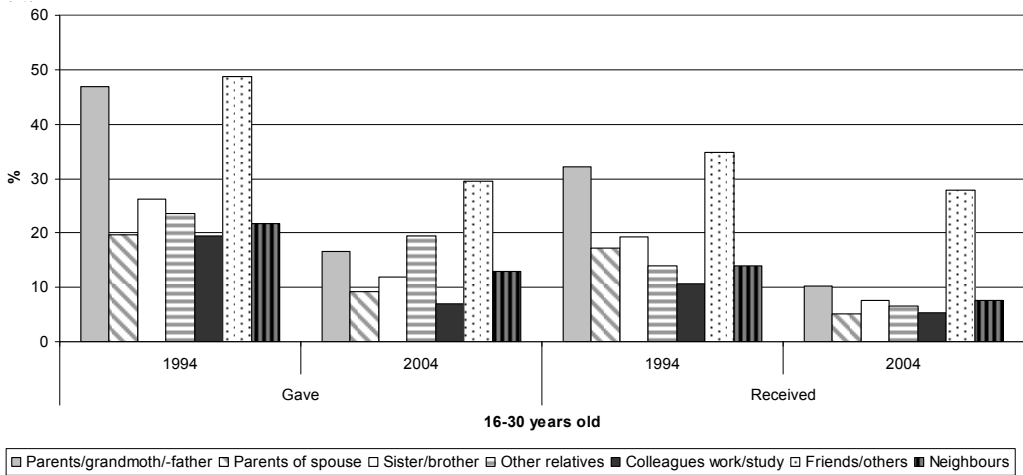
In what concerns the size of the informal support networks, we can see the decline in the mean numbers of donors and recipients (Table 1). In 1994, the support networks were more dense (contained more individuals) and could be explained as a survival strategy to safeguard one's wellbeing – in case of need, a wider network uncovers more coping resources than the smaller ones. Alternatively, the smaller networks can be tighter; however, in a specific case of need it may lack the fitting resource.

*The donors and recipients of help.* Figure 1 describes the support networks of the youngest age-group. Compared to 1994, by 2004 the support giving has decreased to all recipients, but especially noticeable is the reduction in the proportion of young adults, who provide help to their parents. In 1994, 47% of 16-30 years old individuals gave help to their parents; by 2004 the proportion of help givers was reduced to 16% only. The help given to friends has decreased as well, but to a lesser extent: in the early 1990s, almost half of the respondents had given help to friends, but after ten years had passed, the share of the helpers had dropped to 30%. In the case of help receiving, a similar pattern emerged. Receiving help from relatives had decreased enormously: less than ten per cent of young adults had received some help from relatives. However, the support flow from friends shows the highest stability. To conclude, in the younger age group the support networks have declined and fewer numbers of young adults are engaged in helping activities. Support networking with relatives has gone through the biggest decline.

The individuals in the middle age group (31-59 yrs) are sometimes literally called a 'sandwich generation', squeezed between the needs of the other two generations: still giving support to their growing children and taking care of their elderly parents at the same time. Thus, the caring responsibilities have a wider spectrum in their case compared to the younger and the older age groups. According to our data, giving and receiving help has decreased over time, but to a much lesser extent than in the younger age-group. The reason behind this could be that in this age-group the help exchange is more based on and motivated by the real need for help. The proportion of help givers to parents from both sides and to neighbours has not changed significantly. But we witnessed a drop in the proportion of helpers addressing help to grandchildren and sons/daughters in law, to their own sisters and brothers, colleagues and friends. In the case of receiving help, the help from relatives has stayed relatively stable over time, but the decrease has occurred in the case of friends and colleagues.



**Figure 1.** Help giving and receiving networks among 16-30-year-old individuals according to the year of the study



**Figure 2.** Help giving and receiving networks among 31-59-year-old individuals according to the year of the study (%)

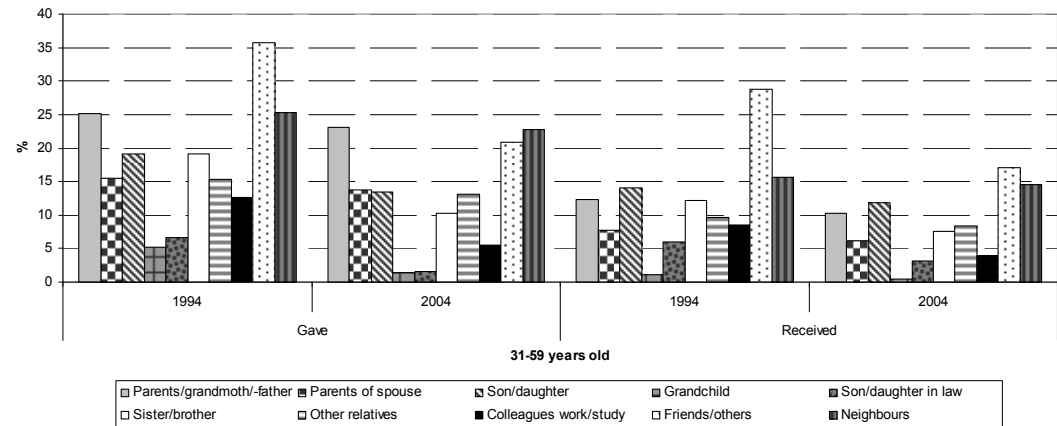
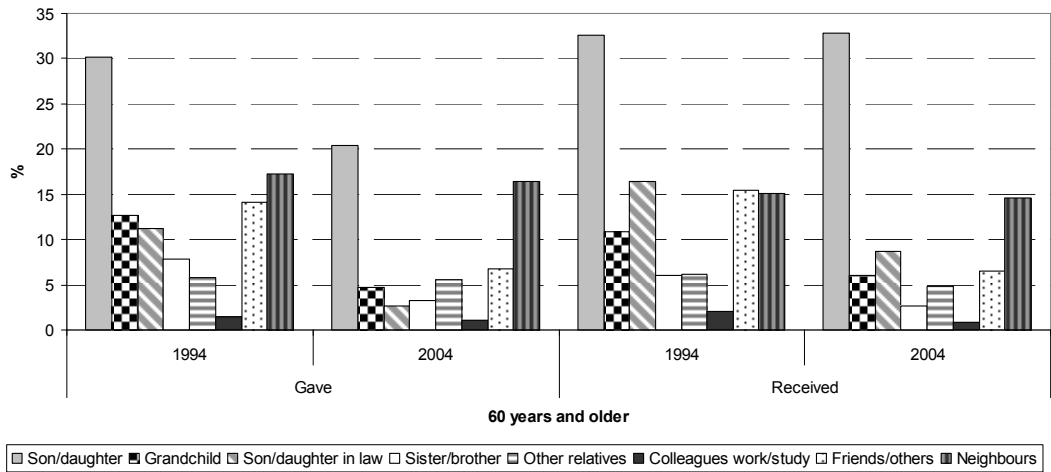


Figure 3 illustrates the help giving and receiving in the older age group (60+ yrs). In the case of giving help, the support flow to grown-up child(ren) has decreased, but support receiving from grown-up child(ren) has stayed at the same level over time. The proportion of people in the age-group 60 years and older who have given support to grandchildren, a son or a daughter-in-law, a sister or a brother and friends has decreased. The proportion of those, who have received help, has also decreased, except help from grown-up children and neighbours, in which case the spread has remained unchanged.

**Figure 3.** Help giving and receiving networks among the individuals 60+ years according to the year of the study (%)



*Reciprocity of help.* The next step in our analysis is to estimate how the help giving and receiving are mutually connected; does it follow the idea of reciprocity of support and does the relation between receiving and giving depend on the subjects between whom the reciprocity takes place. Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients. It shows that the help giving and receiving are positively correlated: those who give help also receive help in return. This is especially visible in the case of help exchange between non-relatives. In the early 1990s, the mutual informal support between relatives and non-relatives was interrelated, but in 2004 the association turned out to be weak. Consequently, if in 1994 those people who helped their kin also gave help to non-relatives and received help in return, then in 2004 the support networks had rather split into two groups: the individuals, whose support networks were based on kin, and the others who had built supporting ties with non-relatives. This allows us to suggest that the determinants and characteristics for individuals who hold different types of networks have become more diverse.

**Table 2.** Correlations between help giving and receiving according to the year of the study

	1994		2004			
	Gave help to relatives	Gave help to non-relative	Received help from relatives	Gave help to relatives	Gave help to non-relative	Received help from relatives
Gave help to relatives						
Gave help to non-relative	.283**			.065**		
Received help from relatives	.351**	.185**		.358**	.056**	
Received help from non-relatives	.172**	.420**	.363**	.103**	.490**	.029**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Patterns of informal support networks with relatives.* As the next step, we process the logistic regression models to account for differences in support giving and receiving with kin and non-relatives. Model 1 in Table 3 shows the results of the regression analysis in different age-groups for help giving to relatives that includes the following independent variables: size of the household, presence of underage children and siblings, gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, educational level, employment status, income level and subjective health of the respondent.

The analysis shows that the informal support networks appear to be affected by the marital status of the respondent, and not dependant on his/her age: the single persons compared to married and cohabiting individuals are less likely involved in helping their relatives and also receiving help in return. Whether the respondent is divorced or widowed plays a crucial role in giving help; more precisely, the individuals who have lost their partners for different reasons are less likely to give help to their relatives, however in help receiving, only in 2004 a difference emerged here. Compared to women, older men tend to have weaker support networks with their relatives. Other significant determinants affecting the help exchange with relatives are the household size, whether the respondent has children younger than 18 years and the presence of brothers and sisters. A greater household size is associated with a lower possibility of giving and receiving help from the family unit, but if at least one underage child is living in the household, the probability for help exchange with relatives increases. Those individuals who have siblings are also more likely to help and receive help from kin.

**Table 3.** Logistic regression models for predicting help exchange between relatives. Odds ratios (exp B) are shown in the table

	Model 1 Help to relatives <sup>1</sup>					
	16-30 years old		31-59 years old		60 years and older	
	1994 <i>ExpB</i>	2004 <i>ExpB</i>	1994 <i>ExpB</i>	2004 <i>ExpB</i>	1994 <i>ExpB</i>	2004 <i>ExpB</i>
<i>Marital status (ref. Married)</i>						
Single	.66**	.38***	.56***	.45***	.55*	.42***
Divorced, widowed	1.13	.45**	.69***	.61***	.65***	.79*
<i>Gender (ref. Woman)</i>						
Man	1.14	.99	.96	.93	.67***	.74***
<i>Educational level (ref. Tertiary)</i>						
Primary-basic	.46**	.97	.60***	.69***	.61**	.63***
Secondary	.60*	.97	.80*	.92	.76	.83
<i>Subjective health (ref. Well or very well)</i>						
Bad	.84	.52**	1.08	.69***	.51***	.61***
Not good not bad	1.05	.74**	1.08	.99	.79	.84
<i>Nationality (ref. Non-Estonian)</i>						
Estonian	3.30***	1.77***	2.29***	1.85***	1.39**	1.29**
<i>Employment status (ref. Active)</i>						
Non active	1.15	.97	.87	.77***	.82	1.14
<i>Siblings (ref. Does not have)</i>						
Have	1.35	1.35**	1.70***	1.15	1.45**	1.37*
<i>Does have children under age 18 (ref. No)</i>						
	1.90***	.99	1.46**	1.23**	-	-
<i>Age</i>						
	.99	.97	.97***	.99	.96***	.92***
<i>Household size</i>						
	.80***	.89***	.83***	.85***	.84**	.89***
<i>Income level</i>						
	1.00	1.04	1.06*	1.08***	.92	1.06
<i>Observations</i>						
	991	2485	2436	4251	986	2124
<i>Model chi-square</i>						
	116.19	149.23	178.69	254.47	62.80	214.95
<i>Degrees of freedom</i>						
	14	14	14	14	13	13
<i>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></i>						
	.151	.078	.095	.078	.084	.138

Table 3. (Continued)

	Model 2 Help from relatives <sup>2</sup>					
	16-30 years old		31-59 years old		60 years and older	
	1994	2004	1994	2004	1994	2004
	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>
<i>Marital status (ref. Married)</i>						
Single	.50***	.37***	.91	.57***	.54*	.40***
Divorced, widowed	.58	.49**	.98	.87	1.25	.75**
<i>Gender (ref. Woman)</i>						
Man	.84	1.01	.86*	.75***	.70**	.79**
<i>Educational level (ref. Tertiary)</i>						
Primary-basic	.66	.56***	.58***	.70***	.92	.98
Secondary	.84	.64**	.60***	.84**	.73	.93
<i>Subjective health (ref. Well or very well)</i>						
Bad	1.38	1.95**	1.35**	1.21	1.46	.90
Not good not bad	1.22	.50***	1.11	1.01	.98	.81
<i>Nationality (ref. Non-Estonian)</i>						
Estonian	2.93***	1.47***	2.54***	1.72***	2.01***	1.64***
<i>Employment status (ref. Active)</i>						
Non active	.84	1.17	1.33**	.97	.85	1.21
<i>Siblings (ref. Does not have)</i>						
Have	.78	1.50**	1.38***	1.26**	1.15	1.39**
<i>Does have children under age 18 (ref. No)</i>						
Age	3.36***	3.09***	1.58***	1.24**	-	-
Household size	.99	1.01	.97***	.99**	1.01	1.02**
Income level	.85***	.84***	1.01	.91***	.82**	.77***
Observations	.95	1.01	.97	1.04	.92	.94
Model chi-square	991	2485	2436	4251	986	2124
Degrees of freedom	203.01	373.64	164.86	134.87	69.18	107.53
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	14	14	14	14	13	13
	.248	.218	.090	.043	.092	.067

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1

<sup>1</sup> Reference category is 'no help'

<sup>2</sup> Reference category is 'no help'

Education, income level and employment status of the respondent are other factors that appear to affect the exchange of informal support. In the case of giving help, the individuals with primary or basic education compared to individuals with university degree are less likely to provide support to their relatives. In receiving help, the educational differences emerged: in the younger age group in the year 2004 and in the middle age group in both years by showing that compared to individuals with university degree, the less educated were less likely to receive help from kin. Employment status does not have a universal effect on help exchange; only in the middle age group in 2004 the non-active individuals were less likely to give help and in 1994 they more likely received help. A higher income is positively associated with help giving in the middle age group (31-59 yrs): those well-off more likely gave help to their relatives. We then looked at the models for ethnicity: the results show that Estonians are 1.3 to 3.3 times more likely to give help to their relatives than non-Estonians. However, it is important to emphasize that the differences between the ethnic groups diminish in the older age groups. Moreover, it should be taken into account that the support networks depending on their functions play a different role for rural and urban populations. In the case of Estonia, the ethnic groups are very clearly segmented across the rural and urban dimensions, where the non-Estonian population is located in the urban settings, mostly in the cities. It also appears, as expected, that

bad health in older age reduces the likelihood of help giving and increases the help receiving in the younger age.

*Patterns of informal support networks with non-relatives.* The estimates in the Models 1 and 2 in Table 4 show the pattern of help giving and receiving between non-relatives. Compared to the regression models of help exchange with relatives, the variance in help exchange accounted by these models is lower. The models show the opposite tendency to help exchange between relatives, particularly when comparing married individuals to the divorced and widowed people in the 31-59 age-group in the year 2004 and in the 60+ age-group, in the year 1994 they were more likely to help non-relatives and also receive help in return. Compared to women, men also tend to rather exchange help with non-relatives than with relatives.

The characteristics of the family background (children, siblings, household size) of the respondent are not very important predictors of help exchange between non-relatives. In 1994, a lower level of education in the middle and older age groups reduced the likelihood of giving help to non-relatives. Alternatively in 2004, education does not play a significant role in the exchange of informal support. An inactive employment status also reduces the help giving probability for the younger age group and in 1994 also for the individuals aged 60 and over. The help networks between non-relatives are related to ethnicity: on one hand, the differences in help exchange of Estonians and non-Estonians are more visible in the younger age groups but, on the other hand, in 2004 compared to 1994 the differences in the older age groups have disappeared.

**Table 4.** Logistic regression models for predicting help exchange between non-relatives. Odds ratios (exp B) are shown in the table

	Model 1 Help to non-relatives <sup>1</sup>					
	16-30 years old		31-59 years old		60 years and older	
	1994 <i>ExpB</i>	2004 <i>ExpB</i>	1994 <i>ExpB</i>	2004 <i>ExpB</i>	1994 <i>ExpB</i>	2004 <i>ExpB</i>
<i>Marital status (ref. Married)</i>						
Single	1.02	1.12	1.53**	1.07	1.34	1.46
Divorced, widowed	2.27**	1.40	1.13	1.45***	1.59***	.87
<i>Gender (ref. Woman)</i>						
Man	1.75***	1.14	1.97***	1.56***	1.32*	1.60***
<i>Educational level (ref. Tertiary)</i>						
Primary-basic	1.47	1.04	.56***	.95	.54**	.77
Secondary	1.31	1.17	.65***	.97	.56**	.85
<i>Subjective health (ref. Well or very well)</i>						
Bad	1.15	1.50	1.09	.84	.57**	.48***
Not good not bad	1.11	1.32**	.99	1.12	.60**	.80
<i>Nationality (ref. Non-Estonian)</i>						
Estonian	2.18***	1.34***	1.94***	1.08	1.35*	.87
<i>Employment status (ref. Active)</i>						
Non active	.74*	.70***	1.18	1.01	.63**	.85
<i>Siblings (ref. Does not have)</i>						
Have	1.06	1.18	1.34***	1.02	1.05	1.22
<i>Does have children under age 18 (ref. No)</i>						
	.94	1.23	1.30*	1.13	-	-
<i>Age</i>						
	1.04	.99	.97***	.99**	.98	.94***
<i>Household size</i>						
	.94	1.01	.98	1.01	1.06	.95
<i>Income level</i>						
	.99	1.04	1.04	1.02	.91	.96
<i>Observations</i>						
	991	2485	2436	4251	986	2124
<i>Model chi-square</i>						
	62.14	41.75	177.76	80.60	36.29	163.84
<i>Degrees of freedom</i>						
	14	14	14	14	13	13
<i>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></i>						
	.082	.023	.094	.026	.053	.116

Table 4. (Continued)

	Model 2 Help from non- relatives <sup>2</sup>					
	16-30 years old		31-59 years old		60 years and older	
	1994	2004	1994	2004	1994	2004
	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>	<i>ExpB</i>
<i>Marital status (ref. Married)</i>						
Single	.98	1.02	1.31	1.22	1.26	1.06
Divorced, widowed	1.51	1.31	1.44***	1.50***	1.80***	1.08
<i>Gender (ref. Woman)</i>						
Man	1.16	1.13	1.18*	1.33***	1.26	1.28**
<i>Educational level (ref. Tertiary)</i>						
Primary-basic	.88	.91	.48***	.96	.93	.74*
Secondary	1.23	1.10	.57***	1.01	.63	.75*
<i>Subjective health (ref. Well or very well)</i>						
Bad	1.38	.93	1.51***	1.34**	1.37	.95
Not good not bad	1.35**	.91	1.08	1.08	.79	.97
<i>Nationality (ref. Non-Estonian)</i>						
Estonian	2.27***	1.34***	2.76***	1.15	2.00***	.82
<i>Employment status (ref. Active)</i>						
Non active	1.14	.87	1.11	.92	.74	.83
<i>Siblings (ref. Does not have)</i>						
Have	.97	1.29	.98	.92	1.14	1.00
Does have children under age 18 (ref. No)	1.37	1.09	1.22	1.08	-	-
Age	1.03	.99	.98***	.98***	1.03	.99
Household size	.92	1.05*	1.07*	1.05*	.97	.96
Income level	.96	1.06*	.93*	1.02	.92	.97
Observations	991	2485	2436	4251	986	2124
Model chi-square	52.02	31.90	172.56	65.11	56.29	17.03
Degrees of freedom	14	14	14	14	13	13
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.069	.018	.093	.022	.081	.013

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1

<sup>1</sup> Reference category is 'no help'

<sup>2</sup> Reference category is 'no help'

## Discussion

The purpose of this article was to understand the changes in the informal support networks in Estonia over a period of ten years. Of particular interest were the factors that influence how individuals exchange help with their relatives and non-relatives. We examined giving and receiving help in 1994 and 2004, two points of time with extremely different contextual situations – from societal reconstruction and deep economic recession in the early 1990s to intensive economic growth and the established social protection system in the early 2000s. We relied on the assumption that during the period between two studies, the Estonian society has gone through rapid structural and social changes, which could have challenged the family life and individual support networks.

The rapid changes in the family sphere have been explained through the process of individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Björnberg & Ekbrand (2008) emphasize that individualization leaves more freedom to create personal networks by individual choice. Thus, a 'free market of social relationships' means a greater mixture of relatives and non-relatives who are embedded into one's

informal support network. Moreover, in Eastern Europe these changes could be explained within the framework of developmental idealism (Thornton & Philipov 2009), according to which the family patterns of Western Europe will be taken over for ideological reasons. Furthermore, we were led by the scholars of social capital, who have stated that in order to fit into a modern society, the bridging social capital gains importance over the bonding one. For the individuals, it would be more functional to have more heterogeneous social networks consisting rather of non-relatives than relatives. Consequently, we expected that compared to 1994 the support networks would have been re-constructed.

Our analyses indicated that the overall levels of giving and receiving help have not changed as much as expected; only the youngest age-group showed a decline in giving and receiving help. However, the average number of actors in the networks has decreased – the informal networks were less dense in 2004 compared to 1994. Thus, our data do not support directly the well-known expectation that the development of a welfare state will ‘crowd out’ the informal support. Much to the opposite effect, the informal support networks still hold important positions in people’s lives.

Our next point of interest was to identify the patterns of the informal support networks. The instrumental support flow in the Estonian society is upwards rather than downwards – among the younger generations the support giving exceeds the support receiving, but the oldest generation receives more than gives. This result may illustrate the actual pattern of reciprocity of support or it may result from different estimations of giving and receiving. For instance, Ikkinck *et al.* (1999) showed with their study that children reported as giving more support to the parents than the parents reported the reception from them. This may mean that the younger generation may overestimate the amount of support given and the older one underestimates the amount of support received. However, this difference between generations could be explained in terms of structural changes in social networks. Compared to the older generation, the younger one has a wider social network consisting of more individuals. The composition of the networks differs as well. Our analyses showed that the younger generation’s network involves more non-relatives; however, according to gender, this is also the case of men compared to women. It could be seen as a result of the process of individualization, explained by Björnberg & Ekbrand (2008:31) as ‘the commitments between kin have become increasingly selective’. Therefore, we also suppose that the networks are more often based on individual choice rather than obligation, social or cultural norms. Our results clearly show that the support flow between relatives has declined. Especially in the younger age group (16-30-age-old), the exchange with relatives has decreased but with non-relatives has stayed at the same level over ten years.

The second interest of our study was to investigate which characteristics determine help giving and receiving. Here we distinguish between individual and family-related characteristics. In the Estonian society, ethnicity is an important factor of informal support networking; the non-Estonians compared to Estonians have weaker informal support networks, especially noticeable are the differences in help exchange between relatives. Apparently, this may be caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of new state borders with the introduced strict visa system, which have split the informal support networks both of relatives and non-relatives across the borders.

Another important determinant of help exchange is gender. Previous studies (*e.g.* Widmer 2004) have shown that men have more heterogeneous networks than women and they involve more friends and other non-relatives. In her study, Kutsar (1996) found that women invest in informal intergenerational family support networks through unpaid care (*e.g.* taking care of grandchildren) and men more often give support financially. As a matter of fact, the unpaid caretaking is more reliable in a sense of reciprocity of help because it is primarily based on affection, while the fiscal support is traditionally based on obligation and its potential of reciprocity may be lower. The current study also showed that compared to women, older men are less embedded in the networks of relatives, but in general men are more in exchange relations with non-relatives than women. This could also partly be explained by the type of help, what is needed and what is given. Also, the types of help differ according to the recipients and donors. For instance, childcare is provided mainly by women and apparently it is directed to relatives, but the help in transportation or works in the fields could be given by men to non-relatives and relatives to the same extent.

Education, employment and income are considered as the resources that support the help exchange. Our results indicate that the higher educated individuals invest more into support networks compared to the less educated individuals – our result does not support the idea that the informal support networks substitute the lower levels of individual resources.

Family-related characteristics, such as marital status, having children and siblings, and the household size are significant determinants of help exchange. Several previous studies have pointed out that family transitions shape the support network and the intensity of the support exchange (Daatland 2007, Dykstra 1997, Eggebeen 2005, Kaufman & Uhlenberg 1998, Marks & McLanahan 1993, Pezzin & Steinberg Schone 1999, Sarkisian & Gerstel 2008, Shapiro 2003, Spitze *et al.* 1994). According to Widmer (2004), remarriages have the potential to extend the network size, but it may end up being low-density. The same can be said about people who live in cohabitation without getting married. In their case, the informal support networks with relatives of the partner may stay underdeveloped until they break up. Leeni Hansson (2004) showed in her study that women after separation from the cohabitation receive less support from the ex-partner's relatives than women who have gone through divorce.

Also in the Estonian society, the individuals who are in a steady relationship, whether in a marriage or cohabiting without getting married, have created and maintain the support networks with relatives, but the divorced and widowed individuals have established the support networks with the non-kin. This suggests that the break-up of a union means, in the first place, that the social relations with a partner's relatives will diminish or even disappear. But we could also claim that in the marriage-based unions, the support exchange could be guided more by norms and obligations and in case of divorce the actual (voluntary) helping is based more on real affection and bonding: according to a well-known wisdom – 'in a situation of need, you will get know who is your real friend'. Thus, the more mixed and blurred social support networks may pose a hidden risk to informal support networking. Families with children still depend on an informal care and support system, but the larger households could manage on their own. That does not mean that the larger households do not need or practice help exchange, but apparently it takes place inside the households and between the household members more often. To sum up, the main differences in determinants of help exchange with relatives and non-relatives are gender and marital status, while other factors such as education, ethnicity, age, employment status have similar patterns of help exchange, both when relatives or non-relatives are concerned.

To conclude, the present study clearly highlights that in the Estonian society the informal support networks are going through changes. These changes could be seen as an outcome of an individualization process and a reaction to the need for creating a bridging type of social capital. The development of the welfare state contributes to the individualization processes and reduces the need for instrumental support provided through the informal support networking. Thus, affection and personal choice are gaining importance by creating and keeping informal support networks.

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