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Editorial:

ESS in the Context of Transition Studies

Triin Vihalemm & Mare Ainsaar

This issue celebrates 10 years of Estonia's participation in the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS, with its mission "to chart... attitudes in Europe and to interpret how Europe's social, political and moral fabric is changing" (About the...), is a thankworthy resource for the research of socio-political and economic transitions. Although the ESS survey does not cover the most turbulent times in the 80s and 90s, it is a useful tool for comparative analysis because it provides cross-national survey results and contextual data. The ESS is built on the ontological basis of comparative, cross-national research that recognises the value of different societies and cultures, and that makes 'others' meaningful either as background for analysis of 'own' society or as components of the 'whole' (Goldthorpe, 1997).

Today's rapidly changing life challenges researchers to seek for new possibilities to link cross-national surveys methodologically with case-centred approaches and new possibilities provided by ICT, such as metadata analysis. The design of the ESS enables altering conceptual methodological approaches for analysing countries as objects of study (Kohn 1989). These methodological questions are very crucial for the researchers of ex-Soviet societies because the different pace and ways that their deeper transformations, initiated by institutional transition towards capitalism, democracy and global interdependence, followed. How should their converging or diverging results be conceptualised in the context of cross-national comparative research and vice versa – how should comparative surveys be conceptualised in the context of theorising transition and transformation?

A brief observation of the rich collection of publications that use the ESS data indicates that scholars of transition societies have used this resource actively, by taking countries as autonomous units for analysis as well as components of larger societal systems and as variations of the universal models of certain general phenomenon (e.g. welfare). While agreeing with authors who see different comparative approaches as enriching (e.g. Livingstone, 2003), we encourage researchers to address "deviations". As Sztompka (1988) argues, in the rapidly changing and interdependent world, where societies are not in isolation but in international relationships, focusing on the unique and peculiar characteristics of countries and atypical attitudes can lead to the new discoveries.

In varying ways, the articles here refer to the (further) ways of conceptualising transition societies neither as isolated units, nor as specific (underdeveloped) parts of the Western type of late industrial societal system, but as nodes in the intangible networks of historic and current international relationships that bring along various interactions from economic provisions to cultural influences.

The special volume consists of six papers. Two of them discover employment market related issues, three analyse interrelationships between general values and social participation and involvement, and the last one analyses family life.

The first paper by Wouter De Tavernier and Ave Roots analyses the retirement age gap between Eastern and Western Europe and concludes that the theoretical model conceptualising the relationship between job control and perceived suitable retirement age fits the Western countries well, but has weaker explanatory power in ex-Soviet countries. The authors suggest considering historical-cultural influences, such as the impact of Soviet work ethics, but also the current institutional framework and its features, such as the legal retirement age, which serves as a 'reference standard' for informants. This paper refers to the potential of searching for the crossing points of cultural, legal and economic influences in further analysis of labour market relations and considering them in the relevant policies.

The second paper by Lucia Ištoňová and Denisa Fedáková (2015) compares employees from two contrasting countries in terms of subjective job insecurity among participating countries in 2010: Slovak and Estonian employees. The authors find some factors that may have universal mediating effects, however, the majority of measurement results referred to the countries' differing macro-economic and organisational contexts, which in turn refers to the need to search for the configurations and clusters of features, not the single items.

The next group of papers investigate the value context of social practices that relate to the European future in civic and environmental terms. Kati Orru and Laur Lilleoja (2015) have used the multi-level analysis of survey results and contextual factors in analysing people's pro-environmental concerns in 2004 and 2012. They counter argue the logic derived from the Schwartzian mapping of values, which states that the transition from socialism to capitalism, which brought along a decrease of universalist values, has also made people care less about nature. Their analysis indicates that the post-socialist economic ruptures that increased socio-economic instability and inequality have instead reinforced the value attributed to the environment. They suggest that the practical environment dependent livelihood is more influential than effective environmental governance in terms of people's normative involvement in ecological sustainability. Their article demonstrates well the benefits of a multi-level analysis that is also favoured by developing the relevant tools in the ESS consortium.

The democratic tradition and its transformation is the focus of the article by Maie Kiisel, Marianne Leppik and Külliki Seppel (2015). The article is based on the theoretically and empirically developed model of gradual transformation of democratic participation from duty citizenship to engaged citizenship. In investigating connections of alternative civic involvement types and the perception of the functioning of democratic institutions across different countries and age groups, they found that the new member states' population and young people are less active in traditional political participation and more critical of the performance of democracy in their own countries. Also, the engaged citizenship involvement appeared to be more 'equal' in terms of class, ethic and education differences. These tendencies refer to the potential of future transformation of democratic participation and political culture in Europe. However, there are exceptions like Estonia and the Czech Republic, which again suggests that Estonia as a certain 'deviation' from the overall patterns is worth more complex investigations.

The last paper by Mare Ainsaar and Kadri Rootalu (2015) asks how marriage and having children contributes to life satisfaction in new patterns of living and raising children in cohabitation (especially in Nordic countries and Estonia). The authors found that life satisfaction is predominantly shaped by partnership and partnership type. Having children does not elevate life satisfaction, although in the absence of economic coping problems it might raise the positive value of children. Although the Eastern and Western European countries in general differ in their populations' life satisfaction, it appears that the life satisfaction of families follows more universal models and is driven by the families' contextual social capital. This paper and the previous one both utilised cross-national and cross-sectional analyses (where often a strong similarity of social groups across different countries appears), which demonstrated that more attention has to be paid to the measurement of the impact of certain contextual adaptations that might not necessarily be indicative of a universal pattern.

One aim of the current issue is to go beyond topical knowledge and give feedback about the usability of the variables, their validity and, thereby, also produce a constructive critique for the ESS. The more scholars use the ESS data, test the indicators in practical analyses, and give their feedback, the more the ESS can be of use.

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