# Understanding online activism in transition society

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## Introduction

Political activism is a vital means of securing a voice for young people in society. This can entail involvement in formal politics, including electoral participation among those old enough to vote, joining a political party or an organisation such as a Trade Union, or engagement with less formal structures of activism. The latter area includes activities such as participating in consumer boycotts, signing petitions and following Internet campaigns, with young people often with simultaneous involved in different activism spheres (Fisher, 2012). All these activities have the potential to create a bridge towards structures of power within a society, ensuring that young people's views are represented on political agendas whether this be at local, national or international levels.

While much academic work on youth political activism has concentrated on the study of electoral participation, particularly within Political Science, elsewhere in the social sciences there has been additional interest in exploring the efficacy of other forms of engagement. One such example is youth participation in the large-scale street demonstrations and 'indignado' mobilisations that became common-place in the years following the onset of the global financial crisis, particularly in countries subject to Troika interventions and economic governance based upon austerity principles, as well as the various 'occupy' movements directed against the centres of global capitalism (Castells, 2012; Chomsky, 2012; della Porta, 2015). However, the fact that these movements failed to maintain political momentum, particularly in the Mediterranean countries, strongly implies that such forms of protest soon came to be perceived as lacking efficacy (Castaneda, 2013; Rüdig and Karyotis, 2014; Cairns et al., 2016).

This leads us to ask questions about other forms of youth activism, perhaps more attuned to broader trends in political participation. Although the idea that the youth generations are characteristically apathetic, particularly in regard to electoral participation, has long been popular among political scientists (O'Toole et al, 2003; Henn et al., 2005; Quintelier, 2007), that certain young people manage to become politically active has not gone unnoticed at European Policy level. Here there has been strong emphasis upon ideas such as Active Citizenship, an amorphous term used to describe various forms of participation in civil society, community and/or political life in the interests of democracy, encompassing both formal and informal political activities and community organizations (Mascherini et al., 2009). In practice, this entails a replacement of the collective model of participation with engagement via reflexive platforms that provide an opportunity to express one's opinions and state one's preferences. While this many include institutional forums or assemblies such as youth parliaments, more prominent is participation through digital platforms that provide a means of connecting youth with political issues, and help support cause-based activism and social movement mobilization (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Castells, 2012; della Porta and Mattoni, 2014).

These initial reflections lead us towards a discussion of youth political activism in a contemporary European context. In the remainder of this chapter, we explore this issue through drawing upon evidence collected in the course of a four-year European Commission-funded project on *Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement* (MYPLACE),

with particular focus upon two specific regional contexts in Estonia. The evidence gather in the course of this project, completed in 2015, provides an opportunity to discuss the present state of youth political activism in a transition society, as well as informing debates on civic engagement, and disengagement, with emphasis upon the use of digital technology.

## (Re)defining participation

The meaning of political participation at a conceptual level, especially in regard to understanding engagement and disengagement among the present generation of young people, has also been undergoing a quite profound change. At a theoretical level, a basic shift seems have occurred with young people now thought to be engaging in political, or politicised, activities more attuned to their own age cohort's concerns as opposed to following issues in a manner that might have been more relevant to their parents. This change can be attributed to the fact that political institutions are generally created by adults to serve adult agendas, and are not structured around young people's interests or designed to engage them on their own terms. That this should be the case had led to the belief that young people are marginalised in respect to formal politics in many countries (Harris, 2009).

What this means is that should we observe disengagement from formal politics in the present day, this would represent an intensified version of a pre-existing trend rather than a new development. However, this position does not mean that young people are apathetic, only that the politics they are practicing may be imperceptible to the eyes of policymakers. Therefore, instead of seeing politics as narrowly institutional, we can look for signs of politics everywhere else: in everyday life and in the quotidian choices young people make as they inhabit the civil sphere, as well as in the less spontaneous but still informal actions of social movements (e.g. Amna & Eckman, 2013; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). This is what we mean by 're-defining participation', acknowledging that repertoires of political engagement have become more diverse and less absolute: from consumer politics to community campaigns and international networks; from the ballot box, to the street, to the internet; from political parties, to social movements and issue groups, to social networks (Sloam, 2013).

This re-conceptualisation of participation in wider terms than involvement in organisation and electoral behaviour is not a new development. In fact it has already taken place, recognised by Beck (1997) and Giddens (1994) through the use of a new lexicon of terms such as 'sub-politics' and 'life politics'. This language provides a sociological means of defining a new activism reality, wherein contemporary politics is to be found in a much broader scale, or at least is more diffuse throughout societies, than was presumed to be have been the case in previous eras. In more prosaic terms, these terms represent what takes place in the fields outside the traditional political institutions and corporate systems, encompassing professional groups, issue-specific initiatives, social movements and the actions of private individuals not affiliated to any collective.

Beck's (1997) concept of sub-politics presents a viable means of explaining how individuals live-out their personal political causes and commitments 'underneath' the surface of formal politics, albeit with a strong public and activist element to this definition. Additionally, Giddens' (1991) politics of choice provides an account of how issues 'flow from the process of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts' (Giddens, 1991, p. 214). A variety of concepts have in fact been introduced since to account for recent changes and further develop the definition of political participation. Bang and Sørensen's (1999) everyday makers; Micheletti's (2003) reflexive politics; Bakardijeva's subactivism (2009); Amnå and Ekman's

(2013) stand-by citizen; Bennett's (2012) self-actualizing citizens and personalization of politics; or Loader, Vromen and Xenos' (2014) networked young citizen to name just a few of the frameworks grappling with the issue. These concepts add explanations of everyday 'transient and self-expressive' (Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2010, p. 13) participatory practices to what could be seen as acts that (may) have political relevance, as well as acknowledging the importance of online interaction in youth experiences of the personal and the collective (see also Tiidenberg & Allaste 2016).

Although such approaches have sometimes, perhaps unfairly, been criticized for watering-down the concept of political participation due to what feels like a lack of focus on collective identities in favour of the individual, we argue that political participation is better understood as punctuating the flow of everyday life (Thorson, 2014), and as such the shift towards the idea of individualised participation is better suited for contemporary explanations. Also, participation means different things in different temporal and spatial contexts, and historical and political background may have a crucial importance. To explore this theme, the remainder of this chapter focuses upon one specific form of contemporary youth participation in one particular national context: young people's social media practices in Estonia.

## Participation in Estonia

Young people in post-socialist countries tend to be less involved in both conventional political participation as well as intentional grassroots activism than youth in more mature democracies. This has been explained by the generally low levels of engagement that citizens have inherited from a socialist centralized party system that offered no real means of being part of decision-making, as well as the negative effects (e.g. poverty, corruption) of the post-socialist transformation (Vukelic & Stanojevic, 2012). Estonia chose a path of radical neo-liberal economic and political reforms after regaining its independence, which led to the popularization of a success-oriented, materialistic and individualistic public discourse. Overall, social movements, protest and civic activism have hence been rare in Estonia, suggesting a norm of civic and political disengagement rather than engagement. And while recent years have seen an increase in the prominence of social or community movements, being an activist has a rather negative connotation in Estonia due the term's connections with Soviet history, where 'activism' meant state-mandated communist practices (Tiidenberg & Allaste 2016).

Data for this chapter consists of survey evidence and in-depth interviews in Estonia, collected in the framework of the 14-country MYPLACE project. The survey was conducted, using a random sampling research design, with young people aged 16-26 years old in 2 socio-demographically contrasting regions (n=585 + n=596) from November 2012 to March 2013, with the 60 interviews conducted with volunteers from the survey. The discussion in this chapter mostly relies upon the analyses on in-depth interviews, with the survey data used only for comparative contextualization. This quantitative data nevertheless helps describe the apparently moribund state of Estonian youth's political participation, certainly when compared to neighbouring Nordic countries (according the MYPLACE survey, 58% of young people in Estonia belong to an organization, compared 73% in Finland and 87% Denmark), and more general perceptions on a variety of political issues.

Looking further at our research context, young people's trust in institutions was found to be below the average point of the scale compared to all countries, while trust in political institutions (the Prime Minister, political parties and Parliament) was even lower. The level of

disbelief in politics and politicians is illustrated by quotation from Ivari, 24, according to whom '*there has emerged, such a slight clef between the government and people, or distrust has arisen'*. However, if in the context of old democracies it is possible to say that young people are turning away from (especially conventional) participation, then in Estonia democracy and political participation is still developing as young people start to participate in diversified ways. It is for instance claimed that young people are enthusiastic about online participation and engaging in it in different ways (e.g. Solop, 2000; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003), and in Estonia, where Internet penetration is high, among 16–24 year olds 99% (UNECE, 2014), digital participation may play a very important role, making this an issue we need to explore further.

**Internet-related everyday activism**

Our main claim here is that the Internet offers participation opportunities to young people who do not necessarily consider themselves to be 'politically active'. However, through everyday activities such as 'sharing' in internet debate, even those who consider themselves civically inactive can get involved in social and political discussions, especially through what seem on the surface to be less serious, even humorous, means. As Karmen describes:

> *The last thing I shared was: 'If you fill out a tax declaration form then don't add members of parliament [laughs] to your dependents list.' Well, because they are actually dependents for the Estonian people.*

Our interviews in fact illustrated that young people were most comfortable with sharing political content on social media when it was packaged as humour. While media remix and parody are legitimate forms of political critique, our argument here is that in this case, the political is somewhat latent (Tiidenberg & Allaste 2016). Furthermore, that boundaries between passive and active participation can become increasingly blurred might enable young people in turn to engage in other forms of activity. As Gerli explains:

> *I remember I started looking these videos on YouTube which were made by the Anonymous or this Legion, so to say […] And after that all kinds of information came from there. Then I looked around on the Internet, did some more research.*

This is an excellent example of this form of stealth engagement, something that should interest those of us with concern for the state of youth political participation since being better informed, by whatever means, helps to such young people to make better sense of society.

Joining groups, giving 'likes' and commenting can also be interpreted as a part of constructing selfhood through positioning oneself and situating one's own opinions with broader public discourses, as Afanasi explains: '*Well [...] what happens is that I'll read something that other people have written and then I just think whether I agree with them or not'.* It could also be giving the feeling of being part of something bigger, as quotation from Tarmo, 21 illustrates:

> *Directly, I don't know, like I have participated in some bigger projects but who knows, maybe I have 'liked' something that has changed into something bigger, you could even be unaware of it yourself!*

'Liking' Facebook events or topics leads young people to networks that distribute information, and via that means, influence their understanding and opinion-making. As stated by Kristel, 25:

> *When there is a topic that like interests me, for example, on Facebook somebody has posted on the wall, then I will, for example, read this article, right. Basically it works, if this would not be there, then I would not read it, but I am not myself, like, active in this sense.*

Signing petitions could be interpreted as potentially a stronger statement of political intent, in taking a stand and making the effort to belong to a particular interest group. As Ly, 23, noted:

> *When this Charter 12*[1] *started, it was very interesting. We immediately joined the petition or I am not sure how to say it. When they set something up on the Internet, on Petitsioon.ee, then we joined*.

This quotation exemplifies the fact that it is possible to feel as part of a protest movement through the online petition environment, leading to further participation outside the virtual world, a form of engagement which seems widespread in our research context. Most often young people use online petitions that are connected to matters of everyday life, like this example from Lembit, who has used such a platform to influence decision-making about housing development in his own community:

> *We have this Raja park and now they plan to build apartment houses there. I like sports, I am used to running there in summer, and when they opened the petition in the Internet, I signed that I am against this construction plan.*

Despite the diversity of causes revealed here, what unites all these cited young people is the fact that they are politically engaged in a manner that would not have been practically possible a generation, or less, ago, to the point where we can credible argue that this has become their preferred mode of voicing political views, particular in regard to issues of civic significance. While the activities may not be new (e.g. signing petitions), the speed and ease of access provided by digital platforms creates an acceleration in activism; a potentially wide diffusion of information, interests and beliefs that is relatively novel. This does not mean that liking and petitioning online has more efficacy than doing so offline, or the same level of impact on political agendas as, say, voting in elections or engaging in street protests, but that this form of participation is happening among a disparate range of young people does refute the idea of youth as totally disengaged and disinterested, providing a vivid example of political consciousness and civic engagement.

**Clickism or a new way of participation?**

Developing this theme, it should be said that there is lack of consensus on what kinds of social media practice have political potency; the self-expressive forms which emphasize individual identity 'often straddle the political and non-political' (Theocharis & Quintelier, 2014, p. 4). However, according to Dimitrova et al. (2011, p. 97), social media gives people a perception of having an opportunity to participate, which may contribute to 'higher internal and external self-efficacy' and make the public feel more engaged.

Theocharis and Quintelier (2014, p. 4) also claim that posting, commenting, tweeting and joining groups has a 'democratic value, since they have the potential to involve people in forms of engagement that conforms to classic definitions of participation.' But concurrent work has been published that questions whether online forms of participation have any

[1] Open letter from intellectuals which initiated public meetings

substance, employing concepts of slactivism (Morozov, 2012) and clickism (e.g. Amin, 2010). There are also suggestions of a widening knowledge gap between news-seekers and news-avoiders (Stromback & Shehata, 2010), and studies that view social media as fostering a logic of self-centred participation that constitutes a threat to collective action (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). Ekstrom, et al. (2014) also found that frequent engagement on Facebook doesn't necessarily lead to development of public orientations and Cantijoch, et al. (2008) found social media use to lead to a widening of the knowledge gap between the politically interested and those actively screening out political information. Finally, Gustaffson (2012) has pointed out that using social media alone will not necessarily mobilize previously inactive people (see also Tiidenberg and Allaste 2016).

Insights from this brief, and far from comprehensive, group of works force us to consider that what we may have observed in our interview extracts could be exceptional, in providing an overly optimistic view of online political participation; alternatively, it may simply be the case that these young people have as yet realised the limitations of digital activism. However, we believe in the validity of challenging how youth political participation is defined, and stand-by the proposition that engagement may start but not necessarily end with a click of one's mouse. This is certainly a means of creating political conviviality, with sharing, commenting and 'liking' interpreted as participating in public life and increasing the possibility of talking with others about politics, which is a participatory act in itself. If the starting point is not look for which kind of effect Internet activity has on successful goals and actual changes in society, it could be seen as a diversification of how citizen take part of political matters.

## Conclusion

Similarly to other Eastern European countries, young people in Estonia tend to be less politically active than in Western Europe. In this article, we have fleshed out this statistic through nuanced accounts of young people interviewed for the MYPLACE project. It is important to note here that these young people were drawn from a systematic sample of survey respondents rather than being a group of young selected due to their activism profiles, which would have meant that their practices and perceptions of participation do not reflect those of particularly active youths. It could be speculated that they belong to the group of young people who are neither at the forefront of protests nor apathetic; they are not interested in conventional politics but 'continue to find ways to be heard and make change both within and outside of state politics in relation to their social and political concerns' (Harris, et al., 2010, p. 22).

In this chapter we have argued that while on the surface, there is estrangement from participation signs of young people 'taking sides and choosing positions' (Bakardijeva, 2009), through different online means such as sharing and 'liking' a particular point of view or signing petitions, we can observe something deeper. This means that social network sites and petition platforms have become a space for young people wherein they 'keep themselves informed about political issues in everyday life context' (Amnå and Ekman, 2013), even though they do not necessarily believe in the efficacy of these channels in enacting political change or influencing public officials. This form of participation also helps young people circumnavigate some of the negative baggage that accompanies traditional activism. As stated before in Estonia, the term 'activism' itself has negative connotations due to its associations with Soviet era state-mandated socialist activity, that make 'activism' unattractive in a success-oriented society that stresses individualistic values. It may therefore be the case that

young people need a more individualistic point of entry to the political sphere to make participation palatable, thus creating scepticism towards collective action and distance from conventional participation and grassroots activism.

It could be speculated then that everyday level social participation in social media engages young people rather than decrease the willingness of potential activists to act more radically. However, even though digital media tools have lowered the cost for 'private-public boundary spanning'(Thorson, 2014), in the case of Estonia the question remains somewhat open in regard to whether what may be unintentional political activity is something that can be seen as 'gateway activism', which will lead a new generation of people towards participation, or whether what we are observing are practices that are not in fact indicative of an interest in politics or desire to participate further.

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