Finale:

Contextualising Participation in a Transition Society

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Introduction: the practice of youth politics

This special issue of Studies of Transition States and Societies closes with a concluding discussion that aims to contextualise some of the key findings from the preceding articles. To do so, we use comparative level evidence drawn from other regions included in the MYPLACE consortium, identifyng contrasts and commonalities in how youth politics is practiced across different European regions. The basic approach is one of assessing the extent to which patterns of participation in Estonia diverge from activism elsewhere, thus locating Estonian youth within a broader analytical framework. In this sense, we are taking advantage of the regional diversity of the MYPLACE project design to better understand the meaning of the contemporary practice of youth politics in Estonia.

Crucially, the research consortium included not only societies within close geographical proximity to Estonia, most obviously Latvia and Russia, but also national contexts with whom we might anticipate greater diverenges in the practice of youth poltitics. This includes other post-socialist societies (Hungary, Slovakia and Georgia), Nordic countries (Finland and Denmark), three Mediterranean nations (Spain, Portugal and Greece), the United Kingdom, Germany and the European Union's newest Member State, Croatia. From looking at these varied situtions, we can move towards a better understanding of how young people practice politics in contemporary Europe and gain a better idea of where Estonian youth fit into the current activism schema, using the example of digital activism. And this word 'practice' is chosen quite deliberately for its ambiguity, connoting both the act of engaging in a specific political undertaking and the idea that this engagement is in some way a preparation for subsequent political activism later in life.

The dominant perspective within studies of political activism appears to be one regarding mobilisation as a reaction to exceptional and perhaps unpredicted contemporary events. This includes circumstances that have become excessively oppresssive or even personally injurous, with additional emphasis on the novel means through which political ideas are transmitted today. For example, Castells' (2012) book on social movement activism cites the signficance of repressive governments in inspiring the Arab Spring, as well as the efficacy of digital activism in forming a response. And this initial spark is an important part of a greater chain of events that can also inspire activism across borders (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014). However, this is not the whole story, since more quotidian aspects of participation must also be accounted for.

We need to not only consider the immediate stimulus for action in terms of current events but also take into account political legacy and the means through which this inheritance is passed on societally and inter-generally, including familial transmission of activism predispositions. This focus also extends to what has been termed 'sub-politics' or 'sub-activism' (e.g., Holzer & Sorensen, 2001; Bakardjieva, 2009); a theme introduced in the contribution to this special issue on the Pirate Party / Estonian Internet Society. While this case study represents an example of virtual activism, balance is maintained between different means of engaging in activism through focusing on the example of Youth Councils in Estonia. From this point of view, we are able to appreciate the fact that while new and potentially innovative forms of practicing politics have emerged, more traditional means have also retained their relevance.

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Citizenship and participation

Another important theme is that of the relationship between citizenship and participation. This is a topic that, while latent within the MYPLACE surveys and qualitative fieldwork, is more explicitly addressed in the Estonian context. The article targeting the topic in this edition also reminds us that there has been long-standing interest in youth politics and civic engagement at European Policy level, including recognition of the idea of Active Citizenship. And through an analysis of quantitative data, we are able to better appreciate the patterns of activism that emerge in locales that contrast in terms of socio-demographic profile.

One of the most interesting findings has been to discover the influence of factors such as age, family background and education level, with young people who have the strongest social and economic inheritances tending to be the most participative. Also revealed in this context is the tension created by Europe being increasingly characterised by hostile conditions for young people in terms of their labour market participation; for example, in elevated levels of unemployment and job precariousness (Cairns et al., 2016). At the same time, there remains an expectation that they will meaningfully engage in the political and civic spheres; an optimistic hope given this widespread position of economic disadvantage.

Discussion of this issue within this journal can help inform policy debates in this field, reminding us that one of the basic objectives of the MYPLACE study was to inform European policy on youth participation and civic engagement at a broad level, in addition to looking at more exceptional examples of radical politics.

Negotiating the past across Europe

Understanding the role of the past in contemporary activism was another key objective of the MYPLACE project. The article on this theme in this issue focused on some of the key issues in the transmission of political memories among Estonian youth. This included exploration of how recent examples of youth mobilization are influenced by past events and the defence of the symbols that embody the values of this past; most prominently, the example of the 'Bronze Soldier' incident in Tallinn in 2007. That the Estonian past, in this case events associated with the Second World War, continues to be remembered in the present by young people several generations removed is an interesting finding in itself, confirming that the legacy of the wartime years remains strong. This process of linking past with present is explained by the existence of different sites of memory transmission; for example, schools, museums and the family home, as well as symbolic values having become embedded within discursive narratives associated with particular ethnic or national groups.

Looking at the broader field of evidence collected by the MYPLACE research teams across Europe, we can identify similar processes and shared national discursive themes, including remembrance of events associated with the Second World War that are of special local significance. The closest example, in geographical terms, to the Estonian situation can be observed in the evidence gathered in the Latvian context; work which included cooperation with the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia on coping with the legacy of the holocaust. As the material presented in the Latvian national report on the transmission of political values demonstrates, the defeat of Nazism by the USSR is deeply respected but complicated by the loss of independence following the Soviet 'occupation' in 1940. In this case, the term 'occupation' is problematised due to the fact that the presence of Soviet forces is not universally perceived as an invasion by a hostile foreign power, with a substantial Russian minority feeling otherwise. However one interesting finding emerging from focus groups conducted with Latvian youth was the difficulty of finding cases wherein there was knowledge and understanding of the causes of WWII. What was on show were ways of commemorating the past and

marking particular dates in the calendar with these commemorations and national holidays (Saleniece et al., 2013, p. 29). This position suggests that the connection between historical events and acts of remembrance may be more imaginative than we might anticipate, with the current day 'struggle' for recognition also being a result of the desire to preserve the sanctity of certain dates in the calendar, in this case 25 March and 9 May, rather a celebration of the veterans.

The Latvian analysis also emphasises the importance of maintaining the existence of a national narrative of statehood during the war-time and Soviet periods, indicative of the fact that negotiating the past is a practice engaged in by 'majority' populations as well as national, linguistic or ethnic minority groups. Soviet and post-Soviet historical legacy also looms large in Estonia, Georgia, Hungary and Slovakia. While these contexts share a common experience of going through national independence processes, memory transmission practices are not uniform across national contexts or even within the various field sites covered by the MYPLACE project; for example, between perceptions of 'victimhood' and 'accusation' in the Hungarian analysis (Popov and Deák, 2012). These splits are reflected in the choice of events to be remembered and the meanings attached to them, embodied in the exhibitions hosted by the chillingly named 'house of terror' museum, detailing the struggles of the fascist and communist periods. Furthermore, competing valuations of history become embedded into the political agendas of political left and right. What this means is that history becomes grist for the mill of identity politics at national and European levels: creating a positive national self-image and an example of central European historical experience worthy of recognition on the international stage (Popov and Deák, 2012, p. 13). The Russian case study meanwhile provides an additional perspective, focusing on issues such as the alleged 'falsification' of historical discourses, including contested interpretations of the 'Great Patriotic War' (Fomina et al., 2012).

These issues are obviously not present in the same formulations outside the various Eastern European contexts included in the MYPLACE project. Instead we find young people faced with a complex legacy of totalitarianism (e.g., in Greece and Portugal), national and regional independence movements (e.g., Spain/Catalonia), and other structural factors such as post-industrialization in the UK that produce markedly different political identity effects. One reflection that can be made of these more recent examples of memory transmission is that near contemporary historical events, perhaps not surprisingly, tend to be remembered more accurately and less divisively. For example, the Portuguese revolution of 25 April 1974 is generally accepted as a positive event, and while different interpretations of the political paths taken in its aftermath may be present, the event itself provides an unambiguously positive identity resource irrespective of personal political preferences (Cairns et al., 2012). What this implies is that the more recent the event, the less likelihood there is of divergent, or disingenuous, interpretations becoming established.

This is particularly apparent where there is consensus regarding the 'positive' interpretation of a historical legacy, such as is arguably the case in regard to the Portuguese revolution, meaning limited potential for contested remembrance. Added to this reflection is the realisation that some young people have actually lived through 'history' as it happened, giving them actual as opposed to inherited or received memories of this past. This is true of some of our older respondents in respect to the transition from communism to free market economies, and all of those in the Spanish, Greek and Portuguese research contexts, who have lived through some of the worst aspects of the global financial crisis, austerity and the demands of external debt repayment programmes (Calvo et al., 2012; Cairns et al., 2014).

These latter remarks imply that just as there is a pressing need to negotiate with the past in becoming political, many young people face the problem of coping with the present and anticipating the future. Whether or not the immediate weight of this task will replace the burden of dealing with political challenges related to complicated histories is uncertain, but it does make this activity feel somewhat secondary in importance.

Cross-national online participation

In looking at the issue of contemporary political participation, much research attention has been devoted to ascertaining the extent to which conventional forms of participation have decreased in popularity while involvement in online participation is thought to have correspondingly increased (e.g., Castells, 2012). This participation turnaround appears to be especially evident in Estonia, and is reflected in the results emerging from our research. But the question remains as to the extent to which the growing popularity of participation in social media in Estonia is exceptional or similar to what is happening elsewhere in Europe.

To help answer this question, results from the MYPLACE quantitative survey provide insight into respondents' estimated weekly usage of social media (and other digital technology such as text messages), making reference to the duration of communicating with their friends about politics on a four-point scale ('No time at all', 'Less than 1 hour', '1 hour to 2 hours' and 'More than 2 hours'). Using data published in the MYPLACE work package 4 report (Busse et al., 2014, pp. 260-261), we have been able to locate 'Estonia' within the context of the 13 country (28 region) project outcomes (Table 1), covering two socio-demographically contrasting locations in each country (four in Germany); one being a characteristically affluent area and the other a less prosperous neighbourhood (see Zurabishvili et al., 2013).

As Table 1 reveals, the UK is the clear 'winner' in regard to social media usage within the MYPLACE survey, with both of its research sites occupying the top two positions on this breakdown. However, in third place we find one of the two Estonian sites, the Narva area, with the second Estonian location, Tartu, occupying a more middling position. What these results suggest is that the Estonian respondents are generally more active in regard to social media and other digital forms of communication compared to their counterparts elsewhere in the regions covered by the MYPLACE consortium, providing some support for the idea that youth politics has moved online.

While these results, emerging from the context of a dedicated survey on youth political activism, might lead us to believe that social media is important to participation, outcomes emerging from other questions included make us to question the efficacy of digital platforms. In other words, does the fact that politics is being discussed online mean this is an effective means of mobilising?

Table 1: Use of social media by location for 'more than 2 hours' per week – all MYPLACE regions (%)

Location	%	Location	%
Nuneaton (UK)	61	Lieksa & Nurmes (Finland)	32
Coventry (UK)	58	Ozd (Hungary)	31
Narva area (Estonia)	41	New Philadelphia (Greece)	30
Telavi (Georgia)	41	Odense Centre (Denmark)	28
Sant Cugat (Spain)	39	Rimavska Sobota (Slovakia)	27
Vyborg (Russia)	39	Sopron (Hungary)	27
Kupchino (Russia)	38	Argyroupouli (Greece)	26
Kutaisi (Georgia)	36	Agenskalns (Latvia)	24
Lumiar (Portugal)	36	Barreiro (Portugal)	23
Pescenica (Croatia)	35	Kuopio (Finland)	22
Bremerhaven (Germany west)	35	Trnava (Slovakia)	21
Tartu (Estonia)	34	Jena (Germany east)	20
Vic (Spain)	32	Rostock (Germany east)	19
Odense East (Denmark)	32	Forstate & Jaunbuve (Latvia)	12

Source: authors' compilation

Table 2: Political efficacy of activism in all MYPLACE regions (means)

	Research site 1														
	Cr	Dk	Est	Fl	Geo	GE	GW	Gr	Hu	Lv	Pt	Ru	Sk	Sp	UK
Voting	5	8.5	7.1	7.7	8	7.9	7.9	6.8	6.	6.5	7.1	6	6.1	7.7	7.1
Media	4.8	7.7	6.4	7	6.7	6.8	6.7	4.2	4.3	5.7	6.2	5.9	5.2	6.9	6.8
Demos	4.4	5.4	5.2	5.3	5.8	6.2	6	6	3.5	5	5.4	4.8	4.8	6.4	5.8
Vol.	4.9	5.9	5.4	6.4	5.3	6.2	6.1	4.9	3.6	4.8	6	5.6	5	6.2	5.9
Party	4.3	6.5	6	6.9	6	6.2	6	4.7	4.8	5.4	5.4	5.7	5.5	5.1	6.2
Pet.	4.8	5.2	4.8	5.4	4.9	5.6	5.6	5.5	3.5	5.2	5.1	4.6	5.2	5.5	5.6
S. med	5.6	5.7	4.6	5.6	5.9	5.3	5.6	4.9	3.5	4.8	5	5.4	4.5	5.6	5.3
Polit.	2.8	5.6	4.8	5.2	5	4.8	4.3	3.4	3.4	4.4	4.3	5.6	4.5	4.5	5
Cons.	3.3	4.7	4.3	4.9	4.7	5	5	5.9	3.3	4.3	4.4	4.2	4.2	4.6	5.3
Illegal	3	3	3.6	3.8	5.4	3.6	2.8	3.9	3	4	3.5	3.8	3.4	3.5	4
Violent	2.9	2.2	2.9	2.8	4.6	2.3	2.3	3	2.9	3.2	3	3.6	3	2.2	3.4
	Research site 2														
	Cr	Dk	Est	Fl	Geo	GE	GW	Gr	Hu	Lv	Pt	Ru	Sk	Sp	UK
Voting	5.3	8.2	6.4	7	8.8	7.9	7.9	6.7	5.8	5.3	6.9	4.7	6.7	7.2	6.5
Media	4.7	7.6	5.8	6.2	7.2	6.8	6.8	4.5	4.3	4.8	6.5	5.3	4.9	6.3	6.4
Demos	4.2	5.5	5	4.5	6.3	5.9	5.9	5.6	3.9	4.6	6.2	4.2	4.6	6.2	5.3
Vol.	4.6	6.2	5	5.4	6.3	5.9	5.9	4.6	4	3.6	6	4.3	4.6	6	5.4
Party	4	6.5	5.3	5.7	6.9	5.8	5.8	4.1	4.5	4.7	5.9	4.2	5.4	5	5.4
Pet.	4.5	5.6	4.3	4.9	5.6	5.6	5.6	5	4.2	3.9	5.6	4	5.1	5.3	5.4
S. med	3.8	6	3.9	5	6.8	6.8	5.2	4.3	3.6	3.6	5.6	3.4	3.4	5.2	4.5
Polit.	2.8	5.4	4.9	4.7	5.6	5.6	4.1	3.5	3.9	3.3	5.5	4	4.2	4.3	4.5
Cons.	3.4	4.7	3.9	4.4	5	5	5.1	5.6	3.5	3.8	5.1	3.8	3.7	4.2	4.6
Illegal	3	3.4	3	3.5	4.7	4.7	3	3.8	3.3	3.4	3.6	3.4	2.9	2.9	4.1
Violent	2.5	2.5	2.9	3	5.6	5.6	1.9	2.7	3	3.2	3.4	2.9	2.5	1.8	3.4

Source: authors' compliation

Table 2 provides an overview of results emanating from a question block on the perceived efficacy of different forms of political participation, assessing these activities on a scale between zero and ten. These results unambiguously show that 'Voting in elections' is regarded as the most efficacious form of political participation, with illegal and violent protest actions the least useful and all other items of middling importance, including social media. And as is explained in the previous article analysing everyday forms of new participation, these social media practices are often not recognised as a form political participation among Estonian Youth. Looking at the broader picture, the overall mean on the efficacy of social media for political activism was 4.85 (n=16,370, sd=2.83), with responses varying between a high in Georgia (Telavi) of 6.8, to a low of 3.4 in Slovakia (Rimavska Sobota). Putting this issue into context alongside other forms of activism, social media still fares relatively well in terms of its perceived efficacy, although substantially less well regarded than voting in elections, and is not considered as efficacious in Estonia compared to other regions included in the MYPLACE study.

Summary

Reflecting upon these results, and specific nature of the Estonian research context, and of being a transition society, we can observe both common ground with the other regions in the MYPLACE project in regard to youth participation issues, for example, the legacy of the Second World War and the Soviet era, along with more specific elaboration on issues such as digital activism and youth citizenship. In regard to what is exceptional about the Estonian respondents, we can see that while they may be more engaged with digital platforms when it comes to discussing politics, their levels

of perceived efficacy of such media are not particularly outstanding compared to their counterparts in other European regions. And as stated before in Estonia, the term 'activism' itself has negative connotations due to its associations with Soviet era state-mandated socialist activity, and that makes 'activism' unattractive in a success-oriented society stressing individualistic values. It might be considered a phenomenon of a transition society that participation is not as important as in Western societies, and that youth engage more easily in social participation if its 'political' connotation is somehow hidden.

This leaves us to ask what our work can contribute to our understanding of the issue in hand. Certainly, in looking for an answer to the broader question of what 'explains' youth activism, our Estonian research provides some insights. For example, we can see that a certain duality of thinking is required in order to make sense of an apparent contradiction in youth political biographies. There may be more varied means of practicing politics, yet there is also a shared belief that more traditional modes of participation such as voting in elections are the best means of making oneself heard. But it could be speculated that a quotidian level of regular participation in social media engages young people in an unintentional political activity; something that can be seen as 'gateway activism', which will lead a new generation of people towards more overt participation. Therefore, it may be the case that political legacies and more novel forms of activism are inter-twined, meaning that we need to acknowledge old and new means of becoming political. Alternatively, perhaps some political practices are better served by one means as opposed to the other: for instance, one may use a digital platform as a means of becoming civically engaged but this is not a realistic means of thinking about who to elect for the next government.

What our material seems to be telling us is that we should not abandon consideration of formal or traditional means of practicing politics because of the emergence of new, perhaps more informal, ways of participating. On the contrary, we should take into account the full range of possibilities in relation to youth activism. In this sense, the future is more likely to be characterised by greater diversity in youth politics rather than epochal shifts in how different generations voice their societial concerns. For this reason, we can see that through observing activism in a transition society, we also record how activism is in transition, with the reformation of youth politics determined by a complex but not necessarily competing mix of historical legacies and contemporary possibilities.

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Appendix: Interviewees' socio-demographic profiles overall and by field site[1]

Demographic profile		Total	Tartu County	Ida-Viru County
Gender	Male	37 (62%)	16 (55%)	21 (68%)
	Female	23 (38%)	13 (45%)	10 (32%)
Age	16-20	15 (25%)	11 (40%)	6 (19%)
	21-23	22 (37%)	9 (31%)	11 (36%)
	24-25	23 (38%)	9 (31%)	14 (45%)
Employment status	In full-time employment	17 (28%)	3 (10%)	14 (45%)
	In part-time employment	3 (5%)	2 (7%)	1 (3%)
	Unemployed	3 (5%)	1 (3%)	2 (7%)
	In full-time education	23 (38%)	13 (45%)	10 (32%)
	In part-time education	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	Working and in full-time education	8 (13%)	5 (17%)	3 (10%)
	Working and in part-time education	2 (3%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)
	Not known[2]	4 (7%)	4 (14%)	0 (0%)
Nationality	Estonian	34 (57%)	28 (97%)	6 (20%)
	Russian	24 (40%)	0 (0%)	24 (77%)
	Ukrainian	2 (3%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)
Citizenship	Estonian citizenship	47 (78%)	27(93%)	20 (65%)
	Russian citizenship	5 (8%)	0 (0%)	5 (16%)
	Without citizenship	6 (10%)	0 (0%)	6 (19%)
	Other	1 (2%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
	Not known	1 (2%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Education	Master degree	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	2 (6%)
	Bachelor's degree	12 (20%)	5 (17%)	7 (23%)
	General secondary education	17 (28%)	12 (41%)	5 (16%)
	Vocational education after secondary education	11 (18%)	3 (10%)	8 (26%)
	Vocational education after basic education	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)
	Basic education	16 (27%)	9 (31%)	7 (23%)
	Less than basic education	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)
Family status	Single	46 (77%)	25 (86%)	21 (67%)
	Married or living with partner	10 (17%)	2 (7%)	8 (26%)
	Not known	4 (7%)	2 (7%)	2 (7%)
Residential status	Live at home with parent(s)	26 (43%)	14 (48%)	12 (39%)
	Live at home with other relatives, e.g., grandparents	4 (7%)	2 (7%)	2 (6%)
	Live independently alone	4 (7%)	0 (0%)	4 (13%)
	Live independently with own partner/ children	11 (18 %)	4 (14%)	7 (23%)
	Live independently with friends	7 (12%)	5 (17%)	2 (6%)
	Not known	8 (13%)	4 (14%)	4 (13%)

Source: authors' compilaton

1 'Not Known' categories (hereinafter) implies to missing answers and errors in the completion of socio-demographic data sheets.

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