Understanding online activism in a transition society

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The sample consists of young people aged 16–26 (n=1181).

# Abstract

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 simultaneously 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 commonplace 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 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 still 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 organisations (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 may 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 mobilisation (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 gathered 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.

# Outcome

"Similarly to other Eastern European countries, young people in Estonia tend to be less politically active than in Western Europe." (Allaste Cairns, 2016, p. 313)
" ... 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." (Allaste Cairns, 2016, p. 313)