



## Revising Postsocialism: The First Post-Soviet Generation in the Estonian Art Field

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### Abstract

This article reflects on the current explanatory value of concepts such as postsocialism and Eastern Europe by exploring how they are represented in contemporary art projects in Estonia. Through an overview of recent exhibitions in which I collaborated with local artists and curators, the research considers generational differences in relation to cultural discourses of the postsocialist experience. Methodologically, artists and curators were not simply my informants in the field, but makers of analytical knowledge themselves in their practice. Exhibitions were also approached as contact zones, whereby new cultural forms are simultaneously reflected and constructed. Critically, this inquiry gathers new ways of representing and conceptualising cultural changes in Estonia and novel perspectives of interpreting the relations to the Soviet past. The focus is put on art practice because of its capacity of bringing together global and local frames of reference simultaneously. The research also draws attention to the inbetweenness of the first post-Soviet generation (those born near the time of the breakup of the USSR); they are revising established cultural forms as well as historical representations through mixing practices, and therefore updating traditional ideas of identity and attachment to places.

**Keywords:** Eastern Europe; Postsocialism; Generational memory; Children of freedom; Unmaking cultural forms.

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### Postsocialism without borders

What is the actual content of the term 'postsocialism' in Estonia? We can even ask if Eastern Europe and postsocialism remain as generative concepts to be retained; if they brought any theoretical advance whatsoever (Hann 2006); and how these categories are nowadays used by the local population, paying attention to how the natives of postsocialism analyse their own condition (Verdery 2002). This article deals with the issue of revising current understandings of post-socialism. It builds on the existing literature on the topic adding generational and artistic dimensions to the discussion.

In the preface of *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practice in Eurasia*, Chris Hann observes that this term will have to be replaced when a new era comes. In the same anthology, Caroline Humphrey shows the 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' (2002a: 13). This article thus presents generational change as an exploratory variable of the social and epistemological changes already happening, which might eventually lead to the development of new narratives and epistemic possibilities to interpret the postsocialist experience as well as to contest the explanatory value of regional categories such as Eastern Europe.

The research draws on the assumption that both media discourses and academic analyses of postsocialism have put most of the emphasis on discussing the responsibility of the younger generations towards the past, and too little attention has been given to matters of agency regarding how analytical concepts and the interpretation of the Soviet past can be updated by them. This article tries to fill such a lack, examining how young people reshape the global influences and cultural products in the local context while updating existing concepts and representations. It demonstrates that urban young people in Estonia show a rich ability to mix cultural forms and move between different communities.

Consequently, social relations are increasingly stretched across transnational spaces, affecting the bounding between places and culture (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), generating novel expressions of translocality and influencing current practices of identity formation (Glick Schiller 2005). The research also shows that the art field in Estonia played an important role in re-creating and reinforcing the idea of Eastern Europe as a cultural whole after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As noted by curator Anders Härm (2018), art practice became a bottom-up platform through which new ideas were made felt (with meaningful exhibitionary narratives), as well as an institutional device of ideological interpellation supported through political, financial and cultural infrastructures (i.e., the Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts).

The research therefore provides an account of how cultural and political

categories derived from the regional history are now changing their explanatory value as an overarching framework, while acquiring new meanings with which to analyse the broader world. It does so by focusing on the work of Estonian artists and curators born near the time of the breakup of the USSR, those who could be the first post-Soviet generation, following Alexei Yurchak's phrasing (2005). The study employs a multi-method approach combining an active collaboration with several art projects and the methodological tools of narrative analysis. It proposes to analyse categories such as Eastern Europe and postsocialism in relation to the global present, arguing that in order to develop a better understanding of these societies today, we should pay special attention to how the younger generations in the former socialist block take on the inherited concepts while appropriating internationally disseminated cultural products.

The first post-Soviet generation inherited the specific historical representations and categories of the late-Soviet one, yet they are recalibrating cultural forms and narratives of the socialist past in the present. This shows agency in shaping the concept of postsocialism, eventually leaving behind its constrictive and backward-looking connotations (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008; Červinková 2012). The anthropology of postsocialism presents a complex temporal, scalar and spatial approach. From questioning the paradigm of transition predominant in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, it evolved into an ethnography of the institutional unmaking and radical changes experienced in the realm of the everyday, to later be presented as part of a global condition, applying the conceptual frame to other regions of the world (Gille 2010).

Overall, however, studies on postsocialism have tended to reflect a regrettable lack of forward-looking vision, as researchers were chiefly concerned with re-telling what happened in the past, and hence, paid little attention to the present and the future (Hirt, Ferenčuhová and Tuvikene 2016). Furthermore, this study also questions the geographic constraint of postsocialism as a concept, based on the idea that localities are no longer isolated but globally tied (Gille 2001). In this vein, Sue Bridger and Frances Pine have criticised that we have been insisting on an 'ill-defined blanket term' for too long, obfuscating 'the range and variations of issues involved' (Bridger and Pine 1998: 3). Nonetheless, new literature has been published suggesting the need to make use of postsocialism to reflect on global issues (Murawski 2018; Gentile 2018; Müller 2020), hybrid and decoupled from the region (Tuvikene 2016); Also in this vein, it has been approached as an intellectual space that provide insights about alternative futures and globalisations (Bailyn, Jelača and Lugarić 2018; Marck, Kalinovsky and Marung 2020).

Postsocialism encapsulates the relations that had emerged during the radical transformation that happened after the Soviet collapse, referring to both: a transitional condition and to processes that have been happening in connection

with other processes elsewhere, rather than being singular, essential and separated (Tuvikene 2016). Postsocialism resonates therefore with global changes and the neoliberal restructuring of societies too, hence making this concept applicable to broader debates. Likewise, observations of postsocialism are not simply descriptive, they are also conceptual, referring to socio-economic experiences affecting at, through and beyond the region; in other words, even if the concept is first of all associated with Central and Eastern Europe and with a transition experience, the process had several collateral effects on the whole world (Hann 2002; Stenning 2010) and did not happen as a continuum, but as an overlapping, overwhelming unmaking (Humphrey 2002b; Materka 2012). Indeed, global and postsocialist processes can be, to a great extent, presented as reciprocal and overlapping. Policies arguing for privatisation and dispossession were not simply contemporaneous in different parts of the world but also justified by parallel arguments and ideologies, and corporately linked to each other. It is in this sense that we can speculate with the idea of the whole world being postsocialist now,<sup>1</sup> and even that postsocialism has become a phenomenon without borders.

This article is, however, not dealing with political economy, the impact of postsocialism elsewhere in the world, or with the after-effects of the Soviet collapse to the process of globalisation. The research is rather oriented towards accounting for how the first post-Soviet generation in Estonia, who have had no (or very limited) first-hand experience with the USSR, is appropriating and eventually unmaking existing cultural forms in a less politicised way, and by doing so, presenting the communist past as available for re-interpretation and deterritorialising along the authoritative discourse established after the Soviet collapse (Martínez 2018). Hence, this study provides new insights on how to view postsocialism and Eastern Europe from contemporary perspectives.

The analysis of these phenomena applies a more relational approach in order to capture the creative afterlives of postsocialism as a concept and its unmaking and mutations. Any 'post' is primarily anti, a contra movement, simultaneously objecting and updating. However, the 'post' that is coming after postsocialism (the post-post-socialism) seems to be less directed towards the socialist past, and more against the global present (Gille 2010).

It could be, indeed, that we need to get rid of any 'post' prefix or add a different one to understand the ongoing revision work of the new generations. For instance, the prefix 'trans-' denotes a sense of conveyance and transfer as well as going across. It thus suggests intersections, transport and transmission, marking the 'through' of the process. Likewise, 'post' entails a gesture of rejection, while 'trans' refers to a shift and involves connectivity (Murawski 2019; Martínez 2020). On this matter, Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druța's (2016) account of how a 'zombie socialism' in Romania show a recursive obsession with the past, in that context

presented as a discursive ghost flagged to discredit criticism and reduce support for alternative policies. Further on, and as argued by Dace Dzenovska (2018), the current popularity of nationalist and illiberal elements in the public sphere might be the product of the failure of postsocialist processes of Europeanization, democratization, and liberalisation.<sup>2</sup> These insights, however, sound rather pessimistic about the possibility to locally produce alternative futures, which are not necessarily oriented ‘to exorcise the past from the present’ (ibid: 18), but to extend political and cultural imaginaries.

### **Children of postsocialism**

Those who grew up during the so-called transition have their own memory of the 1990s, which is distinctly different from that of previous 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 district (of Soviet apartment blocks developed in Tartu in the 1980s) was the skyline of Seattle (Preiman 2017; Rander 2016). Postsocialism appear thus not just as a living experience associated to a specific period and territory, but also as a particular structure of feelings, rather disorienting with respect to space and time (Bailyn, Jelača and Lugarić 2018).



Fig. 1 Henrik Rakitin, *Heraldry*, 2016; included in the *Children of the New East* show.

In 2017, curator Siim Preiman (b. 1992) organised the exhibition ‘Children of the New East’ in different galleries of the Tallinn Art Hall, a project that included eight young artists from the Baltic region. The key aim of the project was to reflect on how those born in the late 1980s and early 1990s have had to respond to claims by the older generations that they have a ‘non-existent memory’, as well as to seek out how these young artists are influenced by a global culture. As Siim 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. (Preiman 2017: 2)

In this article, I show that generational change does not simply add new layers, overlapping what exists, building up on it. It also tends to revise and unmake whatever has been done before, as part of the new future making. New generations tend to deploy new perspectives on history as part of their ongoing dialogue with the present, rediscovering past things anew, or revisiting further pasts and futures in a search for inspiration and ideas. An example of this is Ingel Vaikla’s (b. 1992) latest project ‘Shapes and Distances.’<sup>3</sup> In her film, Ingel puts in dialogue archival material of a TV programme from late 1980s about a parade in Slavutych (happy footage of a town in the making, as it was built right after the Chernobyl disaster to accommodate the workers of the plant), with contemporary footage of young, acrobatic people in a playground.



Fig. 2 and 3. Footage from ‘Shapes and Distances’, Ingel Vaikla 2020.

Ingel reflects on how architecture resonates a past future partly gone, and how people's feelings and imagery vanish at a different speed than built materials. 'It doesn't matter if you haven't been to Slavutych before, there's something familiar in this town to us, in our childhood, in stories you have heard, in how you imagined life to be, even if it wasn't like that', observes Ingel. I had the pleasure to present the booklet of the film with Ingel at the Lagemik bookshop of Tallinn the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 2020. During our conversation, she answered to important questions, such as how shall we capture the past in the present? And who are those representing it (and the representees)? Ingel then replied:

During the making of the work, I asked myself what's my view on the Soviet past, and also who cares about my view, as I have been told that I'm too young and do not know anything. 'Listen to me', says often the older generation. But I wanted to go deeper on which representations are reproduced, who is given a voice... Since I moved to Belgium, I started to feel an Eastern European more and more. There they are rethinking now their colonial past, but they do not show much curiosity, or empathy, to those doing a similar exercise but with a different past... What I remember of the 1990s is to be in the middle of a constant change, trying to make or built something better and more European, and the combination of Western t-shirts with Soviet architecture. All that is the very basis of the post-socialist identity... I was amazed of how people welcomed me in Ukraine as belonging to a sort of imaginary community of past Soviet friendship, how that community or mutuality is still there, how people changed their approach to me when I said that I am Estonian. When I say this in Brussels, then everyone understands it, because for them we all are the same: postsocialist and Eastern Europeans. But once you are in Estonia the post-Soviet connection is not that evident, and it is felt as something more affective, or abstract.

Also reflecting on how the first post-Soviet generation deals with the postsocialist matter, Siim notes how his identity was experienced as somehow divided along the former borders and yet consuming global cultural products. Following the idea of the divided individual, local artist and critic Tanel Rander (b. 1980) 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 (Rander 2016; see also Strathern 1988). As Tanel points out,<sup>4</sup> the magnitude of the changes in the 1990s prevented many local people from fully internalising all the meanings and

dimensions involved in the change, and only now are they starting to take it all 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 people could not speak English back then and those who did, practiced it with no sense of criticism. (Rander 2017)

In 2016, Tanel presented the exhibition ‘Third Way’ in Tallinn Art Hall, a critical project that showed the correlation between the socio-political transformations that have recently occurred in Eastern Europe and the idea of the region having a distinct ‘soul’. In the booklet accompanying the exhibition, Tanel reflected on an episode from a few months back at the ‘Communist Nostalgia’ conference (University of Glasgow 2015) in which an American lady described it as bizarre to be born in Eastern Europe and feel nostalgia for Kurt Cobain. I asked Tanel to develop the idea of a divided geopolitical subjectivity in a new essay, which I take here as an *emic* empirical material:

Was I a Soviet kid or an Estonian kid? Probably both of them ... In the late 1980s, to be ‘Soviet’ meant to be Russian, and to be ‘Estonian’ meant to be Western ... 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 brought 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 took 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 a loud voice ... Yes, it was a totally different world! A different cosmology! My subconscious was formed above a vast 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 on Sakhalin Island, where he died. My grant-aunt had

been imprisoned in Vorkuta. My grandfather had been imprisoned in Kolyma. But not all of my relatives experienced the vast terrain because of Stalin's repressions. My father worked in the hospitals of Krasnoyarsk Krai. My aunt went on camping trip in the 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 in 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 2019: 72-3)<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 4. Tanel Rander project to rename the Raadi area after Dudayev, 2013. Tanel Rander.

All these insights were gathered through different formal and informal collaborations with local artists and curators. They were co-developers of this research, themselves doing archival work, field descriptions, and autoethnography for their art practice. Indeed, we can say that these artworks also function as analytical artefacts. During my ethnographic study, local artists and curators proved to be knowledge makers themselves, both observers and conceptualisers, engaging with existing cultural forms and suggesting paths to overcome analytical delimitations.

My research follows on the heels of contemporary methodological debates exploring new forms of collaboration in the field, in which traditionally considered informants play an important role in producing, mediating and distributing representations, and are referred not merely as knowledge holders, but also as our partners in the research (Holmes and Marcus 2005; Estalella and Criado 2018). As noted by Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2008), the relationship with

our subjects in the field is changing, due to the multiplication of the information available, the amount of highly educated professionals, and the increasing interest in anthropological methodologies by people who have not been trained in this discipline.<sup>6</sup>

This research also approached exhibitions as contact zones, whereby new cultural forms are both reflected and constructed (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013). In this sense, exhibitions can be turned into spaces of fabrication of knowledges and intervention in the field, and not just be used for the display of already existing information (Martínez 2021b). Furthermore, we can make use of exhibitions as a public-making medium, whereby (non-verbal) signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed (Greenberg, Ferguson and Nairne 1996). Likewise, exhibitions can be studied as a point of gathering, whereby a co-presence of things (that were before separated) is established. Exhibitions can thus work as a translational space too, where to articulate cultural differences (Pratt 1991; Clifford 1997).

Consider an example from the exhibition ‘Typical Individuals’ (2014-2015), which reflected on the genealogy of graffiti and street art in Tartu. As the curator Marika Agu (b. 1989) explained, the show was meant to show the way in which local culture was shaped by ‘following examples from abroad, combining foreign behavioural principles and exemplars with personal ambitions and soul-searchings’ (Agu 2014: 8). Marika noted how, paradoxically, graffiti artists articulated claims of authenticity despite being strongly imitative of Western styles, meanings and idioms, blending them with local culture and references to national politics. Estonian street art was, therefore, simultaneously influenced by both local policies and global referents. This combination poses new questions about the composition of cultural repertoires and new modes of reception, demonstrating a new relationship between socio-demographic changes and cultural transformations.



Fig. 5. Anonymous picture of the archival material of the exhibition Typical Individuals.

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.’ Likewise, Barthol Lo Meior commented 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’; or, as expressed by MinaJaLydia: ‘a magic world where I escape from this reality’. As learnt while preparing the exhibition, and despite their secrecy and individualism, graffiti writers form a community of individuals that share strong codes and show respect for their tradition, deploying lifestyles suspended simultaneously inside and outside of the system (Yurchak 2005).

Further on, these cultural practices denote accidental intergroup ties, establishing new commonalities with peers which can involve belonging to more than one place at the same time. This form of cultural bonding has the potential to evoke progressive affects able to cut across nationalist divides in Estonia. These accidental ties also generate alternative collective meanings and imaginaries, allowing individuals to position themselves on several (social, temporal and spatial) scales and discursive levels of belonging, applying complex sorting mechanisms, which involves uniting global and local tendencies (Martínez 2015; Pilkington and Omelchenko 2013). Consequently, the first post-Soviet generation has tended to inhabit worlds comprised of a wide range of local, regional and global identity discourses, reproduced through forms of affirmative bonding and peer commonality. These accidental communities can themselves be forged by chance through shared experiences related to individual taste, leisure and cultural consumption (Rosen 2018).

## **More global, no less local**

Globalization and digital technologies have an epistemological dimension in people’s lives, presenting a sense of belonging that is geographically distributed through social networks (Lien and Melhuus 2007). These networks are pushing to rearticulate patterns of behaviour, and with them, the way in which people locate themselves and give meaning to the world in which they live. The global is thus being integrated with the national and destabilising older hierarchies and cultural forms. For example, I conducted 25 brief explorative interviews in three prominent bars for young people in Tallinn (Protest), Tartu (Arhiiv) and Narva (ro-ro), and heard that the main cultural referents of my interlocutors were: Manchester United; David Beckham; Harry Potter; Buddhism; punk music,

hippie and surrealist cultures; Kurt Vonnegut; Bob Marley; Michael Jackson; Che Guevara; Versace; Hemingway; and Almodóvar.<sup>7</sup>

Yet contrary to what we might initially think, we do not simply drop our locality to be global but settle in both in a process that combines adding and revising. Further on, even if global networks and national discourses appear as more interlinked than competing processes, they rather play different roles in the construction of identity. Contemporary technologies make it possible for peoples to live in multiple countries simultaneously, influencing identity-making over physical distances. The fact that media technologies transcend national boundaries contributes to the complexity of this relationship. Further, we can ask whether this coexistence of knowledges, scales and attachment to places is an incremental or a transformative condition; nonetheless, the overlap of spatio-temporal registers and cultural referents is already generating various modes of belonging. This process is undermining traditional predicaments based upon the significance of place — the specificities of language, culture, demography, economy and history — and challenging 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 of the past; Rather, 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 and the experience of locality more complex.

An example of this is the rapid impact of rapper Stuf (Evgeny Lyapin, b. 1992), who in 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 provoking statement 'I'm Russian, but I love Estonia'. The video was recorded in Narva, on the very border between Estonia and Russia. With a bilingual composition, Stuf echoes the frustrations of the Russian-speaking community in Estonia; even so, he claims not to be interested in politics. We can also note the case of Nublu (Markkus Pulk, b. in 1996), a rapper from Keila who started by imitating the North American rapper Eminem. His debut on SoundCloud was in 2017. A year later he managed to own the first six positions within the Estonian top 10 chart, with songs that contain rapping in Estonian, Russian and English. On 7 August 2019, he released a new track entitled 'Für Oksana' in which he sings in Russian and Estonian, while strolling around Narva. In one month, the video clip on YouTube received over two million visits.

Another example is the case of Tommy Cash (Tomas Tammemets, b. 1991), who has become globally popular by making 'post-Soviet rap', a style that combines influences from Kanye West, Eminem or Die Antwoord with Alla Pugacheva and Russian Orthodox Church music. As Tommy Cash says: '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'.<sup>8</sup> In the music videos, he is featured clad in Adidas gear, merging pop culture references with religious, military, Soviet kitsch and ghetto elements. Cash claims to have been a pioneer in the aesthetic representation of the post-socialist experience in popular culture: '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'.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 6. Artishok biennale, work by Dmitri Gerasimov.  
Photo by Kent Märjamaa.

In the last years, Gucci, H&M and Adidas have released menswear collections inspired by Soviet aesthetics, with the lines 'Back in the USSR' and 'What would you wear if you were to time travel to Moscow in 1994?' Parallel to this phenomenon, Liisa Kaljula (b. 1984) curated the exhibition 'Sots Art and Fashion' in the Art Museum of Estonia and curator Sten Ojavee (b. 1989) organised the VI Artishok biennale to explore the relation between nationalism and fashion, inviting eight artists and eight writers (including me) to reflect on the categorising capacity of clothing in national terms.<sup>10</sup> In an interview presenting the project, Ojavee explained that fashion and nationalism can be interwoven; for instance, by reproducing community affiliations, by integrating landscape elements in the clothing, by presenting military aesthetics, by generating emotions around ethnic patterns and folkloric forms, and also by enacting critiques of economic policies. As Ojavee concludes, the political appropriation of fashion often relates to a strategy of identity-making.<sup>11</sup>

For theatre critic Liisi Aibel (b. 1990), the VI Artishok biennale gave her hope that nation and identity-making can be approached in an 'analytical, sensible and thoughtful way'.<sup>12</sup> Fashion designer Anu Hint (b. 1961), however, strongly disliked

the show. She wrote a furious email to Ojavee's office and a post on Facebook calling the Art Biennale 'multicultural propaganda that will eventually destroy the country'. Hint is known because of her exhibition 'To be an Estonian', which has been travelling across countries (with the support of diplomatic channels) to represent a romantic sense of Estonianness abroad, which omits that Estonianness is a mixture of different peoples and cultures, and instead seeks to outline an imaginary 'pure' identity. Symptomatically, Ojavee's critical approach to the idea of nation was openly dismissed by Hint as 'multicultural', demonstrating in turn that the exhibition was touching a sensitive nerve in Estonian society.

In August 2020, two other art projects were presented suggesting new interpretations of the recent past, both applying a critical gaze, this time not in terms of scales but of the inter-relation between multiple experiences of change in Estonia. In the Tartu Art Museum, Jevgeni Zolotko (1983) juxtaposed contemporary issues of collective trauma and social marginality with the period of the 1930s in the first Estonian Republic, a time characterised by authoritarianism and censure. Parallel to that project, Maria Helen Känd (1993) curated the exhibition 'East End(s)' at the Põhjala factory of Tallinn, reflecting on the relevance of being geographically and politically located between Western Europe and Russia. As Känd noted in the exhibition leaflet, in order to understand what composes the current Estonian identity, we should also pay attention to how it has been shaped by inner and outer expectations and inputs, acknowledging a multiplicity of layers that includes Finno-Ugric, Swedish, Danish and German elements; hence, being not simply defined by an anti-Soviet ethos.

My last example is 'Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler', an art project organised by the Russian-Estonian artist Kirill Tulin in November 2017, which included a series of selected 'helpers' (I was one of them). For a period of one month (scheduled into seven separate shifts, a 24-hour workday followed by a three-day break), Tulin transformed the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia into a *Thepidarium* 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 debris left behind from previous exhibitions. In such a counter-intuitive way, Tulin managed to articulate a critique of the current commodification of public space in Tallinn, while also questioning what it means to be a politicised art worker and how our labour correlates with our experience of time.

The figure of the stoker has particular connotations in the former Soviet Union — as the embodiment of idleness, a lack of ambition and the wasting 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. As

noted by 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.

Frames of memory tend to be reconstructed by distinguishing ourselves from preceding generations, which entails a re-appropriation of past forms and a potential struggle for establishing a distinct narrative. In Estonia, the deterritorialisation of well-established authoritative forms is enabling the formation of various alternative spaces, precisely by reproducing discursive forms and categories in a creative way, which even if distorted, remain recognisable by the public.<sup>13</sup> These sites of practice reproduce the existing cultural forms and are not regarded as anti-system or in opposition to the hegemonic values; however, the replication of cultural forms is accompanied by a deterritorialisation of its meanings by how they are said (performative shift) and by including otherwise forms of living in them. Notwithstanding the evident differences between the late Soviet period and the current Estonian society (starting with democracy and free speech), we could speculate if the standardisation of the ‘re-building the nation’ discourse, presenting what it is to be Estonian, has itself become hypernormalised: self-referential and with a decreasing ability to relate to the reality it names, reproduced along established authoritative circuits yet only taken as semi-serious by the urban youth.



Fig. 7. EKKM Thepidarium. Photo by Kirill Tulin.

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

Younger generations tend to be, simultaneously, makers and breakers of the status quo, challenging and effecting social transformations (Castells 2004; Comte 1974; Mannheim 1952). Finnish artist Anu Pennanen made a short film in Tallinn on this matter, entitled *Friendship* (2006). In an original way, she explored the relationship of local teenagers to the monuments and architectural landscapes of the city. The film combines two groups of friends, one Estonian-speaking and the other Russian-speaking; they both show a similar approach to places such as the Viru shopping-mall, Linnahall and Maarjamäe, one characterised by leisure and cultural recombination. Past memorials and built forms are here stripped of its previous ideological functions, and such experience seems to help overcoming nationalistic devices and instead generate inter-ethnic friendships – inventing new kinds of camaraderie and bonding forms.

As noted by anthropologist Gustav Kalm (b. 1986), contemporary Estonian youth tend to think less in terms of grand notions and more about specific episodes and with less straightforward categorisations, which makes nationalistic ideals less significant for urban youngsters than they are for older generations (Kalm 2015). Nevertheless, the way new generations are changing the content of politics is not clearly articulated; likewise, the degree to which the relationship with the past is one of discovery and revision is not obvious, and more research is required on this topic. In the future, this might be leading to a depoliticisation of the remnants of the Soviet past, along with a re-politicisation of everyday life (e.g., ecological, gender and economic issues).

In many cases, the urban young people I met are behind the new expressions of civic activism, one type of activism that is more affirmative than critical and based on feelings of camaraderie, loyalty and solidarity (Razsa 2015). For instance, they are discussing LGBT rights and the condition of refugees and immigrants, promoting vegan values, engaging in the public sphere with leading groups such as Feministeerium, Linnalabor, Stencibility, Pinksiklubi, Kraam, to name but a few. Likewise, new efforts are being dedicated to neighbourhood communities. As urbanist Keiti Kljavin (b. 1986) observed, neighbourhood associations in Estonia have not been politically reactive, responding to social inequality, but rather have focused on creating a sense of belonging and devotion to a particular milieu. And yet, these movements present themselves as ‘trans-local’ — drawing inspiration from local struggles elsewhere, importing the world anew (Kljavin 2014). Yet in this multiplicity of cultural reuse and rediscovery of past experiences, we might also ask: What kind of responsibility might the first post-Soviet generation have to the traumatic past? And do the existing generational hierarchies in Estonia

hinder the possibility of establishing a direct relationship with the Soviet past (by inculcating negative moral sentiments about it and by giving lessons on it)?

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), thereby becoming a 'meaning-making apparatus' (Nugin, 2010: 356). However, young people have limited direct personal memories of living in the Soviet Union, and their identity is rather shaped by stories told by their relatives, schoolteachers and politicians (Maruste 2014). The representation of the past appears, therefore, not just as a factor of struggle, but also as an important 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, 2021a).

Yet nowadays, young people are showing a more selective approach towards past representations. In an era that is witnessing a shift in the traditional power of identity, individuals are engaging in new place-bound activities from which they derive new cultural forms of personhood and belonging. The dialectical relationship between social dynamics and generations implies that the construction of the past may also vary. But even if young people in Estonia show a way of relating to the past that is different from the one manifested by their parents, the different generations are framed still by the official histories (Aarelaid-Tart 2006; Halbwachs 1980; Kattago 2009; Olick 2007).

The riddle here is to figure out how present-day expectations and experiences might invest the past with novel meaning and apprehension. The increasing popularity of seemingly past material culture and Soviet design may indeed be understood as a reflexive step back among young people, who are exploring 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, one more ironic and half-longing, as if it were an empty stylistic gesture (Guffey 2006).

Generational memory is something historical and emergent, accompanied by a re-appropriation of the past, which nowadays is increasingly mediated, screened and multi-scalar. 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 a younger generation with the Soviet past rather appears as an instrument of critique of the contemporary that drifts through the ironic and melancholic (Astahovska 2015), yet also indicates what is absent in the present (Todorova 2010).

Paradoxically, older generations have publicly accused the first post-Soviet generation of 'lacking memory', not appreciating their 'given' freedom, ignoring patriotic feelings or even betraying the nationhood by being critical of the status quo (Maruste 2014; Nugin 2010; Preiman 2017; Rander 2017). But why are the older generations in Estonia making such complaints? In Estonia, sociologist Marju Lauristin (2003) categorised those born just before and just 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. This label reifies a continuity and homogeneity of cultural and political consciousness and disregards emerging forms of social bonds. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that the cluster of promises made to that generation cannot be realised, at least as originally expected.

The first post-Soviet generation in Estonia grew up in a society that increasingly encouraged competition and was surrounded by discourses of neoliberal success. 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' that contributes to a 'cruel optimism' by creating a hierarchical bond between generations and by exaggerating the monolithic composition of actual Estonian society. Hence, to a great extent, it appears as an illusion to think that those growing up after the break-up of the USSR would partake of the same understanding of identity as their parents and have a similar assessment of the Soviet past.

Indeed, the rapid, convoluted 'transition' of the 1990s has generated among local sociologists a need to distinguish analytically between 'winners' and 'losers' in order to identify those who became the arbiter of taste and value in Estonia (Titma 1999; Saar and Helemäe 2006; Nugin 2015), based on generational, gender and education criteria. As noted by Raili Nugin (2015), a certain group born in the middle of the 1960s, reaching maturity when radical socio-political changes took place, managed to claim key positions in society: '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: 7).

In this article, we are dealing, however, with young people active in the artistic field and having international resonance, hence exploring both the relation between different generations in one society and the cultural and epistemological changes to come. In order to understand distinct 'generational positionings', one has to specifically pay attention to the way young people distance themselves

from the experiences and memories of their families as well as from narrow past narratives, which tend to be nationalistic and one-dimensional (Markowitz 2000; Palmberger 2016). Those under thirty years old grew up in a world that became increasingly globalised, having to cope with extensive levels of consumer culture, changing media technologies and multiple scales of social action and cultural configuration. Such an irregular and complex scaling-up allows for the creation of an identity above a given membership in social groupings and cultural traditions; yet this phenomenon remains also conditioned by the group dynamics in which we individually engage. Likewise, this is produced not necessarily 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 recombination and unmaking.

## Conclusion

This article set out to open up new possibilities for the reconfiguration of the existing ways to talk about postsocialism in Estonia by studying the struggle to locate that overwhelming experience in the current cultural forms of the first post-Soviet generation. The research identified a generational and an artistic dimension as a potentially helpful aspect for understanding the changes in the discourses on postsocialism and Eastern Europe. As part of the theoretical and empirical implications of this phenomenon, it engaged with cultural change through the lens of the artistic, urban youth in Estonia and their representations of the changes after the break-up of the USSR. This article thus discussed the ways in which generational change is updating and revising such analytical categories as Eastern Europe and postsocialism, foregrounding connections at multiple scales and through different networks. The research presented various representations of the Soviet past from artists and curators, who are enhancing cultural shifts through mixing and recombining the existing cultural forms. By studying how young, urban professionals, active in cultural production, make use and refer to these terms in the present, it argued that the engagement with of Soviet legacies and material culture is being increasingly shaped by generational change.

Accordingly, this article urges scholars in anthropology, political science, area studies, and cultural studies to look deeper into terms such as Eastern Europe and postsocialism, and to keep them in motion by accounting of the fluidity brought by generational replacements and the transplantation of the global present into localities. Therefore, it contributes to these ongoing discussions by foregrounding how postsocialism has been a lived experience in its own right, generating its own memories, frustrations, contradictions, hopes, and also creative representations. Likewise, the research also demonstrated how urban youths, professionally active

in the field of culture, are offering views of the past, present and future that are less unidirectional and ordered than did the previous generations, therefore more chaotic and creative (with an open-ended mixing). The critical reconsideration of how the first post-Soviet generation understands and represents themselves creatively, show that not only is the Estonian society far less homogeneous than officially depicted (in museums, in the media, in discourses by politicians), but also that the existing hierarchy of generations within this society works as limiting force for bringing alternative futures into being.

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Stenning and Kathrin Hörschelmann (2008) elaborate this idea further as a boomerang effect, in the same way postcolonialism was not external to the societies of the imperial metropolis, but instead inscribed within them.

<sup>2</sup> Dzenovska's ethnography studies the governmental strategies mobilised to make Latvia 'European'. As she notes, after the Soviet collapse, the existing authoritative knowledge was discredited and incarnations of the imaginary West guided 'postsocialist subjects' to the new way of life, importing European models uncritically, lodged in a 'catch up' discourse, and constantly referring to the Soviet legacy as 'a crutch for explaining the present' (Dzenovska 2018: 89), even if some of the actors had not lived under the Soviet regime or do not understand their position in the contemporaneity.

<sup>3</sup> A co-production between the Beursschouwburg of Brussels and the Museum of Contemporary Art of Estonia.

<sup>4</sup> In an essay that was part of the art project 'Help for the Stoker of the Central Heating Boiler' (Museum of Contemporary Art of Estonia 2017).

<sup>5</sup> For more on how the temporality of childhood breaks the narrative linearity of political progress, see Silova 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Further on, those who have been traditionally considered as 'informants' are becoming 'epistemic partners', extending the notion of the field and making necessary 'to integrate the analytical capacities of our subjects to define the issues at stake in our projects' (ibid: 86).

<sup>7</sup> All of these informal interviews took place in the evening. The interviews were conducted in English and Russian (this was the native language of ten of the informants, with the rest being native Estonian speakers also fluent in English).

<sup>8</sup> See Braudie Blais-Billie, 'The Estonian rapper tommy cash wants to be "Kanye East"', Vice 25 April 2017

<sup>9</sup> Interview of Tommi Cash by Andrei Nedashkovsky in the journal Flow, 15 June 2017.

<sup>10</sup> For more info, and documentation see: <http://artishokbiennale.org/AB18/>

<sup>11</sup> See the interview in Estonian in Müürileht: <https://www.muurileht.ee/moe-keeruline-suhe-rahvusega-intervjuu-sten-ojaveega/>

<sup>12</sup> In Hint's take, clothing is a medium for national image-building, yet for Ojavee, fashion was rather an angle through which to reconsider nationalism. See the review in Sirp, [http://sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c6-kunst/labi-noelasilma/?fbclid=IwAR0zRY2SWu-mqd0AHjx8AomL6-xsVwIvs-6bRrt4T08d9rTcKY1OFKxRR\\_E](http://sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c6-kunst/labi-noelasilma/?fbclid=IwAR0zRY2SWu-mqd0AHjx8AomL6-xsVwIvs-6bRrt4T08d9rTcKY1OFKxRR_E)

<sup>13</sup> These spaces relate to what Yurchak describes as 'living vnye' (2005), referring to conceptual milieus operating within and yet beyond the hegemonic discourse.

## Author Presentation:

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