Abstract

This article presents generational change as an exploratory variable of the social and epistemological transformations to come by examining the ways in which postsocialism is locally remembered and imagined by those coming of age during the so called ‘transition’. The study shows how a new generation with limited memories of the Soviet time has grown up in Estonia, re-enacting past forms in an explorative way and therefore enhancing cultural shifts. Through informal interviews, cultural criticism, and an overview of recent exhibitions, the research considers discourses about the past in relation to the generational differences after socialism. Also, it discusses the ways in which generational change is updating in some cases, or turning outdated in some others, old categories such as Eastern Europe, postsocialism, and ‘Children of freedom’ in Estonia. Hence, the essay aims at opening new possibilities for both: conceptual development towards the future and reconfiguration of the existing ways to talk and write about the Soviet past.

Keywords: Eastern Europe; Youth culture; Postsocialism; Generational memory; Children of freedom; Area Studies.

Introduction: Postsocialism without borders

1 This article offers a new angle to some of the passages included in the book ‘Remains from the Soviet past in Estonia. An anthropology of Forgetting, Repair and Urban Traces’, published by UCL Press. I want to express my gratitude to Siim Preiman, Kirill Tulin, Tanel Rander, Marika Agu, Patrick Laviolette and Siobhan Kattago for their support and feedback.
How much postsocialist is the Estonian society still? What is the actual contour and what is the content of the category ‘Eastern Europe’? We can even ask if Eastern Europe and Postsocialism and remain as a generative terms to be retained in the future and also if, or how, these categories are nowadays used by the local population. Also, we can critically question how generational hierarchies in Estonia have been hindering the possibility to establish a direct relationship with the Soviet past, by inculcating negative moral sentiments about it, giving lessons, and delusional categories such as the one of ‘Children of Freedom’. Hence, this article proposes not only to hear how the ‘small people’ of Eastern Europe understand themselves, but also to see how there are multiple smaller groups within these societies with less considered insights. The exercise demonstrates that not only the Estonian society is far less homogeneous than what is officially depicted (in museums, in the media, in discourses by politicians), but also that the existing hierarchy of generations within this society works, de facto, as a limitation of the spaces of difference, which could be mined for alternative ways of organising the present (Dzenovska 2018).

Ethnographically, I propose to analyse categories such as Eastern Europe, postsocialism and ‘Children of Freedom’ in relation to the global present (see also Ivancheva in press, Kojanić in press), arguing that in order to develop a more relational understanding of these societies, we should pay special attention to how young people in the former socialist block takes on the inherited concepts. Young people inherited the specific historical representations, categories and frames of the previous generations, yet they in turn are increasingly recalibrating the narrative and experience of it. Also, global and technological changes are making the expectations and imaginaries associated to these categories obsolete as a side-effect. This reinforces Caroline Humphrey’s conviction that ‘as the generations brought up under socialist regimes disappear from the political scene, the category of postsocialism is likely to break apart and disappear’ (2002, p. 13).

Besides ethnographic description, the essay shows a multi-method combining a survey research, an active collaboration with several art projects, and methodological tools of narrative analysis. Through cultural criticism, informal interviews with young people (25, conducted in Tallinn, Narva and Tartu), and a study of different artistic events, the research opens ways of representa-
tion and interpretation of generational changes in Estonian society. Firstly, it foregrounds that young people (those who are between 22 and 30 years old today, who were born around the breakdown of the USSR) are re-enacting and deterritorialising Soviet forms and reshaping traditional ideas of location and identity (not necessarily making them more progressive, but simply mutating them).

Secondly, the essay combines an exploratory account of how categories derived from the region that have been relevant in the last decades are losing value as an overarching framework, or acquiring new meanings to analyse the broader world. The essay puts the focus on the ways in which generational change in Estonia reveal new vocabularies without leaving behind completely the old ones – categories which persist zombie like because they are implicated in actual power relations, loosing explanatory value, but continuing to move because they are useful as an ideological device (Chelcea and Druta 2016), or which are deterritorialised, mutating into a hybrid decoupled from the region (Tuvikene 2016).

Thirdly, the study shows how Eastern Europe (as a region) appears as increasingly difficult to define or event to decipher, characterised by multi-scalar processes such Europeanisation, postsocialism, nationalist setbacks, global circulation of cultural products, and neoliberal peripheralisation (see also Frederiksen and Knudsen 2015). Further, it argues that a contemporary approach to these phenomena requires a more comparative and relational approach to capture what might be called a global east, as well as the invention of new terms and categories such as ‘post-postsocialism’, ‘children of the new east’, ‘geopolitical subjectivity split in half’, or ‘trans-socialism’ (Bach and Murawski, forthcoming). These concepts are oriented towards updating how the meaning of location, traditions, national identity is being shattered, as well as the self-awareness of being Eastern European, and the interpretation of the past.

This essay invites for learning how to view Eastern Europe from different perspectives and scales. Studies of postsocialism have tended to reflect a regrettable lack of forward-looking vision, obsessed with re-narrating what happened in the past and paying little attention to the present and the future, which seems to not even deserve a name (Hirt, Ferenčuhová and Tuvikene...
2016). Also, the study is based on the idea that localities are ‘no longer isolated but tied to the outside world in complex and rather consequential ways’ (Gille 2001: 34), meaning nowadays that the ‘post’ of the term, primarily ‘anti’, is not simply directed towards the socialist past but also towards the global present (Gille 2010).

This research contributes thus to new discussions that claim to bring a novel conceptual language to the study of Eastern European societies, epistemologically progressive, with wider theoretical implications and avoiding delusions of postsocialist difference, by considering the actually existing flow of ideas and multi-scalar networks. These discussions suggest to make use of the concept to think through the experience of global issues, applying back to the West a category that it was coined there referring to Eastern Europe (see Gentile 2018, Murawski 2018). In this light, we can argue that we are all post-socialist now (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, Stenning 2010), assuming that post-socialism is everywhere, like a boomerang effect.

Postsocialist subjectivities

Every generation asks anew how we should orientate in time and space; likewise, categories and frames of memory tend to be reconstructed or deterritorialised by distinction from preceding cohorts, which entails thus a reappropriation of the past and a potential struggle for establishing a hegemonic narrative. For instance, young people in Estonia have their own memory of the 1990s, which is distinctly different from the other generations. They remember playing in playgrounds next to Volga taxis, wearing clothes that came with Swedish aid packages, seeing the construction of the first shopping malls, eating their first burger at McDonald’s, listening to the Scorpions on the radio, watching films on VHS cassettes and Nirvana concerts on TV, imagining that the Annelinn’s apartment blocks of Tartu was the skyline of Seattle (Preiman 2017, Rander 2016).

In February 2017, curator Siim Preiman organised the exhibition ‘Children of the New East’ in the different galleries of the Tallinn Art Hall, a project including eight young artists of the Baltic region. The key aim of the project was to reflect on how those born in late 1980s and early 1990s
have to answer to claims of having a ‘non-existent memory’ from elder generations, as well as to seek out how these young artists are influenced by a global culture. As Preiman explained in the exhibition booklet:

‘I’m exactly young enough to have seen the momentous events of the end of the previous century only in retrospect on a TV screen. All of those moments that were of great importance to the development of the Estonia and the Europe we are currently living in actually didn’t really happen as far as I’m concerned … As the scenes of the fall of the wall were broadcast on the same screen as MacGyver and Xena: Warrior Princess, you could have easily imagined those events, for all we know’ (2017, p. 2).

New generations tend to deploy alternative perspectives on the past as part of their ongoing dialogue with the present. Accordingly, generational memory is something historical and emergent, accompanied by a reappropriation of the past which nowadays is highly mediated and screened. Reflecting on these matters, Preiman (2017) notes how their identity was felt as divided along the former borders yet consuming global cultural products. Also following the idea of the divided individual, local artist and critic Tanel Rander (2016) explains the effect as a geopolitical subjectivity split in half: the younger people’s heads were finally living in the West, yet their bodies remained inevitably bound to the East, making people dividual, composed of multiple entities (Laviolette 2017, Strathern 1988). As Rander points out in recent essay which was part of the art project ‘Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler’ (Museum of Contemporary Art of Estonia 2017), the magnitude and significance of the transition period prevented local people from fully internalising all the meanings and dimensions involved in the change, and only now are they starting to take it in because a sufficient amount of time has passed:

‘I just realised that I should really pay attention to the lyrics of “Wind of Change” by the Scorpions. They were straightforward: “Let your balalaika sing, what my guitar wants to say!” This song could be considered as the hymn of Eastern Europe because it emerged during the most pivotal events and it made the masses whistle along because most peo-
ple could not speak English back then and those who did, practiced it with no sense of criticism’ (Rander 2017).

I asked Tanel Rander to develop this idea and he wrote a touching text soon to be published:

Was I a Soviet kid or an Estonian kid? Probably both of them… In the late 80s, to be ‘Soviet’ meant to be Russian, and to be ‘Estonian’ meant to be Western – this much I remember from the common sense of people, who surrounded me back then. In this case, I was an Estonian kid. Indeed, I remember telling one of my Russian friends something like ‘why don’t you want to become Estonian? You could go to America! Don’t be Russian! You’ll remain Soviet!’ Being Estonian was associated with all kinds of things from the West – especially toys, sweets, cars, films and animations from VHS cassettes. Russian language, music and films seemed like something that can never beat the new wind. Sometimes, I wore my father’s Soviet officer cap and a rubber King Kong mask. I got the mask as a gift from my father, who had bought it from Moscow. What a post-Soviet combo that was! I wore it at school and in public places. Once an old lady came to me and said I should quickly hide the cap, because you can’t make jokes with these things without getting into trouble. I also remember talking loudly about ‘fucking Russians, who brought my grandfather to Siberia, when he was only 16 years old’. And another old lady came to me, warning that I shouldn’t speak about these things with loud voice… Yes, it was a totally different world! A different cosmology! My subconsciousness was formed above a huge terrain that started with the Baltic Sea and ended in Kamchatka. The footprint of my family was pretty huge. My great-grandfather had been imprisoned in Sakhalin island, where he died. My grand-aunt had been imprisoned in Vorkuta. My grandfather had been imprisoned in Kolyma. But not all of my relatives experienced the huge terrain because of Stalin’s repressions. My father worked in hospitals of Krasnoyarsk Krai. My aunt went to camping trip in Kuril islands. I remember her photos – bearded men eating piles of caviar with huge spoons. It was a huge continent, where I lived! When Mikhail Gorbachev visited Tallinn 1987, my great-grandmother said ‘our master is here’. I stood by the road and watched his escort pass. I imagined it
to be the road that passes all the Soviet nations. This was my identity as ‘a Soviet kid’.
(Rander, in press)

Children of Freedom – Cruel Optimism

In a brief period of time, Eastern European societies that provoked democratic revolutions assumed the role of being premature and infants of democracy, internalising as normal the need to learn from the old Western brothers how to use what they themselves had conquered (Buden 2010). In a similar light, young generations have been often presented in Estonia as untroubled by the past and enjoying freedom in a carefree way, exempting them of any responsibility in the current state of affairs and in turn limiting their power of emancipation. In these discursive terms, young people remain childish in the political struggle, continually lacking something that adults have or know (Martínez 2014). Paradoxically, this approach reproduces the Soviet tradition of regarding young people as the builders of tomorrow, turning them into an object – rather than a subject – of state policies (Krivonos 2015).

In Estonia, sociologist Marju Lauristin (2003) categorised those born just before and after the regained independence as the ‘Children of Freedom’ (*Vabaduse Lapsed*), referring to the idea of growing up in a free society for the first time and being ‘unspoiled’ by the Soviet system. I argue, however, that this label reifies a continuity of cultural and political consciousness, even if hegemonic memory discourses of Soviet repression and resistance have been already questioned and supplemented in everyday life (Jõesalu and Kõresaar 2013). Furthermore, the concept disregards the way social bonds have been reshaped in the last decades because of both internal and global processes. Also, it ignores that the cluster of promises put into that generation cannot be made possible, at least as originally expected.

Indeed, older generations have publicly accused young people of ‘lacking memory’, not appreciating their ‘given’ freedom, ignoring patriotic feelings, or even betraying the nationhood for being critical with the status quo (Maruste 2014; Nugin 2010; Preiman 2017; Rander 2017). But why are the older generations in Estonia making such a complaint? As shown by sociologist
Raili Nugin, there is in Estonia a generation that became the arbiter of taste, the ‘winners generation’ (2015), establishing what is transient and giving a name to the durable: ‘they are the ones who participated in creating narratives in discursive fields, influencing the understanding of the period of change’, and assessing social ‘others’ from their perspective (Nugin 2011, p. 7). Then, if a generation in which one has invested the hegemonic idea of a good life does not follow your expectations or does not fulfil the hopes put on them, the very grounds and coherence of social organisation is endangered and spaces of difference are carved or extended. In this sense, Estonian society might suffer from what Lauren Berlant calls a ‘cruel optimism’ (2011), referring to the costs of an illusion, a positive idea and goodwill becoming a burden. As Berlant notes, the effects are ‘cruel’ because it is the very fantasy of what is ‘good’ that denies the subject in question all that was initially promised and even the capacity for emancipation. In our case, it is the very label ‘Children of Freedom’ which contributes to a ‘cruel optimism’ by creating a hierarchical bond between generations and by exaggerating the monolithic composition of actual Estonian society. In short, it is an illusion to think that those growing up after the break-up of the USSR would partake of the same understanding of freedom, location and identity as their parents, and a similar assessment of the Soviet past.

“I don’t try to be American”

In December 2016, artist and art critic Tanel Rander presented in Tallinn Art Hall a multidimensional project entitled ‘Third Way’, which set up to show the correlation between the sociopolitical transformations that have happened in Eastern Europe in the recent history, and the idea of the region having a distinct ‘soul’. In the booklet accompanying the exhibition, Rander reflected on an episode he lived a few months before in the conference ‘Communist Nostalgia’ (University of Glasgow 2015), whereby an American lady disclaimed as bizarre to be born in Eastern Europe and feel nostalgia for Kurt Cobain.

Also, in 2014, there was an exhibition about the genealogy of graffiti and street art in Tartu in which I took part by writing a text for the catalogue. As the curator Marika Agu explained, the
show set up to reflect on the way in which local culture was shaped ‘following examples from abroad, combining foreign behavioural principles and exemplars with personal ambitions and soul-searchings’ (2014, p. 8). Paradoxically, the emergence of local graffiti was depicted as strongly imitative of a vague notion of ‘typical Westerner’: an imitation of the imitation; a form without a clearly delineated content that was reappropriated generation after generation.\(^{2}\) In this sense, Estonian street art remained influenced by both local policies and global referents simultaneously. Another feature is that, in their secrecy and individualism, graffiti writers form a community of individuals that share strong codes and ethics and show respect for their tradition. These youth practices denote intergroup ties that generate collective meanings to individual lives and have the potential to evoke solidarities and affects that cut across mainstream divides (Martínez 2015b; Pilkington and Omelchenko 2013). As local artist Bach acknowledged in the documentary prepared for the exhibition: ‘we got our ideas from rap videos where the walls were colourful. We did not want to copy anyone, but we still mimicked the guys in the rap videos’. Also, Barthol Lo Mejor remarked on the significance of the Internet in the search for individual emancipation: ‘It was escapist in a way, because you do not identify with the world around you, and your stuff is not organically tied to it. . . . So they imported that whole world . . . a world within a world’. Another important point they shared was the play with identities, felt by Mina-JaLydia as ‘a magic world where I escape from this reality’. Besides visiting exhibitions, informal discussions with local artists and curators reaffirmed my initial ideas about the need to learn from them as epistemic partners, collaborating with people who share ethnographic-like practices despite not having been trained as anthropologists (Estalella and Sánchez Criado 2018; Holmes and Marcus 2005). Also, trying to understand the varied temporal regimes and attitudes towards the past coexisting in Estonia, I talked to young people in an informal way, carrying 25 simple inquiries in three prominent bars for young people in

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\(^{2}\) Marika notes how the reasons exposed by local street artist Edward von Lõngus to justify his practice (apathy of the consumerist society and visual pollution found in urban spaces) were similar to those argued in New York and Berlin. Yet in this context (Tartu, a university town of 100,000 inhabitants), the pressure of advertising and capital speculation on public spaces is not nearly as acutely manifested as in some big cities.
Tallinn (Protest), Tartu (Arhiiv), and Narva (Ro-ro).³ As a trigger for our informal conversation, I asked two questions to them: ‘Which is your main cultural referent?’ and ‘Do you see yourself as a child of freedom, growing up in a free society?’

With respect to cultural referents, I got very diverse answers, such as Manchester United, David Beckham, Harry Potter, Buddhism, punk, hippie and surrealist cultures, Kurt Vonnegut, Bob Marley, Michael Jackson, Che Guevara, Versace, Hemingway and Almodóvar. These answers show how the so-called Children of Freedom gained access to global cultural referents, diverse values and multiple forms of knowledge, which contributed to form their identity, place-making and assessment of the past. Another example reinforcing this argument is the rapid and wide impact of rapper Stuf (Evgeny Lyapin, 26 years old, born in Narva), who on January 2017 posted on YouTube a song entitled ‘Olen Venelane’ (I am Russian), which reached over 150,000 views in less than four months. The song begins with the statement ‘I’m Russian, but I love Estonia’, and continues saying, ‘All are dissatisfied with this State, they dream of a far-off kingdom’. The video was recorded on the border between Estonia and Russia and, with a bilingual composition, he echoes the frustrations of the Russian-speaking community in Estonia; even so, Stuff claims not to be interested in politics.

We can also note the case of Tommy Cash (Tomas Tammemets, 26 years old), who has become globally popular making ‘post-Soviet rap’, a style which combines influences from Kanye West, Eminem or Die Antwoord with Alla Pugacheva and Russian Orthodox church music. ‘I get all my inspiration from my childhood and directly from the place where I grew up [the Kopli and Lasnamäe neighbourhoods of Tallinn]. I don’t try to be American, I don’t try to sound like no one else’, says Tommy Cash.⁴

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³ All these informal interviews took place in the evening, between 19:00 and 22:00. Interviews were carried out in English and Russian (this was the native language of 10 of the informants, being the rest —native Estonian speakers — fluent in English); all of my informants were accessible and receptive to discuss these matters, expressing familiarity with the category ‘Children of Freedom’.

In the music videos, he features clad in Adidas, with a Dalí moustache and black boots, merging pop culture references with religious, military, Soviet kitsch and ghetto elements. Cash claims that ‘Now, post-Soviet aesthetics has become ubiquitous, but when I started working with it, in 2013, there was no such trend. We got ahead of it’. Nowadays, Gucci, H&M and Adidas are releasing menswear collections inspired by Soviet aesthetics and with the lines ‘Back in the USSR’, ‘What would you wear if you were to time travel to Moscow in 1994?’ and ‘Creating the New’ respectively. Also, if one takes a walk in the old town of Tallinn, one can face advertisements promoting post-Soviet fashion style for the winter season of 2017. Not surprisingly, Vogue recently published an article asking: ‘Has the commercialisation of Russian and Eastern European fashion gone too far?’

About the self-identification of young people as Children of Freedom, I have selected here below six statements from my informants, which might serve to illustrate, in an explorative way, the limits and potentials of this category:

I see myself as a Child of Freedom. I don’t have the same guilt as my parents. I don’t have a direct connection with the communist past. I was born as part of the West already. (Siim, 26)

I’m a Child of Freedom because I have the freedom to travel all over the world. But there are still too many Russians in Estonia. (Grete, 26)

I’m a Child of Freedom because I can choose the information I read. We don’t talk about Communism and my parents don’t want to describe it. They just say it was bad. So we don’t quite understand it. We kind of feel nostalgia for something we don’t understand, for a myth. (Raine, 25)

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I feel like a Child of Freedom. I have freedom of choice. I can travel wherever I want in Europe. I can study what I want. I can be who I want. But I don’t judge what it was before. According to my parents, Communism was good. Probably it would be good to have a more equal and balanced society. (Lina, 22)

In some ways we are, but we haven’t had the experience of not being free. Personally, I see other oppressing forces, not that formal or evil. For instance, the way we are surveilled through the Internet. (Paula, 25)

I’m a Child of Freedom because I grew up in the 90s, a very intense and chaotic period in Estonia; also because of seeing how modernist architecture that was familiar to me, somehow part of my identity, has been progressively disappearing; particularly in Tallinn, where I was born. (Marika, 28)

More cosmopolitan, no less local

Globality is not happening elsewhere. Contrary to what we might initially think, we do not drop our locality to be global, but settle in both — people may be more cosmopolitan without putting aside the local. To show this we can compare, for instance, Russian and Estonian networks of hip-hop in Tallinn during the 1990s. Even though intertwined through global cultural symbols, the two communities showed unequal features of self-construction due to their ‘political states of mind’ at the local level, with messages such as ‘Russians go back to Russia!’ circulating. As noted by designer Ott Kagovere (2015), this had two consequences in Lasnamäe, the neighbourhood where he grew up. The first one is that Russian teenagers became ‘white niggas’ in Estonia; the second was that their rap was considered more authentic than that of fellow Estonians. Globalisation and national identity are thus to be understood as interlinked processes, playing different roles, showing a variation of scales, instead of conceived in binary terms, as two poles (Edensor 2002).
The global is being integrated inside the national intensively, reshaping the inherited, destabilising older hierarchies and scales. In her ethnography of multiple youths in postwar Bosnia, Monika Palmberger (2016) argues that in order to understand the way present actors give meaning to the past and reshape frames of memory, it is crucial to account of distinct ‘generational positionings’, paying attention specifically to the way they distance themselves from the experience and memories of their families and narrow past narratives. Young people inhabit more plural worlds, comprised by a wide range of local, regional and global identity discourses, which often leads to new forms of accidental communities forged through shared experiences related to chance, taste and leisure. For instance, we can notice new ways of forming social connections in the bonds created by practices such as ping-pong or street art in Estonia. Practitioners of these activities express cultural models that were not formerly present within local social structures and they present themselves as being involved in a distinct way of life, rather than simply showing a different subcultural style. An example of this is Vootele Vahe, one of the most popular ping-pong players in Estonia. As Vootele says: ‘A friend called me post-hipster. I consider myself more of a representative of the “subculture” of hands-on people – a supporter of a sustainable way of life’. 

Young people engage in global processes in various types of local appropriations (Tsuda, Tapias and Escandell 2014), not always as hybrids but also alongside (Pilkington et al. 2002). Contemporary technologies make it possible for peoples to live in multiple countries simultaneously, influencing identity making over physical distances. This irregular scaling-up allows for the creation of an identity above a given membership in social groupings and cultural traditions, yet this is conditioned by the group dynamics in which we individually engage. The fact that media technologies transcend national boundaries contributes to the complexity of this relationship, increasing the tension between ‘imagined communities’ and ‘imagined networks’ as two different forms of place making (Green, Harvey and Knox 2005).

Further, we can ask whether this coexistence of knowledges, scales and attachment to places is an incremental or a transformative condition, yet the overlap of spatio-temporal registers and cul-
tural referents is already generating complex configurations and producing various modes of belonging. This process is undermining traditional predicaments upon the significance of place—the specificities of language, culture, demography, economy, and history, and challenges the hegemony of the nation (and methodological nationalism) as a unit of spatial organisation. Nonetheless, this argument does not imply that national identities are relics from the past, but that they are being reshaped, actively reconciling unity and diversity in new ways. Despite their targeted and selective adoption of global symbols into the local context, young people still narrate their attachment to places in terms of home and tradition (Pilkington et al. 2002). This means that the lived experience of globalisation does not simply scale up the construction of identity through transnational cultural symbols, but also makes the existing scales more irregular.

The memory of Sisyphus

Young people are simultaneously makers and breakers of a status quo, challenging and effecting social transformations, acting as agents of change and not simply disrupters of the established order (Castells 2004; Comte 1974; Mannheim 1952; Honwana and de Boeck 2005). A crucial issue in this matter is how whatever comes after postsocialism materialises, or in other words, how new generations are changing the way of conducting the content of politics and to what degree the relationship towards the past is of discovery, change or rejection? We can notice indeed that playfulness, novelty and stimulation have become as important as security for young people, who show also more individualistic values and less will to follow the rules (Lilleoja and Raudsepp 2016).

As noticed by young anthropologist Gustav Kalm in an opinion essay (2015), contemporary Estonian youth thinks less in terms of grand notions and more about specific episodes and with less straightforward categorisations, which makes nationalistic ideals less affecting for youngsters than they are for older generations. As a consequence, this is leading to a depolitisation of history and of the remnants from the Soviet past, along with a repolitisation of everyday life (e.g., ecological, gender and economic issues). In the medium term, generational change might provoke
the breaking apart of the revanchist paradigm stemming from the regaining of independence, especially once those who are stuck in reading only the present through the links to the past (relying on the power relations formed accordingly) disappear from the political scene.

An example of this is the different attitude towards migration, mobility and civic participation, as well as their diverse strategies for making a living (in an era in which permanent jobs, as well as a career pattern and clear-cut occupational assignments, are increasingly rare). Not long ago, however, the director of the ENM Tõnis Lukas (56 years old)\(^8\) proposed that Estonians should consider those who have emigrated from the country in the past years as ‘refugees of comfort’ and ‘lazy’, instructing the younger generation about the difficult path of the nation.\(^9\) In his short essay, Gustav Kalm responded to this controversial statement: ‘With salaries in neighbouring Finland and Sweden amongst the highest in the European Union and a couple times higher than in Estonia, it is easy to understand why many Estonians choose to emigrate to work in these countries’ (2015, p. 92). Yet, Kalm pointed out further that what the controversy reveals is:

an intergenerational shift in attitudes. For Tõnis Lukas and his generation, the most important goal they fought for . . . was Estonian independence . . . In this patriotic instrumentalist vision of labour, work done abroad with the sole goal of personal enrichment does not really count as proper work. Unlike for Lukas’s generation, who were born and raised in an Estonia under Soviet rule, contemporary youth in Estonia grew up in an independent country. Even though they might be aware of the battles that were fought, Estonian independence has been for them a given – a reality in which to build one’s life and live out its everyday material struggles. (ibid)

Nowadays, a resurgence of civic activism seems to be taking place in Estonia, at least according to the most recent Human Development Report. In many cases, young people are behind the new expressions of political criticism and cultural activities (discussing LGBT rights and the condi-

\(^8\) In April 2018, Lukas was replaced by Alar Kalis, 60 years old and married with the director of the History Museum, Sirje Karis.

\(^9\) Lukas: ‘praegused Eestistlahkujad on mugavus-jalodevuspاغلسلد’ Uudised, ERR 15 September 2014.
tion of refugees and immigrants, promoting vegan values, engaging in the public sphere with leading groups such as Linnalabor, Stencibility, Pinksiklubi, Kraam, to name but a few). Likewise, new efforts are being dedicated to neighbourhood communities and milieu developing (such as Telliskivi, the Professor’s Village and Nõmme’s Public Services Associations, NPSA), rather than engaging with the structure of the society as such. As urbanist Keiti Kljavin observes, neighbourhood associations in Estonia have not been politically reactive, responding to social inequality or marginality, but rather they have focused on creating a sense of belonging and devotion to a milieu. And yet, these movements appear as ‘trans-local’ – drawing inspiration from local struggles elsewhere (Kljavin 2014, p. 19).

Postsocialism has been a live experience itself, generating its own memories, frustrations, contradictions and hopes. It has been experienced as a beginning with no end, an era that endured without becoming conventionalised (Nafus 2006). Young people in Estonia grew up in a society that increasingly encouraged competition, filled with abundant choices, surrounded by discourses of neoliberal success – a context in which instability turned into its own form of stability. Contrarily to older generations, young people acquired a practical aptitude preparing them to cope with and manage the diversity of life changes, showing different ideals and political goals for which they would like to fight (Kalm 2015, Martínez 2015a). In Estonia, those coming to age during the ‘transition’ seem to master global patterns, ubiquitous mediatisation and market economy better than their parents because they had to learn to integrate instability and indefinability into their everyday lives (see also Markowitz 2000).

The memory of the Soviet past as a meaning-making apparatus

Socialist experiences and values still have an impact on the present-day life of young people in Estonia: this is happening because of both state policy and certain patterns of interfamilial and intergenerational communication of the past. National identities are most often constructed with narratives, rituals and traditions that establish a connection with the past and enhance a sense of belonging to a community. In Estonia such a process entailed strong generational connotations,
since the memory of Soviet time is the basis for how the past is remembered and how different
generations are mapped (Nugin, Kannike and Raudsepp 2016), becoming a ‘meaning-making
apparatus’ (Nugin, 2010, p. 356), which establishes discursive ruptures and continuities (Jõesalu
and Kõresaar 2013). One of the complications of this process is that, although young people do
not have often direct personal memories of living in the Soviet Union or about the Singing Revo-
lution of 1991, their identity is directly shaped by stories told by their relatives, school teachers
and politicians – thanks to the highly affective character of this memory (Maruste 2014).

The representation of the past appears therefore not just as a factor of struggle but also as an im-
portant political resource that facilitates the managing of people’s memories, and through them
the regulation of people’s position in society (Macdonald 2013, Martínez 2017). Yet nowadays,
anything linked to temporality becomes obsolete increasingly quickly, and the formation of per-
sonal identity as a relational process is less determined by local history and culture than ever be-
fore. Likewise, collective memories are not generating the same reactions from young people as
they used to, since they are showing a more plural and selective approach towards past represen-
tations. Further, the impact of late-modern processes could not be foreseen by previous genera-
tions, and makes it more difficult to keep a monolithic identity and single cultural categorisa-
tions.

In an era that is witnessing a shift of the traditional power of identity, individuals engage in new
place-bound activities from which they derive new cultural forms of personhood and belonging.
The dialectical relation between social dynamics and generations implies that the construction of
the past may also vary, yet earlier forms of addressing the past cannot be simply replaced by later
ones, becoming rather a memory of memory (Olick 2007). Any historical representation is tied to
changing social and cultural parameters, yet no matter how distinctive generations are with re-
gard to the past, any process of construction of ‘new’ memories implies an engagement with old
legacies, even if just to refuse them. Hence, even if young people in Estonia show a way of relat-
ing to the past different from the one manifested by their parents, both generations are framed
One of the things young people in Estonia detect is that their parents’ memories of the socialist experience still inform the current organisation of the society (Martínez 2018). The riddle here is to figure out how present-day expectations and experiences might invest the past with novel meaning. Different generations hold different aspects of the past as important, according to narrative principles of how the old was and what is the new. The increasing popularity of seemingly past material culture and Soviet design may be indeed understood as a reflexive step back among young people, who explore the basic layers of collective emotions by acknowledging the evidence of a different value system (taste, money, time) that still remains within contemporary societies. This interest suggests a fundamental shift in the popular relationship with the past, more ironic and half-longing, as if it were an empty stylistic gesture ‘with little regard for moral imperatives or nuanced implications’ (Guffey 2006, p. 163). Further on, the appetite of young people for historical forms and emotions reveals also a shift from ‘hot’ to ‘cold’ memory (Weeks 2010), as the approach towards the past is characterised by distance and detachment. In contrast to the earlier emphasis on the traumatising consequences of the Soviet regime and the imprint of the identity of the Other within Europe, the engagement of the new generation with the Soviet past functions as an instrument of critique of the contemporary that drifts through the ironic and melancholic (Astahovska 2015).

**Updating, resetting, resurrecting**

The Russian-Estonian artist Kirill Tulin organised the project ‘Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler’ in November 2017, including a series of selected ‘helpers’. For a period of one month (scheduled into seven separate shifts, a 24-hour workday followed by a three-day break), Tulin transformed the Museum of Contemporary Art of Estonia into a tepidarium for encounters and thought-making, hosting discussions among the nearly 50 people who came to visit the space every shift. The stoker-artist and his successive helpers (me included) warmed the building with the debris left behind by previous exhibitions. The figure of the stoker has particular connotations in the former Soviet Union – as the embodiment of idleness, lack of ambition and waste of
time. Despite being presented as the lowest social position in official accounts, the stoker was also the freest possible job for young artists, poets and musicians, allowing for a space of autonomy, being simultaneously inside and outside the system. Indeed, for Alexei Yurchak (2005) and Sergei Prozorov (2009), the figure of the stoker was a paradigm of detached resistance and epitomised the apolitical modes of everyday life in late Soviet Russia, becoming a signifier of the conjunction of extreme potentiality and utter impossibility. In such a counter-intuitive way, Tulin managed to articulate a critique to the current commodification of the public space space in Tallinn, also questioning what it means to be a politicised worker and how our labour and experience of time are correlated.

We can even wonder what would have been the associations and potential for critique attributed to this project in other post-Soviet contexts? If making a speculative exercise of comparison between Estonia, Georgia and Russia, I would argue that in the Nordic country, generational change is updating past categories and understandings of identity, politics and public sphere; while in the Caucasian society young people attempt for a resent or restart, trying to develop, from scratch, a functioning system and frame of understanding without a clear understanding of how power is organised (Frederiksen 2013, Martínez and Agu 2016, Dzenovska and De Genova 2018, Martínez forthcoming); in Russia, however, generational change shows a growth of patriotic feelings, often associated with state agendas (Pilkington, Omelchenko and Perasović 2018) and a will for resurrecting a past sense of greatness (Deriglazova 2018). Despite the cultural industries in the country seem to be integrated into the global marketplace and transnational communities more than ever before (Turoma, Ratilainen and Trubina 2018), the recent events in Ukraine and Crimea have generated a new wave of conservatism and altered the perception of opportunities, borders and future among young people in Russia (Omelchenko 2015).

**Conclusion**

The Estonian youth grew up in a world which became increasingly globalised, among multiple scales of social action and cultural configuration, having to cope with extensive levels of con-
sumer culture, changing media technologies and labour precariousness. This has produced a revaluation of the past and their location anew, not as a straightforward engagement with collective memory or political categories (e.g. in the opening speech, Preiman presented his exhibition as ‘apolitical’), but rather as part of a wider process of cultural consumption, reuse and rediscovery, which might lead to the development of new narratives and epistemic possibilities and the injection of a new criticality.

Frames of memory and the construction of identities are not fixed, but in a situational process of becoming, always reproduced through the multiple interactions emerging in the present. Nowadays, global networks are pushing to rearticulate spatial and temporal patterns of behaviour, and with them, the way in which people locate themselves and give meaning to the world in which they live. As a result, the constitution of Estonian identity and the hegemonic interpretation of the Soviet past are increasingly shaped by global processes and generational change. Individuals constantly position themselves on several (social, temporal and spatial) scales and discursive levels of belonging, applying sorting mechanisms, which, in Estonia, involves uniting global and local tendencies, the Soviet legacy and the impact of current multi scalar political discourses.

Young people are making the relationship between past, present and future less unidirectional and ordered than the previous generations. Yet in this multiplicity of revivals, endings and new beginnings, what kind of responsibility might the younger generations have to the past? In my view, there has been too much emphasis on the responsibility towards the past, and too little attention to matters of agency regarding how the interpretation of the past is being updated. In doing so, post-postsocialist changes are taking place and becoming materialised.

References


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