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Introduction:

Youth Political Participation in a Transition Society

Airi-Alina Allaste* & David Cairns

This special issue of *Studies of Transition States and Societies* focuses on youth political participation in Estonia. The articles explore different dimensions of participation, providing examples of how politics is practiced by young people in a society that has undergone a relatively recent and substantial social, economic and political transformation: the shift from being an integral part of the Soviet Union to full membership of the European Union. This transition is reflected in changing patterns of activism among Estonian youth and the nature of the issues with which they engage, with participation influenced by, on the one hand, the legacies of the communist period and, on the other, the challenge of living in contemporary Europe.

While rooted in established theoretical frameworks, this discussion is informed by a strong empirical evidence base. We concentrate on discussing findings from a recently completed European Commission funded study entitled *Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement (MYPLACE)*.¹ As its title suggests, this four-year project, conducted during 2011-2015, looked at youth political activism and civic engagement, integrating research teams from 14 different regional contexts across Europe, including Estonia. While the contributions that follow concentrate on the Estonian context, a closing article reflects on the meaning of our results within the broader framework of European society, building on the work of our international colleagues. We begin, however, in this introduction with an outline of what we regard as some of the key theoretical perspectives on political participation and significant features of our Estonian research context.

Contemporary theories of participation

In the present context, the term ‘youth political participation’ refers to the involvement of young people in policy decision-making and various forms of activism, the latter being the associative expression of the will to enact social change. Political participation among young people, and older age groups, is an issue that has attracted considerable academic and policy attention over a relatively long period of time. An often cited definition is “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and/or their actions,” as offered by Verba & Norman (1972, p. 2). In regard to contemporary perspectives, this extends to work on cause-based activism and social movement mobilisation; issues that have all attracted a massive amount of academic attention (e.g., Loader, 2007; Bakker & de Vrees, 2011; Castells, 2012; della Porta & Mattoni, 2014). The existence of this work means that at a general level, we have some basic ideas that purport to explain why certain people mobilise, including global shifts in economics and politics that have affected youth, centring on the emergence of digital platforms, a theme explored in a number of the articles in this special issue.

Also prominent within prior studies is the idea of there being widespread political apathy within youth populations, demonstrated by lower than average voting rates within this generational cohort (e.g., O’Toole et al., 2003; Forbrig, 2005; Henn et al., 2005; Quintelier, 2007). While this is a popular

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1 This collection of peer-reviewed chapters has its origins in large-scale European Commission framework project, ‘MYPLACE’ (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement), Grant Agreement no. 266831. For further information, please see <http://www.fp7-myplace.eu>.

view, analysis of various European level datasets, including data from the MYPLACE, has revealed that while youth voting patterns are diverse across Europe, much of the apparent abstention within the 18-25 year old age group can be explained by the lack of an opportunity to vote due the fact that most elections are only held once every four or five years. In other words, the belief that young people have a propensity not to vote in elections is, at least in part, a consequence of a basic analytical mistake rather than a reflection of young people's lack of interest (Cairns, Alves, Alexandre & Correia, 2016). What this means is that in addition to past definitions of youth politics equating participation with the practice of voting (Tingsten, 1937), albeit broadening to encompass "campaigning, contacting officials, and signing petitions, etc., or what is often summarised as 'conventional participation'" (Amna & Eckman, 2013, p. 8), we also consider some less conventional ways of engaging with the political sphere. For this reason, the articles that follow will focus less on voting in formal elections and rather on more informal and individualised forms of political participation and civic engagement. This approach also addresses the critique that young people's apparent lack of interest in formal politics signifies a withdrawal from the political sphere, and that it is logical to expect political, or politicised, activities to be attuned to generational norms as opposed to the ways and means favoured by their parents. The repertoires of political engagement have hence become more diverse and less absolute: from consumer politics to community campaigns and international networks; from the ballot box to the street, to the internet; from political parties to social movements and issue groups, to social networks (Sloam, 2013).

Some of the key theoretical ideas that we will come to discuss in the course of this journal will be familiar to readers well-versed in Western European Sociology. There is, for example, conceptual common ground between some of the perspectives mobilised in the articles in paradigms developed by theorists such as Beck (1996), Giddens (1994) and others who have followed them. One instance of this continuity is recognition of the idea that the number of spheres of life in which contemporary politics can be found is much broader, or at least more diffuse, than might have been the case in previous times. These authors have also argued that instead of seeing politics as narrowly institutional, we should be looking for signs of politics practically everywhere: in everyday life and in the quotidian choices people make as they inhabit the civil sphere, as well as in the less spontaneous but still informal actions of social movements. Perhaps for this reason, we have witnessed the introduction of terms such as 'sub-politics' and 'life politics' as a means of defining this new reality. In more prosaic language, these terms represent what takes place in fields outside traditional political institutions and corporate systems, encompassing professional groups, issue-specific initiatives, social movements and private individuals.

Looking at just one theoretical innovation, Beck's (1997) concept of sub-politics, presents a viable means of explaining how individuals live out their personal political causes and commitments 'underneath' the surface of formal politics, albeit with a strong public and activist element to this definition. Additionally, Giddens's (1991) politics of choice provides an account of how issues 'flow from the process of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts' (p. 214). While such approaches have, perhaps unfairly, been criticised for watering down the concept of political participation due to what feels like a lack of focus on collective identities, we argue that the shift towards the individual and what he or she does in their everyday political life is better suited for explaining the current terrain of youth political engagement, more so than continuing to use these the older counterparts of these concepts, which on the contrary, seem rather staid in fixating upon what are undoubtedly very important but ultimately exceptional political events; for example, voting in an election or joining a party. Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that such manifestations of formal participation are in reality the end result of a previously unperceived field of action rather than the outcome of a relatively simplistic process of political indoctrination, such as inheriting a political formation from parents, peers or via the mass media. A further helpful distinction is suggested by Norris (2003),

who differentiates between citizen-oriented actions (mainly about elections and political parties) and cause-oriented repertoires (about specific issues and policy concerns), which “have broadened towards engaging in ‘life-style’ politics, where the dividing line between the ‘social’ and ‘political’ is blurred”.

Estonia as a transition society

Estonia, like other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, has in recent decades been conceptualised as a transition society (cf. Veebel, Namm & Tillmann, 2014). The term refers to a situation in which the political structure changes from single-party rule to a parliamentary system, with administrative institutions reorganised, central planning converted to a capitalist free market economy and a society of shortages replaced by consumerism. While in Western modernist societies the agent of change has been the bourgeoisie of private owners, and change has been a longer process, in transition societies it is ‘designed capitalism’ and ‘functional elites’ that have been the main agents of change. As a result, one characteristic of a transition society is the discrepancy between the speed of institutional reform and the slowness of cultural change. The new framework of values has been theorised by Michael Kennedy as ‘transition culture’, which is focused on forward movement, emphasising the fundamentally opposed positions of socialism and capitalism, and stressing the normative superiority of the latter. Kennedy defines transition culture as “mobilising culture organised around certain logical and normative oppositions, valuations of expertise, and interpretations of history that provide a basic framework through which actors undertake strategic action to realise their needs and wishes” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 9). According to other approaches, social change is not seen primarily as a transition from one order to another, but as a transformation – as rearrangements, reconfigurations and recombinations that yield new interweaving of the multiple social logics that are modern society (Stark & Bruszt, 1998, p. 7).

During the last decade, the transition culture of the CEE countries has begun to be replaced in part by the network society, with the effect that the younger generation today is widely influenced by global popular culture and international movements. The opening up of a Europe with advanced EU-related institutional arrangements, moving across cultures from East to West as well as increasingly from West to East, is becoming the new European reality (Allaste & Bennett, 2013). However, despite most of the previously ‘real socialist countries’ integrating with Western Europe ever deeper, some important differences remain. The popular legitimacy of institutional politics is constantly lower than in the ‘old democracies’ of the West; a conclusion that can be drawn from a large number of surveys (Lagerspetz, 2009). Also, citizens are less prone to participate in organised civic activities, such as voluntary associations or trade unions. Estonian civic activism has been rather passive during the two decades after the restoration of independence. According to a study conducted in 2012 in Estonia, 51% of respondents had never been members of any civic organisations and only 31% were (active or passive) members of a civic association. The most frequently mentioned reason – why the person did not belong to an organisation – was lack of interest. Also, as a general rule Estonians tend to see other people as not very active either: 80% of these respondents believed that Estonians are socially passive and 74% believe that citizens do not know their rights (Kodanikeühiskonna..., 2012). In addition, the recent study on non-profit organisations showed that societally targeted activities of these organisations have been decreasing and also existing NGOs have become more isolated and less integrated into the wider societies. The development of past decades has come to a standstill and civil society finds itself in a state of stagnation (Rikmann et al., 2014).

Ethnic minority in Estonia

In Estonia, the process of transition has also had an ethnic dimension. With the restoration of national independence, the one-third of the population who were not ethnic Estonians lost some of the socio-economic status they had held during Soviet times. Estonia's 1992 Citizenship Act was based on the principle of restoring the citizenship of pre-World War II Estonian citizens and their descendants. The implementation of this principle left the majority of the country's Russian speakers without citizenship, as they had most often either moved to the country during the decades of Soviet rule or were the children (or even grandchildren) of people who had done so. The Russian-speaking minority became disadvantaged in several ways: relative economic deprivation, spatial segregation and a weaker position in the labour market compared with ethnic Estonians. This was especially true for Russian speakers who lived in towns dependent upon the heavy industry that functioned as an integral part of the Soviet Union, meaning their situations became extremely difficult. When Estonia regained independence, these enterprises closed down and unemployment rose enormously. As a result of rapid changes in the labour market and wider society, in combination with a lack of supportive regional policy in Estonia, these regions became economically depressed. Members of the ethnic majority and minority groups thus had partly dissimilar challenges to face when it came to coping with transitions (Kalmus & Vihalemm, 2008), as well as different structural and cultural conditions. Whereas ethnic Estonians were the initiators of social change, many Russian speakers perceived societal change as being imposed from the outside and threatening to their identity. Because of their insecure position in society, opportunities have been restricted and young Russian speakers are relatively more politically passive than ethnic Estonians, who tend to be relatively more involved in organisations than Russian speakers (Kodanikuühiskonna..., 2012).

Young people in Estonia

The winners of the transformation processes in society were those who were young in the 1990s. Early achievement and success became an obligation for young people; in contrast to the Western world, where it is common for people in their thirties to still be studying, young people in the former Soviet countries were expected to have a successful career in their twenties in the 1990s and 2000s; a time when the country enjoyed economic growth, with new firms and new institutions formed and consolidated, meaning that there were new jobs for young people. Since this time, there has been an assumption that Estonia is a place where it is easy for young people to start a career, although by the beginning of the 21st century, openings that were available in the 1990s had closed. The changes that started unfolding in 2008 have not entirely changed the expectations of young people, which are often very high due to the embedding of values during the preceding years. The global recession hit Estonia hardest in its first years, when young people were the first to lose their jobs, especially those with lower competitive advantages. The unemployment rate of young people aged 15-24 rose from 12% in 2008 to 33% by 2010; however, since 2011, the position of young people in the Estonian labour market has improved. In 2013 the unemployment rate was 18.7%, and in the first half of 2014 it was 16.1%, in contrast with other parts of the EU where youth unemployment has on average risen more gradually (Changes in the Economy and Labour Market, 2014).²

There are several sources of inequality that divide young people in Estonia. As noted above, Russian speakers still form a distinctive community by language, culture and media consumption, often with fewer opportunities in society. For example in 2011, youth unemployment among ethnic Estonians was

² Since unemployment percentages are calculated taking into account the share of active youth, however, many at that age are still studying and have not started their working life yet; therefore, taking into account all young people, the unemployment rate currently is 6.5%.

16.8% and among Russian speakers it was 33%. Russian speakers also tend to have lower qualification level jobs and lower salaries. Labour force study analyses show that the representation of young people in higher positions of the labour market whose mother tongue is Russian or another non-Estonian language is lower compared to those who have Estonian citizenship and Estonian language skills, and this difference decreases only if the level of oral and written Estonian is higher. Estonians and Russian speakers also perceive the accessibility of young people to education differently: on average, ethnic Estonians consider Russian speakers' access to educational institutions better than Russian speakers at all educational levels, a pattern that has been persistent since 2008 (Kirss & Lepik, 2015). There are also differences between the regions in Estonia. Generally, rural youth is in a disadvantaged position compared to urban youth. Ethnic and geographical disadvantages are (partly) also combined, since the highest concentration of Russian-speaking people live in the socio-economic periphery, in Ida-Viru County, near the Russian border. There are, however, programmes available for young people at risk within the framework of education and youth work, and themed information and counselling activities are carried out in the Ida-Viru County specially for Russian-speaking youth. However Russian-speaking young people in the periphery continue to be in a disadvantaged position, which also influences their participation – something that is reflected in several of the articles in this special issue.

Reflections on researching activism

Our views on youth political participation are not only influenced by prior theoretical perspectives and empirical studies, from Estonia and elsewhere in the EU, but also our own experiences of being youth activism researchers: what all of the contributors to this special issue share is direct experience of conducting work on this topic, having been participants in the same cross-national research project. This integrative process has provided us with a platform from which to share reflective understanding of many key aspects of youth political and civic engagement across Europe, with ideas often generated through the process of engaging with young activists and collaborating with European level policymakers.

This integration into European research and policy spheres also reminds us that participation can appear to have a different meaning according to context: patterns of activism vary, first, according to place and, second, the passage of time. In regard to the former, we can identify commonalities and contrasts most readily through the use of our quantitative data, while the establishment of different activism clusters enables us to make less direct comparisons of a similar phenomenon. This includes material based on the exploration of political legacy and examples of contemporary activism facilitated by digital technology. In this sense, through our international collaboration we begin to realise that European youth, while possessing different political concerns, often deal with these issues in similar ways, thus creating a multifaceted portrait of activism as practiced in the EU and neighbouring countries. Looking at the second dimension, we can reflect upon participation as a twenty-first century phenomenon, with information technology transforming the speed at which activism is practiced, as well as extending the diffusion of ideas and information across borders.

Having already mentioned some long-standing debates, including young people's fading trust in political systems in Europe (and elsewhere), apparent disinterest in traditional modes of political participation, such as membership of political parties and trade unions, and greater propensity to make recourse to more diversified modes of political expression outside the formal political sphere, we know that there is evidence from across our research consortium that Estonia is not alone in witnessing a rise in 'consumer' and 'lifestyle' politics. This means that the dividing line between the 'social' and 'political', as well as 'public' and 'private', is becoming somewhat blurred on a transnational basis. But more particularly in our Estonian case study, we can see that this process

extends to involvement in political parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with youth involvement reflecting youth interests in terms of the political agenda as well as the processes of engagement with parliamentary and civic democracy. In this sense, we can say that there has been a transformation in the nature of (some) formal structures as well as a diversification of the range of engagement channels, with Estonia being a pioneer of this change.

Research sites, methodologies and data

In regard to what is driving this transformation, we argue that individualised activism as well as continued recognition of the value of a more conventional approach to participation is influenced by several factors, ranging from social memory to the evolution of digital technology. For this reason, we collect data on issues relating to both formal and informal activism, as well as institutional and individualised participation. This is an approach shared by all the research teams in the MYPLACE project, with our results emerging out of multi-faceted collaboration during an intensive period of four years.

The project was, fundamentally, an engagement with youth, with its initial stages devoted to the collection of exploratory data on local and national level politics from young activists before moving on to in-depth quantitative and qualitative data gathering. But it was also an example of co-operation between youth experts from different national backgrounds, facilitated by European Commission funding under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) for research and innovation. Given the need to develop work capable of informing youth policy, we incorporated relatively orthodox methods (such as a quantitative survey following a random sampling approach, follow up interviews and ethnographic case studies), with straightforward questions regarding levels of involvement in political organisation and electoral democracy, alongside the more novel approach of assessing the impact of political legacies and looking towards future challenges facing the European community, such as the perceived threat of radicalism.

In 14 different countries, two contrasting localities that differ in terms of socio-economic and ethno-cultural characteristics were chosen according to the MYPLACE work plan. In Estonia, the choice of research sites took into account inequalities in Estonia (including among youth), aspects of which were discussed in previous paragraphs. We chose two regions: Ida-Viru County in the northeast and Tartu county in southern-central Estonia. The first of these two locations represents the Russian-speaking population (81%), living in the socio-economic periphery, partly still supporting pro-Soviet Union ideas; and although a high percentage of them are elderly, young people in this area are still important to understanding the reality of Estonian political participation. In contrast, Tartu represents the ethnic Estonian population (84%) living in a large settlement in a central location.

In terms of socio-economic development, the area around Tartu (Homepage of Tartu County, 2013) is characterised by a relatively well-educated labour force, low unemployment (5.7% in 2013) and high incomes, a low level of criminality, a high number of young people who moved or stayed there to obtain better education (a number of universities and high-ranking high schools are located in Tartu), innovative and high tech production, good recreational areas and places. On the other hand, the centres of Ida-Viru County could be characterised as 'dying cities', which lost their industrial importance after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, the region has suffered from high unemployment rates (15.0% in 2013), an aging population and social problems. Between 2000 and 2013, the cities in Ida-Virumaa County lost on average 1.9% of their population per annum.

Data collection included the completion of quantitative surveys in both locations: in Tartu (n=585) and Narva, Sillamäe and Kohtla-Järve (n=596), with respondents aged 16-25. National residential registry based random sampling and pseudo-random sampling (random route) methods were used, making the sample representative of the youth population in the localities. Open-ended in-depth interviews (60) were carried out with volunteers from the survey in Tartu county and Ida-Viru county

(from December 2012 to March 2013) and they concentrated on the meanings and attitudes young people attach to participation and their experiences.³ The interviewing language depended on the native language of the informants. Consequently, all interviews in the Tartu County were carried out in Estonian, while in the Ida-Viru County the interviewing language was Russian (except for one interview in Estonian). Across both sites, a total of 34 interviewees were ethnic Estonians, 24 were ethnic Russians, 2 were Ukrainians, 37 participants were male and 23 were female. The majority of interviewees were Estonian citizens (47), but the respondent set also included five Russian and two Ukrainian citizens as well as six stateless persons. In Tartu County, all but one informant – a Ukrainian citizen – were Estonian citizens. The interview schedule included a wide range of themes such as: political heritage and transmission; history and memory in everyday life; participation and understanding of ‘The Political’; culture and lifestyles; the language of politics; receptivity to extremism. In Tartu County, the average interview duration was 79 minutes, while in the Ida-Viru County the duration was 54 minutes.

Additionally, in-depth (20) and focus group (5) interviews were conducted alongside co-operative actions with museum partners to demonstrate the transmission of memory and its impact on political participation. According to the general MYPLACE research design, 3 ethnographic case studies were conducted; in Estonia these were with the LGBT movement, the Pirate Party and Youth Councils, the latter 2 of which are analysed in articles of this volume.

Structure of this edition

The work contained within this journal makes use of this evidence, providing an overview of the outcomes from the MYPLACE project, also making connections with relevant theoretical and policy debates on youth political participation. We begin with an article focusing on the issue of interpreting of the past, based on qualitative interviews conducted in both our Estonian research sites and material gathered from inter-generational interviews conducted in Tallinn. The second article is based on survey data, discussing the issue of active citizenship, while the third article uses results from open-ended interviews in Tartumaa and Ida-Virumaa to illustrate participation in social media among youth. The remaining two articles present ethnographic case studies, looking respectively at the topic of internet activism in an intensified manner with participants in the Pirate Party and the Estonian Internet Society and more conventional participation in the form of a youth council. The discussion in the concluding article seeks to put these findings into a broader context, using findings from the MYPLACE project outside of Estonia to help place the results within a broader European schema.

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³ For interviewees’ socio-demographic profiles overall and by field site, please refer to the Finale section of this special issue (Cairns & Allaste, 2016, p. 108).

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