

Book Review:

Researching Estonian Transformation. Morphogenetic Reflections

Kacper Wańczyk*

Researching Estonian Transformation: Morphogenetic Reflections, edited by Veronika Kalmus, Marju Lauristin, Signe Opermann, and Triin Vihalemm, 2020, Tartu: University of Tartu Press.

This volume is the product of an ambitious research project spanning two decades. Its founding block is a survey, *Me. The World. The Media*, based on a social constructivist approach, theories of structure and agency, and social practices. The survey reached Estonian citizens in five waves: 2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, and 2014. Its results were complemented by research into social time acceleration from 2014 through 2019. Results from the entire period were then reviewed through the lens of social morphogenetic analysis. This framework, proposed by Margaret Archer and her research group, is one of the most important contemporary approaches in social sciences. In this instance, the editors considered four morphogenetic cycles of transformation in Estonia, which then frame all analyses gathered in the volume. The first cycle starts with the Gorbachev reforms of 1988. The second begins with events following the dissolution of the USSR, encompassing the process of independent state building and accession to the European Union (EU). The third cycle begins with Estonia's entry into the EU. The final cycle covers the period from 2018 to the present, and is characterised by the growing power of politically conservative forces in the country.

The volume's chapters cover different elements of Estonian society and dynamics between 2002 and 2019. In the first chapter, Anu Masso, Marju Lauristin, Signe Opermann, and Veronika Kalmus outline the morphogenetic perspective and how it applies to the analysis of Estonian social transformation. The second chapter, co-authored by Marju Lauristin and Peter Vihalemm, narrates the different stages of post-socialist transformation. Chapter 3, written by Ragne Kõuts-Klemm and Marju Lauristin, addresses involvement with culture and the media. The fourth chapter, by Marju Lauristin and Peter Vihalemm, focuses on patterns of political participation. Maie Kiisel elaborates on the interrelation of lifestyle and social transformation in the fifth chapter. The sixth chapter, penned by Anu Masso and Sander Salvat, regards spatial mobility. Chapter 7 was authored by Triin Vihalemm, Signe Opermann and Veronika Kalmus, and deals with the use and value of time on an individual level. The analysis in the eighth chapter, written by Triin Vihalemm, Külliki Seppel and Marianne Leppik, concentrates on Estonia's Russian-speaking community. The ninth chapter, by Veronika Kalmus, explains the role of generational attributes in social transformation. The volume concludes with a study by Marju Lauristin on perceptions of social stratification.

When analysing the political participation of different social strata, the authors conclude that the fluctuation of public opinion and election results is superficial. The Estonian political field is relatively stable. It is defined as a three-dimensional model with axes for activity-passivity, loyalty-criticism and liberalism-socialism. A noticeable pattern emerges, whereby as time goes by, dissatisfaction with politics grows – this is attributed to the dominance of neoliberal trends, which contributes to the alienation of those parts of society that had been politically inactive during the transition to a free market. Lack of interest in politics created a vacuum in which national conservatism and the political forces promoting it received a significant boost. In turn, this resulted in the mobilisation of younger generations, which as a rule hold views that are more democratic.

* E-mail: kacper.wanczyk@gmail.com

As well as a useful schematisation of the Estonian society's engagement with politics, the volume also offers a standout feature in its discussion of time-use as a correlate of social transformation. The authors emphasise that having sufficient time, presumably outside of the work environment, is a key factor in the self-perception and self-definition of individual social categories. Similarly, the value attached to one's time (in terms of remuneration and/or social recognition and status) seems to determine one's stance on social acceleration. Specifically, there appears to be an inverse proportionality, whereby people whose time is less 'valuable' or 'valued' are more hostile towards social change. Furthermore, due to restrictions placed upon their time, they are themselves less capable of changing the system or developing an alternative lifestyle. The authors also found that the movement between different models of time management was conditioned by education, age, caretaking obligations, and personal traits. These elements exacerbated social divisions.

In their discussion of reaction to social change, the authors also consider generational factors. As can be expected, younger generations are faster to adapt and more amenable to change, whereas older generations prefer to retain decades-old habits. Interestingly, those born in the 1960s and 1970s are an exception to this rule; when rapid social change came in the 1990s, this group was relatively young and able to adapt to the new situation. This experience allows them to maintain high levels of adaptability to this day. Lifestyle is an equally important factor in determining one's outlook on the development of social structures. Results presented in this volume suggest that the best way to promote social activism is to encourage it on a national level. Activist lifestyles promote the development of collegial bonds and reaffirm the convictions of people minded to engage with promoting social change. There is a multiplier effect at work: If activists see their efforts resulting in tangible social change, they are more likely to take up additional causes, thereby effecting more change.

At the core of the volume lies a discussion on social stratification in Estonia. Contributors are less interested in its causes than its perception by various elements of society. Post-Soviet countries experienced re-stratification at varying speeds, but mostly within a limited time. As a result, their societies were not allowed a lengthy engagement with the rules that define it and remain somewhat perplexed by it. In Estonia, this incomplete understanding of stratification has led to sociopolitical polarisation. One of the divides examined in the volume is between Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking communities. They diverge significantly in terms of the level of solidarity and economic standing. Most importantly perhaps, they also diverge in terms of the likelihood of embracing the digitisation of the Estonian service sector. Even on an intra-communal level, however, there are fluctuations. The most integrated part of the Russian-speaking community tends to have a cosmopolitan approach to world affairs and does not subscribe to the diaspora narrative. On the other hand, they also remain sceptical towards Estonian authorities. Meanwhile, the group that identifies itself with the Russian diaspora is actively engaged in alternative civic activity and participation in local politics. What is also interesting is that this group – while remaining critical of social transformation in Estonia – is also the most positive about future economic and political changes.

Estonia prides itself in being a regional force in digitisation. The authors focused on the effects this has on society by looking alternately to the use of media, the internet, and digital culture. They determined that digitisation is one of the biggest contributing factors to social complexity, observing that groups with restricted access to the internet and social media can be more susceptible to ideological manipulation, which partly contributed to the strengthening of national conservative forces in the country. The mediatisation of social mobility was the most visible example of that; new media allows for more comprehensive networking, which helps mobility and reduces limitations to the geographical area where one can seek employment (a phenomenon known as 'digital nomadism'). The volume's authors also found that the form of digitisation that influences mobility the most is datafication. Datafication can help propagate social inequality, because access to certain digital services is limited.

Researching Estonian Transformation provides a comprehensive assessment of the transition of Estonian society. Founded on solid empirical research covering almost a decade of societal change,

it provides readers with critical observations on long-term social processes through the prism of an inspiring theoretical framework. The authors show the many faces of transformation in Estonian society and do not shy from concealing the harmful elements of this process. They discuss social divisions emerging as a result of the long-term domination of the neoliberal paradigm and the absence of policies that would strengthen internal solidarity. The parts of the study focused on the digitisation of Estonian society and the Russian-speaking community are essential case studies of this phenomenon. We learn that digitisation had some remedial effect on the problems, but that it also created and deepened certain social rifts. We also learn that the stereotype of non-engagement with the process of social transformation usually attached to the Russian-speaking community is largely facetious. On the other hand, empirical data seems to confirm that the community tends to distrust the Estonian state.

The volume's shortcomings are mostly technical in nature. We can point to the lack of a general reflection bringing together the various chapters and their respective conclusions. This means that the book lacks cohesion. For example, the initial review of morphogenetic cycles describes the 'new wave of democratisation', but the chapter on generations does not address this problem and only briefly mentions the emergence of pro-environmental youth protest groups. Nevertheless, this is mitigated by the fact that the volume can be read as a collection of essays rather than a unified piece of work. Moreover, some of the conclusions attached to individual chapters appear to be tautological. One illustration of this is the inordinate amount of space dedicated to arguing that young people adapt better to social change. Perhaps the editors could have emphasised instead the numerous and useful in-depth reflections that invariably follow these tautologies. Altogether, *Researching Estonian Transformation* is likely to inspire further research of social transformation not only in Estonia, but in other countries as well. It is an excellent example of long-term, thorough research that applies contemporary models. It can also be a useful report, of which governmental agents dealing with social change should take heed. This does not only apply to Tallinn. Given the similarities between Estonia's social and political situation and those in Poland or Hungary, methods and conclusions present in this volume may also be applicable to other governments throughout the region.

Kacper Wańczyk is a PhD student at Koźmiński Academy, in Warsaw, Poland. He has worked as a Polish diplomat, focusing on post-Soviet countries.