Multiple Faces of Conventional Political Activism:
A Youth Council Case Study

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Abstract

Youth political participation via state-sponsored institutional settlements has always been considered a goal of youth policies, representing a means of creating politically active and caring citizens. Throughout Europe, however, the number of politically active young people seems to be diminishing, with youth frequently described as apathetic and disengaged. While a growing body of academic research has concentrated on exploring the reasons behind political inactivity, this article explores the motivation and activities of some of the young people who are involved in institutionalised youth organisations, asking if the meanings behind institutional political participation are undergoing a process of change together with the rest of the society. Based on qualitative in-depth interviews, participant observation and analysis of documents (including online communication) collected as part of the research project MYPLACE, we examine the meanings young people attach to their participation. We show that the character of these organisations and motivations behind participation are miscellaneous; sometimes strikingly similar to the forms of participation not traditionally associated with political activism but rather ascribed to disengaged youth.

Keywords: youth, conventional institutional political participation, individualisation, post-socialist society, Estonia.

Introduction

Youth has always been a paradoxical social category in political studies — at times of rebellions and revolutions, young people tend to be the ones singled out as causing trouble on the streets and in need of taming. Yet, when they sit on their hands and refuse to become involved in everyday social or political activities, researchers (and politicians) seem to be just as concerned. During recent decades, interest in the latter — disengaged and apathetic youth — seems to be gradually growing in academic research. Discussion on youth political participation is heterogeneous, but one could categorise these developments into two general trends. In the first, researchers speak about engaged and disengaged youth, look for reasons for apathy and ways to bring young people back into politics. The second, and more recently emerging trend tends to divide youth into engaged in traditional (conventional) political participation and unconventional/ participation with other (new) means. That is, scholars have noted that although young people are shifting away from what is considered to be traditional political participation, many of them are active in new ways, and the forms of political participation they prefer have significantly changed (Beck, 2001; Farthing, 2010; Kiisel, Leppik & Seppel, 2015; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015).

While several studies have focused on the reasons behind youth disengagement and the changed nature of activism, participation in conventional political youth organisations, and meanings and motivations for this form of engagement, has gained less attention. Thus, stemming from this

shortcoming, the following article will look into an institutionalised youth political activism by analysing the case studies of two youth councils in Estonia. Rather than complementing the literature on alternative political forms, it will focus on institutional political participation: youth councils are municipal institutions, whose aim is to promote participatory democracy in society and among youth. Thus, this form of participation could be categorised under 'conventional' or 'traditional' participation, yet, as the article will show, the lines of such categorisations may become irrelevant. Based on qualitative in-depth interviews, participation observation and analysis of key documents (including communication via Internet), we scrutinise the meanings young people attach to their participation and ask how much we can talk about the transformation of conventional participation.

By concentrating on Estonia, the current article aims to fulfil another gap in academic research, as youth engagement in politics in post-socialist countries seems to have attracted a rather low level of interest. We found the topic of understanding young people's political participation important as little is known about the processes of change in youth political participation in post-socialist societies. The latter make a great case to be studied for several reasons. After the collapse of communist regime in the early 1990s, many Eastern European countries had to (re)create their political and social systems from scratch. The path to creating a new institutional system was not always without setbacks and may still be under construction. Additionally, today's young people born around the 1990s are an interesting case to study because they are the first generation to have no personal experience of living under the Soviet regime, which presumably gives them totally different experiences, attitudes and values than their parents.

Quite commonly, the concept of political participation and its forms (old, conventional, traditional, new, alternative, unconventional) are overloaded with contested and different meanings, from different theoretical approaches. Thus, aiming to clarify our starting point, we find it important to spell out that we approach political participation as a form of activism that carries out activities which aim to influence political structures, corporations, communities or people to change, abolish or adopt decisions, regulations, rules or personal behaviour in order to change the current situation of people, communities or species and not act for the benefit of oneself (see also Pirk, 2015). We define 'conventional' (or old, traditional) participation as a form of political behaviour that uses institutional channels, is accepted by the dominant culture (Janda et al., 2010, p. 155) and whose actions are directed towards influencing some political outcomes (Brady, 1999 cite. Christensen 2011a: 12), such as party membership and voting in elections (Putnam, 2000; van Biezen et al., 2012; Norris et al., 2004; Sloam, 2007). By 'unconventional' (alternative, new) political commitment modes, we mean the actions that fall outside traditional political participation, but are still directed towards changing society/ political outcomes, e.g., protest politics, internet activism, political consumerism and single-issue activism (participation with other means paradigm), in which participation has been witnessed to be increasing (Christensen, 2011b; Stolle et al., 2005; Norris et al., 2004). The term 'social activism' is considered as engagement in society without any aims at political/social change, such as entertainment activities or participation in sports clubs.

The article starts off by sketching some theoretical debates in the field to provide background for the empirical data. Next, the context of Estonian and European youth political participation will be provided. After briefly introducing the data and methods, analysis of the two youth councils is provided.

Theoretical insight

Though a lot of changes that have been taking place in recent decades in Estonia can be explained in the framework of post-socialist transitions (from planned economy to a liberal one, from an authoritarian single-party system to a democracy), there have been a number of changes whose

character is not particular to post-socialist states alone. These processes have been taking place globally and have affected not only youth political participation, but also the character of the politics and other phenomena in society in general. One of the most popular theories explaining these recent changes is labelled 'individualisation', its most prominent proponents being Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991). According to these social theorists, traditional collective values like a stable life, good relationships within communities and shared national goals have started to become degraded and are gradually being sided with (if not replaced) by self-realisation, personal development and self-expression. Additionally, opportunities, problems, dangers and biographical uncertainties that were predefined within a collective framework (family, community or by social class) must now be perceived, interpreted, decided and processed by individuals themselves (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 5; Beck, 1992, p. 135). According to Zygmunt Bauman, individualisation consists of "transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance" (2002, p. xv).

However, individualism is socially situated (Evans, 2002; Roberts et al., 1994) and its role in young people's lives has triggered numerous discussions in youth studies. Although the burden of several decisions is laid on individual shoulders, the question of individual agency in time of individualisation is more complex (Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Woodman, 2009; 2010; Roberts, 2010; Nugin, 2013). As Giddens puts it, in contemporary times, "we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so — we have no choice but to choose" (1991, p. 81). One has to take responsibility of one's life and 'pay' equally for decisions made or, for that matter, decisions not taken (Beck, 1992, p. 135; Bauman, 1998, p. 7). In other words, individualisation becomes a norm and may become a burden for some as creating one's 'choice biography' (du-Bois Reymond, 1995) has become an institutional demand (Honneth 2004). The proportion of individual choice in biography grows, but every choice brings more responsibility and more ties with the institutional system: the labour market, social policy, consumption, etc. (Beck, 1992, pp. 131-135; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3) Thus, though individual responsibility in taking decisions and being responsible for their outcome is high, the agency still depends on social institutions and individual resources. In lower strata, the options for choice are rather scarce, yet the burden of responsibility to create a reflexive biography is just as high.

The processes described above have also affected political participation. First, they have shaped how political agendas are set by politicians as well as individuals. Giddens suggests that today 'life politics' prevails, in which creation of morally justifiable forms of life that will promote self-actualisation, are prioritised (1991, pp. 214-215). In his view,

> *life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies.* (Giddens, 1991, p. 214)

While self-realisation is central in individualisation theory, paradoxically enough, it has another side to it. Individuals increasingly take (individual) responsibility and initiative for issues traditionally seen as government agenda. Many of them realise that politicians are incapable of solving the problems of modern times (e.g., climate change, animals well-being etc.) and are becoming more involved in addressing several political issues by being involved in civic activism. As Giddens refers, it's 'a politics of lifestyle' (1991, p. 214).

Ironically, the 'life politics' does not mean that individuals are more involved in conventional political activism (i.e., voting). Quite the contrary — a (dangerous) decrease in political and civic engagement has been described by many scholars all over the world (Putnam, 2000; Euyoupart, 2005; Taru, 2006; 2008; 2011; Toomla, 2008; 2011; Sloam, 2007; van Biezen et al., 2012; Zurabishvili & Pollock,

2013). Thus, a need to promote political participation among young people has been voiced, though the ways to work out different policies varies — some stress the need to bring young people back to conventional political participation (political organisations, voting), while others promote the idea of creating new institutional forms to foster ways of youth activism.

Several studies indicate, however, that even though young people are not showing up at voting polls (see, for example, van Biezen et al., 2012), they have their own and unconventional ways of political activism (see, for example, Sloam 2007). Some have noted that contemporary youth are involved in 'micro-political' or 'cause-oriented' actions (Pattie et al., 2004; Norris, 2003), meaning that they are rather mobilised around specific issues that are important in the particular moment of their lives or enable self-actualisation at the current moment. Instead of voting for change, young people 'live change', they act on a local level to resolve global issues — either by consuming practices, public transportation usage or something else along these lines (Beck, 2001; Farthing, 2010, p. 189).

Though it may seem at first glance that young people can be divided into two groups: the ones engaged with traditional forms of political activism and others involved in alternative participation, a recent study by Busse et al. (2015) shows that this division is somewhat arbitrary. In addition to these types, according to them, many young people are involved in both forms of activism (old and new), and there are still a number of those who are not socially active in any way (i.e., disengaged). Additionally, Rys Farthing (2010) has called for noticing that political apathy is heterogeneous and warns against simplifying the forms of participation or ignorance. In her article, she showed that sometimes politically apathetic young people are making a point by deliberately disengaging from official conventional participation, because it represents values that are disdainful for them (p. 191). Drawing on Beck (2001), Farthing describes the last group as 'fun-loving' people who have been driven away from political participation by 'kill-joy' politics (2010, p. 190). Thus, according to her, new forms of ignorance can be as meaningful as conventional participation.

In a way extending Farthing's point, we will show in the following article how individualisation processes have made the lines between these (conventional, unconventional, social activism) models hazy, and that even in conventional forms of collective political participation, social and unconventional characteristics of participation are present: single-issue politics as well as self-realisation through fun. However, besides the complexities of noticing and researching such kinds of unconventional participation, another question arises: how do we, in the context of individualisation, define being politically engaged — i.e., what is political (Busse et al., 2015, p. 123)? And although the question has been repeatedly asked about the alternative (new) ways of youth participation, it is often overlooked while dealing with the research about conventional political participation. Therefore, we will ask if attending institutional events organised by conventional political organisations always has the political character and meaning to the young people participating in these as seems to us.

Estonian youth political engagement in European context

Despite the lamented concern in academic literature about the apathetic youth and a substantial amount of different empirical research to back the claim, the recent comparative data about European youth political dispositions is not always available (for discussion, see Pilkington & Pollock, 2015). Mostly due to methodological reasons (different political systems, different approaches of surveying), several datasets signal contradictory numbers and the comprehensive and comparative picture of European youth's political behaviour (such as voting turnout) is largely missing. However, recent cross-European research MYPLACE (though not representative of national states) showed that young Europeans are generally rather not interested (58%) than interested (42%) in politics (Taru & Machacek, 2014, p. 92; see also Allaste & Cairns, pp. 1-8). Young Estonians' interest was reported even

lower than the European average: only around 30% of respondents in both sites claimed to be 'very' or 'quite interested', marking one of the lowest interest levels, along with some other post-socialist countries, e.g., Latvia 21% (in Forstate and Jaunbuve locations) (Taru & Machacek, 2014; p. 59).[1]

Although the perceived interest in politics was rather low, youth political behaviour shows somewhat different and controversial signs. Some scholars have noted that the trend of voting in elections is in a general decline (Rose & Munro, 2003), while others imply that voting in elections among the youth (up to 25 years), on the contrary, shows signs of increase: from 52.6% in 2002 up to 58.2% in 2012 had voted at the last elections (Pilkington & Pollock, 2015; TNS Political & Social, 2015, p. 18) and 63% of European youth had voted in the last three years in 2014 (TNS Political & Social 2015, p. 17). Still, compared to other age groups, voting turnout among youth seems to be the weakest throughout Europe: in 2010, 61% of youths aged 22-29 stated voting in the last national elections, as opposed to the 78.1% of those over 30 years old[2] (Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Horvath & Paolini, 2013, p. 6). Young Estonians' voting behaviour indicates that around 55% of youth votes (Taru, 2006; 2008; Zurabishvili & Pollock, 2013, p. 28; TNS Political & Social, 2015, p. 17),[3] which is on par with the average European level. At the same time, they are the most passive group: in 2011, ca 30% of non-voters in national elections were young (18-30 y/o), while for rest of the age groups (31-45, 46-60 and 61-older) the percentages were ca 16 (Toomla, 2011). However, though being the most passive group, its voting habits nevertheless show a steady and remarkable increase — in 2003 their proportion of the age group 18-30 among non-voters was 42% (Toomla, 2011).

European youth engagement in associations has been rather modest: only 22% of young people reported membership in organisations (Gallup Organization, 2007, p. 20). Recent studies claim that participation in associations is decreasing (TNS Political & Social, 2015). Yet, engagement in political parties has been stable since 2007 with 5% of youth being a member (Gallup Organization, 2007, p. 20; TNS Political & Social, 2015. p. 9). For Estonia, participation in political parties is in decline, although participation in youth associations is relatively higher than the European average (ca 33% of young people had participated in youth associations) (Kirss & Batueva, 2012, p. 50-51). In 2007, 5% of associations' participants reported participation in a political party (Gallup Organization, 2007, p. 20), but in 2015 the engagement had decreased to 3% (TNS Political & Social, 2015, p. 9). According to the MYPLACE study, participation in political parties in Estonia was reported by 4.3% of participants, which is one of the highest, while the percentage, for example, for Latvia was only 0.9 (Taru, 2013).

In sum, while some imply that young Europeans are turning away from traditional political engagement (e.g., voting in elections, youth political organisations) (Euyoupart, 2005; Sloam, 2007; van Biezen et al., 2012), as the numbers above indicate, Estonian youth participation in traditional political activism is more or less on an average level compared to their European counterparts (Taru, 2006; 2008; Zurabishvili & Pollock, 2013; Puuronen et al., 2014). This might suggest that in post-socialist Estonia it would be ambiguous to speak about youth abstention from traditional political engagement forms. The reason for this might be that the tradition of civic participation in politics is not yet fully embraced during the first decades after regaining independence and is in the process of developing. In other words, in Estonia, the tradition of political participation and engagement in conventional modes is still a relatively new experience that young people might be just discovering.

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1 For overview of Estonian youth political engagement in greater details see Taru, 2016.
2 Based on Eurobarometer surveys.
3 Different studies show different percentages: Taru (2006) presented that in national elections in 2003 participated 57-63% of youth (study was carried out in different locations in Estonia) and in EP election in 2004 31-40%; in MYPLACE study in total 46% from eligible youth voted in local elections and 66% in national elections (Zurabishvili & Pollock, 2013, p. 28); TNS Political & Social reported 53% of voters in last three years among Estonian youth (2015, p. 17).

Methods and data

The research is based on an ethnographic case study research strategy with two research units. The ethnographic case study strategy was opted for since it allows the researcher to investigate the particularity and the complexity of a research subject (an individual, a group) within its real life context (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003, p. 13). The researcher can focus intensively on a research unit and develop a comprehensive knowledge of it. In this study, two cases instead of one were used in order to comprehend and understand young people's activism in a conventional mode of political participation (state-sponsored youth political organisations) more thoroughly with its potentially diverse strategies and meanings in an in-depth account. The primary research case was the Tartu City Youth Council (hereafter CYC) and on a smaller scale the comparative unit is the Tartu Parish Youth Council (hereafter PYC). The youth councils represent a conventional mode of participation.

The study was carried out by two researchers: one conducting the ethnographic case study in CYC and the other in PYC. Fieldwork lasted from April 2012 to August 2013. The dataset includes in-depth thematic interviews with founders, organisers, members, former members and sympathisers. In total, 22 in-depth interviews were carried out: 15 with the members of the CYC and 7 with the members of the PYC, aged 16-27 years (not a representative sample). Thematic semi-structured interviews were guided by the interview schedule in the framework of the MYPLACE project,[4] concentrating mainly on the dynamics of a youth council as a form of participation, on the meanings and attitudes young people attach to participation and on their understanding of political activism. All interviews were carried out in Estonian and lasted approximately one hour. The dataset includes also observations and participant observations of meetings, social intra-group events, outreach events (with field diaries and photo materials). All in all, the data consists of 12 (participant) observations of the CYC events and 4 of the PYC events; collection of documentation (formal documents: articles of association, action plans); informal documentation (informal conversations, reflected in field diaries, as detailed as necessary and possible; and informal documents: e-mail conversations, discussions on web pages, social media) and archival records (press releases, media articles, photos, video records).

First, a 'within-case' analysis was conducted (Creswell, 2007, p. 75) in order to provide a detailed description of the cases. The empirical material was extensively coded, using NVivo 9.2 software by the corresponding researchers, thus, both cases independently. This coding method was chosen in order to ensure that all nuances and knowledge that researchers had obtained during their ethnographic observations were also captured in data analysis. The coding process consisted of two stages. The first level included open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) for both research units. Afterwards the two individual coding trees were compared and unified based on similarities in the emerging topics. At the next stage, coding trees were once more reviewed, unified and merged. Merged coding tree enabled to grasp the differences and similarities more clearly as it vividly presented appearance and absence of trends in groups under scrutiny.

The data analysis is illustrated with extracts from interview materials. All interview extracts are identified by the informant's pseudonym (in order to assure his or her anonymity), age and the organisation's acronym.

Youth Council

Youth councils (hereafter YC) in Estonia are regulated by the Youth Work Act (Riigi Teataja, 2015), which defines their essence as 'an advisory participation council consisting of young people, which operates at a rural municipality or city council' and their objective is 'the discussion of issues concerning young

4   Work Package 7: Interpreting Activism (Ethnographies).

people which are in the competence of the rural municipality or city and the making of proposals to the rural municipality or city council or city government in connection therewith proceeding from the needs and interests of young people'. Therefore, YCs can be considered as a mode for conventional political activism. Yet, as advisory to participation councils, YCs do not have a voting right in city council or rural municipality hearings. In this sense, possibilities to enforce their decisions in local political structures are scarce.

In Estonia, youth councils are a relatively recent form of political activism. The first county and local youth councils were established in 2008/2009 (Estonian National Youth Council, 2013) with the biggest wave of establishment in 2010, when it was also signed into legislation. As the establishment took place at various time points, different youth councils display today different levels of development. The growth has been noticeable, from 31 YCs in 2009 up to 81 YCs in 2013 (Batueva, 2014, p. 27). The expansive establishment allows to estimate that over the last few years, more young people are participating in these activities, (although the actual number of young active in YCs is, due to lack of surveys, unknown), and consider it as one of the growing trends in youth political activism in Estonia.

Youth Councils in this study are both located in Tartu County, which is characterised by a relatively educated labour force, low unemployment and high income, a high number of young people obtaining high school or university education, low criminality, innovative and high tech production and good recreational areas and places. The CYC operates in the city of Tartu, which is the second largest city in Estonia and the cultural, administrative, economic and entrepreneurial centre of Southern Estonia. Estonia's leading centre of research and training, the University of Tartu, as well as several other universities and high-ranking high schools are located there. In 2014, the population of Tartu was 98,449 inhabitants, including 19,069 young people aged 15-26 (Statistics Estonia, 2015). The PYC operates in the Tartu Parish, an area next to Tartu. Two schools and a number of youth organisations are located there. The population of Tartu Parish in 2014 was 7,217 inhabitants including 1,049 young people aged 15-26 (Statistics Estonia, 2015).

The establishment process for CYC in 2005 followed a bottom-up logic — it was created by young activists and was one of the first youth councils in Estonia (to be known).[5] The PYC, however, was established from top-down by official institutions (Estonian National Youth Council) through the general wave of establishment of YCs in 2010. Both of the YCs are small youth organisations (CYC is registered NGO). During the fieldwork, the CYC body was composed of 23 members, but the core group consisted of approximately ten people. The members were university or high school students aged 15 to 27 years and the group was gender balanced: 13 female and 10 male participants. According to the CYC statute, the members can be distinguished as 'political' or 'apolitical.' The former, in their account, is an appointed member by the youth section of a political party represented in the city council and an apolitical member is one who cannot belong to any political party or its youth section.[6] So, with its political members, in a way, CYC simulates the city council's composition. The PYC, by contrast, is a smaller organisation, which during the fieldwork was composed of only 13 young people. Similarly to its counterpart CYC, its members were university and high school students, but in general a bit younger, between 18 and 22 years old. The PYC seems to be feminised, as majority of the activists during the fieldwork were female.

Both YCs are hierarchically structured: members are led by a board that includes a chairperson and two vice-chairpersons. Everyday work in YCs is organised through thematic working groups

5   The following descriptions of the youth councils are based on the ethnographic observations and data collected during fieldwork.
6   During the time of fieldwork Tartu City Youth Council started to change its composition structure by including one appointed member by every high school student council in Tartu city, additionally to political and apolitical members.

— e.g., a working group for organising shadow elections.[7] The YCs are formed through elections organised every year for board members and after every other year for composition members. The Youth Work Act states that a "Youth council shall be elected democratically by the young people of the rural municipality or city pursuant to the procedure established by the rural municipality or city council" (Riigi Teataja, 2015). Therefore, the PYC organises public elections where the parish youth can democratically elect members to the new composition among young candidates. The CYC composition, however, is elected by a commission that consists of representatives from the city council and from the current CYC board. The financial resources for the YC activities are allotted based on annual action plans or written projects, from city and rural municipality budgets (however, not all YCs in Estonia are this way financially supported), and some financial help can be applied from the Estonian National Youth Council. In general, both YCs also apply sponsorship in order to carry out their activities.

Findings

'Because I wanted to do something better for society' — motivations for participation

Reasons for young people's political participation have been widely studied (Verba et al., 1995/2002, p. 269-390; Nichols & Miller, 1993, pp. 10-37). It is generally held that young people with heterogeneous resources (be it financial, cultural or educational) tend to also be politically more active (Busse et al., 2015). Political activism is also more commonly spread among those who are prone to be socially active, as many of those recruited to such organisations end up there because their friends did (for discussion, see Hooghe et al., 2004; Hashem-Wangler et al., 2015). In other words, cultural and social capital (participation in school activities, active media usage, parents and friends with political interests, see: Muxel, 2005; Euyoupart, 2005, p. 101) tends to influence young people to be socially and politically active, thus potentially also increasing other forms of capital or accumulating their existing capitals. This has to be kept in mind also when analysing the data for this research project: those participating in youth councils in our study tended to also be active in other fields (social activities in school, activism in the family context, etc.).

Yet, not all young people active in social fields choose to participate in political activities. Thus, we were interested in the reasons why young people choose to be politically active and wondered also what forms this activism took among the youngsters in our study. Furthermore, we intended to see if the framework of political activism was distinctively different from what has been described in academic literature as 'new' or 'alternative' forms of activism or disengagement. To begin with, we first bind together the nature of the organisation and youth motivations in joining the organisation as it seems that the way in which young people perceive their organisation is closely connected with the motivations why they are (politically) active.

Since the very beginning when the CYC was launched, the organisation had been a youth representative organisation in the young members' perceptions.

We do not represent the interests of our members, instead we try to do things that would be generally useful. And, well, the city has always so to say supported us in doing so. (Mikk, M24, CYC)

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7   'Shadow Elections' is a citizen education project that gives young people from the age of 14, who are too young to vote at the local and national elections, a possibility to vote before the municipal and national elections are held (thresholds for local and national elections are 16 and 18 years, respectively). The process of elections included real candidates and voting boxes. The aim of the project is to motivate young people to grow an interest in social matters and politics in general and to become an active citizen who wants to participate and has the ability to decide according to analysis, facts and information. The shadow elections have been organised in 2009, 2011 and 2014 in local and government elections. (Estonian National Youth Council, 2013)

Thus, Mikk can be arbitrarily labelled a representative of what is commonly considered participation in conventional politics for the common good of the society. Yet, his quote has to be seen in the context of the organisation's development. In the early years of the organisation, the purposes and activities that the organisation carried out were more akin to entertainment, such as charity and fundraising events, and directed towards encouraging personal self-actualisation and development. In other words, they were directed towards what scholars have described as single-issue, micro-political activism (Pattie et al., 2004; Norris, 2003), or individual self-realisation (Beck, 2001). However, these kinds of events and activities were perceived by Mikk as necessary ones in order to "help bring the CYC into the picture [... and] to find some objectives to our actions".

Mikk's disposition towards this question was not, however, unanimously shared by others. Some members believed that the youth council should not be dealing with such activities. Paul, the founder of the CYC, stated that "The youth council definitely is not an organiser of events". His opinion was backed by Maarja-Liisa, who was hesitant and doubtful over the relevance of such activities for a youth council. She called these 'totally random topics' and asked, "What is the mission? What is special about it?" As the latter illuminates, the purpose of the events that young people in political youth organisations organise may not always have a political character, yet the meaning of these events for the young people who participate in it varies. Mikk could still see the aim of such non-political events in the framework of a broader political cause (to bring the organisation into the picture and thus have a broader ground for fulfilling its political causes), while other members could have been disdainful towards these types of events.

For many members of CYC, the aims were defined in a rather narrow framework of a conventional political youth organisation. For these young people, the core aim of the organisation included increasing youth political awareness, political (and social) participation, and introducing youth to democratic decision-making processes.

The involvement and such, asking young people's opinion and maybe such, political education [...] values and ideals, that I myself also share /.../ it so-called overlaps very well with what is my general mission in society or in life, just to make things better. (Mikk, M24, CYC)

In other words, the members of the CYC emphasised the significant role the organisation plays in contributing to society by representing young people's opinion in political structures:

one significant objective is to inform young people that they have the opportunity to be heard by the city, to be heard by the city council, and that their opinion is welcomed, that it can really change something /.../. (Marju, F19, CYC)

Yet, what meanings young people attach to the aims of their participation also depends on the particular scope of the organisation and its capability or potential to have an impact on specific social or political issues. Compared to CYC, which is closely connected to the city council of the second largest town in Estonia, PYC's potential to influence the political landscape was considerably lower, as the municipality was smaller and concentrated more on local issues than involved itself in party politics. Thus, given that the impact on general political life can be rather low in PYC, young people are interested in self-realisation within the framework of this institution and aim for smaller goals, such as making a change in their own communities. Among PYC members, there is relatively less discussion about the youth council as a mode for political socialisation or as a youth representative organisation. For those young, the youth council is connected with promoting local social life and the development of their local community, rather than fostering youth political participation or representing their opinion in a rural municipality.

When I think which role it has played in [my] life, then I think that maybe creating this community feeling, that you feel that it has some value /.../ it is a common background, we are all from the same parish and we all want this parish to develop, to get better and bring some changes, maybe this would be for the youth council, maybe this is the place where you start thinking where you live and what happens there, how life is there, maybe developing such way of thought and creating the feeling that this is the right and good community. (Tarmo, M21, PYC)

This correlates with the findings of Hashem-Wangler et al. (2015, p. 47), who observed that young people often do not display any concrete political motivations for their engagement but rather to community work and social aspects they would like to change (p. 47). As in small settlements, the possibilities of any kind of social activities are scarce, the politically inclined organisation may meet some other social demands of the young people in these areas. Hence, though both Tarmo and Mikk see the need to organise events with the character of social involvement, the difference lies in the purpose of such events. While for Mikk these events still serve the political purpose in the long run, Tarmo does not aim for more than just strengthening the community.

Nevertheless, regardless of the seemingly quite clear-cut differentiation between the aims Mikk and Tarmo assigned to the organisation (political activism and local community/ social activism), labelling one 'political' and the other one not could become quite tricky. Here, a question arises about how to define 'political' (Busse et al., 2015, p. 123) as the essence of the concept 'political' is in the process of change itself (Giddens, 1991; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015). As community development and micro-politics has become increasingly the essence of politics in general, Tarmo's will to 'create the feeling that this is the right and good community' might fall exactly under this definition. Yet, there is another dimension to it: how young people themselves position their organisation into the category 'political'.

Paradoxically enough, several members of PYC saw this organisation as a chance to be apolitical. Tarmo saw this as a virtue of the organisation, as he had also had an experience of being part of a youth branch of a political party and did not see it as 'really his thing'. In his opinion, being apolitical can be seen as an asset:

then you have a chance, a chance to have a say on issues, you are being taken more seriously among those who, who are not, or let's say there is a party in power, then the young people from their branch organisation cannot say anything. So this [PYC] is even more serious, in this sense. (Tarmo, M21, PYC)

Tarmo's quote indicates the tendency in the society that has been described by several social scientists, when young people deliberately distance themselves from active politics, as this represents for them the disdainful values of 'kill-joy' politics (Beck, 2001; Farthing, 2010). Also, Tarmo suggests that young people who are the members of, say, a government party, are not taken seriously, as sometimes other motives are seen behind their opinions (opportunism). In other words, though participating in an organisation that can be classified as conventional political activism according to the Farthing's (2010) distinction, it contains elements of the other types of activism Farthing defined as 'being socially active yet not voting' and 'deliberately disengaging from political activism'. When asked about his preferences on political landscape and requested to position his political inclinations on right-left or conservative-liberal scales, Tarmo insisted that he would not position himself anyhow, but would rather create his own scale. Interestingly enough, many others from PYC were rather puzzled about the question, as they did not know which party belongs to the right, and which one to the left.

Also, the conventional political participation via established institutional channels was not well established in the case of PYC. Though it was an organisation under the Tartu Parish Council, the cooperation and participation in the municipal council's work had been modest so far. Tarmo described the cooperation:

We went there with one of the members of the board, me and one member Kristiina, we were there, but then, er, we forgot one meeting, I guess, and then all the cooperation went bust /.../ I woke up at home, called to Kristiina, to find out what she is doing, and she said she had forgotten it, too. So we were both like, oh Judas. (Tarmo, M21, PYC)

So the classification of PYC under conventional political youth activism can be debatable, regardless of its official aim of fostering youth political activism. The lines between political activism, social activism or even disengagement from official political landscape can become hazy as different aims and motivations exist within the frames of one single organisation.

However, the lines of political disengagement and defining oneself as apolitical can be complex as well. Many members of CYC defined themselves as apolitical, yet the meaning of this concept for them was slightly different:

I don't want to belong, like to any party, I don't want to belong anywhere, you see, but [the youth council] seemed like [a good option], well, it is at the same time political, right, but you do not have to be with any views of particular political parties. (Iiris, F19, CYC)

For Iiris, being apolitical meant that she is not a member of any political party, yet being actively involved in activities having political character. The members of CYC actively took part in several types of city council work, attended the meetings and gatherings. Therefore, it can be tentatively argued that depending on the context, the conventional political organisations can have somewhat of a different character: CYC is inclined to more political matters and PYC towards more community-centred activities. Yet, in PYC or in smaller settlements in general, political organisations' political aims may not be missing entirely, but they might be less important. By the same token, many members of both PYC and CYC reasoned their participation with motivations such as 'having fun', 'cool people to hang out with', etc. In other words, the motivation behind participation is probably heterogeneous and manifold, and when describing differences between the two organisations, we rather mark the main trends, while keeping in mind that the real picture is much more colourful.

Looking at the traits of individualism among the members of two youth organisations, the interview data indicates that self-realisation and self-fulfilment are important for young people in both groups. Yet, individualisation is a complex phenomenon, entailing paradoxical traits. One of the paradoxes is the relation between the individual and the collective. The extent of the collective goals in motivation for participation varies among the interviewees, just as much as the notion of 'collective' — i.e., how broad the imagined community is. Particularly in CYC, the members highlighted the motivation to 'do something better for society' — that is, the 'collective' in these accounts was very broad:

I simply came to the youth council because I wanted to do something better for society or to change something, to put in my effort too. /.../ precisely the youth, they should know more, so that they would be interested [emphasises] most of all. Because the youth, in my opinion, don't do much voting. (Silvia, F20, CYC)

At the same time, Silvia stresses her ambition of her individual input into a collective goal — in other words, self-fulfilment can be achieved by addressing collective goals. As the scope and focus of PYC was somewhat different from CYC, the 'collective' was defined more narrowly, in the context of local home community. Also, as the character of events was usually not political, the type of self-realisation that one gains through participation was highlighted: the opportunity to be active, to gain experiences, to test your capability in new situations and succeed.

At least we always have this feeling of accomplishment in the end that we managed, we did it. Well, with some smaller things maybe there's the feeling that /.../ we can do it better but well /.../ if you do it yourself, well okay, you cannot enjoy the event so much, but if you know that you have done something fun and others liked it, then this feeling is very good. (Karmen, F21, PYC)

As Giddens noted, today one of the core aims of the 'life politics' is to create 'morally justifiable forms of life that will promote self-actualisation in the context of global interdependence' (1991, p. 215). Therefore, as already indicated, the lines between the self and community are becoming hazy and the essence of politics is gradually changing towards self-realisation. However, concentrating on the 'self' does not necessarily mean egoism, as self-actualisation can be achieved by contributing to common good.

In addition to the individualistic aims of self-realisation through contributing to communal or social good, there were others, more self-centred purposes in joining the organisation. Pragmatic reasons are also strongly evident (especially among CYC members) when it comes to motivations for political activism; for example, developing useful civic skills, such as speech writing and verbal skills, new useful contacts and reputation or career opportunities in the future:

Maybe if I want to head in that direction, like, I don't know local government or a ministry or somewhere there, you know, then I feel that I would want to get some acquaintances and to get to know this stuff now. (Thea, F21, CYC)

In other words, Thea's aim was to increase her social capital by finding new useful contacts for her personal career in the future. In these cases, young people were aimed to practical self-centred goals rather than aiming for intangible goals of 'common good'. Yet, for Thea and others of her kind, the reasons for participation were not mono-dimensional and both selfish and communal aims could coexist in their motivation.

As observed by Beck (2001) and others, the changed society demands new forms of engagement and political activism. Though youth councils represent the conventional, or in Beck's terms 'old' ways of engagement, these institutional settings have also shifted their meanings, and young people are involved in these organisations in similar ways to those who are not directly involved in political participation. It can be hypothesised that the old forms are transforming along with the emergence of new ways of participation. By the same token, however, it could be also theorised that the 'new' and 'changed' forms might not be so new after all — perhaps throughout the history of political youth organisations, fun, self-realisation, socialisation and looking for social capital have been important motivators for joining different institutions. Yet, the extent of this motivation and the prevalence of these notions during the era of individualism have perhaps grown and shaped the character of these organisations more than before.

From city council hearings to hiking: participation repertoires

In order to further elaborate on the changing (or developing) forms of youth political activism in the studied organisations, we now turn to describing the events they organise. Based on the two youth councils examined, we can identify (at least) four different participation repertoires. The categorisation is grounded by the main purpose of the activities; therefore, the following categories were created: political activities (e.g., events that aim youth representation); activities aimed to gain political experiences (e.g., events that offer possibilities to simulate, experience politics/ political participation); informative activities (e.g., distributing information about politics/political participation); and entertainment activities (social activism).

The first set of activities used by the youth councils can be classified as political activities. These include conventional political representative activities (Janda et al., 2010, p. 155; Ekman & Amnå, 2012), e.g., participating in city council hearings; organising meetings and discussions with state representatives and officials, developing a position on topics that are important for the youth and presenting and defending these standpoints in the city council and in public; but also unconventional activities like campaigns to promote single-case issues. These are activities that, according to the Youth Work Act (Riigi Teataja, 2015), should be the first priority of youth councils as such (political youth organisations). However, in the case of the researched councils these have been ad hoc activities and rather modestly organised. Moreover, fulfilling the goal of youth representation is somewhat questionable. Though young CYC members have the right to speak at city council committee hearings (education and culture committee) and they aim for a right to vote, they still admit self-critically that the political representation task isn't achieved.

The problem is that CYC hasn't properly attended the hearings. So is the right to vote still needed if the right to speak isn't even used? It is necessary to actively participate, attend the hearings and only then the right to vote could be applied for? (Extract from CYC hearing protocol, 25.09.2012)

At the same time, the opinions about the output of the youth councils are not so homogeneous. Siiri, for example, voices an opinion that political organisations do not have to be exclusively political:

many of us meanwhile remained during the meetings of the opinion that 'this isn't an output for the CYC, we shouldn't be doing this' [organising events that are not entirely political], but in my opinion it is maybe cool if there are some other things as well, that not only some kind of crazy political events, but just like those others as well. (Siiri, F19, CYC)

Again, this indicates that young people might not be looking for organisations that are profoundly political, but rather seek the mixture of political and social activism and ways to have a good time. Additionally, as the abovementioned indicates, although the political orientation and repertoires exist within the youth organisations, the actual concentration and fulfilment of political goals might still be unrealisable. Despite the political outline set for the organisations and structural support (funding and mentoring assistance from the city council), young people modify the participation in political organisations to suit their abilities and necessities.

The next set of practices consists of activities that introduce the official essence of the group, i.e., politics, policy – through personal experience. The purpose is to provide young people opportunities to learn about politics, political decision-making and political and civic participation through participation. In other words, through introducing politics to youth, the aim is to promote habitual political participation, as previous participation experience increases the possibility for further engagement (Muxel, 2005). This repertoire includes activities like shadow elections, simulation games where political institutions and governance practices are emulated, meetings between young people and politicians, but also for instance thematic political debates and memory quizzes. The purpose of such events, according to Indrek is

To do something that's relevant /…/ and not only for young people but also for the general public. I think that these two activities [ACTA and DASA debates][8] showed that CYC is capable of organising very mature and relevant events, if we want to. (Indrek, M23, CYC)

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8   ACTA refers to the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (see Office of the United…, 2013) and DASA refers to the Democracy Development Foundation (state funded foundation) (see Hea Kodanik, 2013). CYC organised public debates about ACTA and DASA.

Concurrently, these activities can be directed to and involve a broader audience than just young people. Indrek also emphasised the issue of relevance, as it is perceived as being one of the core aspects in political participation. Young people are looking for meaning and effectiveness in their actions, as these are crucial motivating characters in youth political and civic activism (Hashem-Wangler et al., 2015).

However, both youth councils also exercise activities that have no obvious connection with politics. These activities fall into entertainment and informative repertoires and are more cause-oriented (Pattie et al., 2004; Norris, 2003). Although at a first glance such informative activities (active sharing of information via the internet, on information boards and at information fairs) seem to have little connection with political activism. The aim of these activities is to engage more young people in political activism by distributing information about the opportunities of engaging with youth political organisations and its activities.

While the entertainment activities seem to be the furthest from the core aim of the political youth institutions — representation — the reality is often more complex. Marju (19 y/o) from the CYC emphasises: "this organising [socialising] events part is also relevant; simply to offer events for young people to participate in". She sheds light on one of the concerns of youth activism. It might often happen that young people do not have opportunities for spending meaningful time with their peers, especially in smaller settlements, so every possibility will be used for this purpose regardless of the core and aims of the organisation. So the character of a political organisation might be moulded in a certain context by youth according to their current needs. As Tarmo implies, members of the organisation value the opportunities for social events (e.g., hiking camps, fairs, volleyball competitions, summer days, etc.) that the organisation offers for the peers from the community as well as for themselves.

> I think that this hiking project is maybe one of the brightest memories, it was such fun, there were activities all the time and a lot of food and it was fun to chat and /…/ well, of course I got to conduct training, this was a good experience for me /…/ the previous day was also very fun, we went on a hike and did a photo hunt and, and it was very enjoyable and such fun, chill. (Tarmo, M21, PYC)

In other words, both youth councils exercise also the 'fun loving' part in the organisation and value it within the organisation and as a legitimate way of participation. Although Farthing (2010) described 'fun lovers' as deliberately apolitical youth, we could tentatively argue that among politically engaged youth, different participation repertoires exist, including political as well as social (entertainment) activities. Therefore, political activism goes hand in hand with other forms of being socially active and the boarder lines between social and political activism overlap. In the context of a post-socialist society, the different repertoires within political youth organisation might indicate that the tradition of active political participation among the youth is still developing.

Conclusive discussion

The changing social and political scene has raised a number of questions about youth political activism. This study has shed light on some aspects of the changed nature of political participation. By concentrating on youth institutional political activism in post-socialist Estonian society, it points out that conventional youth political participation is a heterogeneous phenomenon even if the core outline of the organisation is structurally defined. In other words, within the same institutional framework, totally different organisations can emerge, and within these, the multiplicity of aims and motivations flourish. Our case study showed that for some young people, the youth council is narrowly a political representative organisation (Janda et al., 2010, p. 155; Ekman & Amnå, 2012), with specific objectives and activities, which aims to achieve youth representation in the local community. Others, however, do not conceive the youth council as a council in political terms, but rather as an

organisation that unifies the members of one community and offers entertainment activities for local young people. Thus, in some cases, what has been defined as disengagement or even apathy by some social scientists can be found in the framework of a political institution too. Therefore, the potential research target perhaps lies not only in the formal definition of political participation (taking part in activities of political organisation, voting), but in changing perceptions of participation in general. That makes the measurement of young people's political participation in large-n surveys extremely complicated.

Youth councils proved to be an interesting case to study in many respects. These organisations are still in the process of development in a post-socialist context, moulded by processes of individualisation that take place globally. It would be hard to distinguish the effects of these parallel developments separately, however, our study is an example that they both have a strong impact on the institutional activism of young people. Youth councils are a relatively new phenomenon on the Estonian institutional political landscape. Their emergence has appeared in some kind of a void, since after the collapse of the institutional forms of youth political participation during the Soviet era, there was a certain reluctance of creating political youth institutions connected to executive or administrative bodies like municipal governments. However, after the turn of the new century these moods had changed as the new generation without any experience of Soviet time had been raised. Our two cases demonstrated that the emergence of the youth councils, though somewhat different, both had to rely on young people with initiative and individual input, thus enabling to cultivate the different forms of individualism and fostering the feeling of being part of something new in the making.

The processes of individualisation, however, have been changing the modes of youth political participation globally, moulding also the ways in which participation as such can be conceptualised and categorised in academic research. Thus, researchers' interest has been focused on alternative ways of participation (Sloam, 2007) and active disengagement as a form of making a political stand (Farthing, 2010). This article has demonstrated that the forms of alternative engagement or even disengagement are also present among what has traditionally been conceptualised as conventional political activism, as the institutional political activism has also been affected by individualisation.

Among both youth councils, the aspects of individualisation emerged. We can distinguish pragmatic motivations (gaining political and social contacts, career opportunities, developing one's civic skills) as noted by Hashem-Wangler et al. (2015) and motivations that Beck calls self-realisation (happiness from fulfilling ones potential) (2001). Also political motivations emerge — raising political knowledge, fostering one's participation habit. In times of individualisation, social and political issues are interpreted and processed by individuals themselves (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 5; Beck, 1992, p. 135; Giddens, 2006). As Giddens notes, in late modern societies citizens are not apathetic or disinterested in politics; instead, there is a belief that direct action and participation is more useful than reliance on politicians and the political system (2006, p. 869). Also, as Giddens has pointed out, the essence of politics changes — the target of the policies today are to create more fruitful opportunities of self-actualisation rather than aiming for 'reduction or elimination of exploitation, inequality or oppression' it aimed in the past (Giddens, 1991, p. 215).

Our study confirmed the observation that youth engagement is affected by opportunities available, e.g., the proximity of political organisations (Hashem-Wangler et al., 2015). We could elaborate by adding that the proximity of certain types of organisations might not be crucially important, because despite the formal outline of the political organisation, young people form the organisation in a way that best fits with their needs and perceptions. Hence, the youth council as a political organisation was formed to be a place for social interaction and activism, as this was what young people lacked. This might indicate that in contemporary society the processes of individualisation have made the lines between different classifications blur and, therefore, different modes of participation exist within one mode of political participation. Tentatively it can be argued that in post-socialist societies the tradition of political participation might not be firmly fixed or fully developed, but is more fluid, combining different modes of participation.

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Notes

Appendix: Socio-demographic profile of interviewees at times of fieldwork

Tartu City Youth Council (CYC)			
Informant	Education	Employment	Relationship to organisation
Harles, M20	Currently at university	No	Member (political)
Iiris, F19	Completed general academic secondary education	In full-time employment	Member (becomes passive member)
Indrek, M23	Currently at university	Working and in part-time education	Organiser (becomes former member)
Jana, F26	Completed university	In full-time employment	Organiser (former)
Maarja-Liisa, F21	Currently at university	Working and in part-time education	Organiser (becomes member)
Maria, F22	Currently at university	In full-time employment	Organiser (former)
Marju, F19	Currently at university	In part-time employment	Member (apolitical)
Mikk, M24	Currently at university	Working and in full-time education	Organiser (becomes member)
Oliver, M16	Currently in general academic secondary education	No	Member (apolitical)
Paul, M27	Completed at university	In full-time employment	Sympathiser
Reigo, M25	Completed university	In full-time employment	Member (political)
Siiri, F19	Currently in general academic secondary education	No	Member (apolitical)
Silvia, F20	Currently at university	Working and in education	Member / Future organiser
Thea, F21	Currently at university	No	Member (apolitical)
Tartu Parish Youth Council (PYC)			
Pseudonym	Education	Employment	Relationship to organisation
Eliise, F19	Currently in general academic secondary education	No	Member
Karmen, F21	Currently at university	No	Organiser (former member)
Ly, F18	Currently in general academic secondary education	In part-time employment	Member
Marta, F22	Currently at university	Internship	Organiser (becomes former organiser)
Tarmo, M21	Currently at university	In part-time employment	Member

Source: authors' compilation