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LGBT movement in Estonia

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<td>Khursheed Wadia</td>
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</table>
## Contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 3

1.1 The Estonian context of LGBT activism .................................................................................................. 3

1.2 Theoretical insight ..................................................................................................................................... 4

1.3 The LGBT movement in Estonia ............................................................................................................. 5

2. Methods ......................................................................................................................................................... 6

Key Findings ..................................................................................................................................................... 8

3.1 The LGBT community in Estonia ............................................................................................................. 8

3.2 Activism and its image in Estonia ............................................................................................................. 12

3.3 Community and different activists .......................................................................................................... 13

3.4 Co-operation within the movement, with other organisations and internationally .................................. 15

3.5 Gendered LGBT activism .......................................................................................................................... 19

3.6 Recruitment of younger activists ............................................................................................................. 21

3.7 Different strategies: Identity for critique versus identity for education ..................................................... 22

3.8 Recent trends and future implications ...................................................................................................... 25

4. Conclusions ..................................................................................................................................................... 26

5. Future analysis ............................................................................................................................................... 27

5.1 Cross-case analysis ..................................................................................................................................... 27

5.2 Triangulation with other datasets .......................................................................................................... 28

6. References ....................................................................................................................................................... 28

7. Appendix: Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of respondents ................................................................. 31
1. Introduction

1.1 The Estonian context of LGBT activism

The aim of this report is to analyse LGBT activism in Estonia. To understand it there are a couple of aspects that are especially important. First, LGBT activism is influenced by the Soviet past and the status that gays and lesbians had at that time. Until 1991 Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union and alternative lifestyles, including gay culture, were strictly limited to the private and underground spheres; therefore, they were invisible in public. Male homosexual act was also a criminal offence in the Soviet Union, so it was even more hidden and coming ‘out of the closet’ officially was impossible.

Second, LGBT activism is influenced by gender order in Estonia. The change from socialism to capitalism in Estonia was related to the reconstruction of the nation state. This linked the systemic change to a ‘restoration’ of the pre-World War II Republic of Estonia which was occupied afterwards by the Soviet Union. A longing for the First Republic was accompanied, among the other things, by an idealisation of the gender order of the 1930s and, accordingly, promotion of conservative values and neo-traditional gender identities (Allaste and Bennett 2013). Today the Estonian labour market has the largest gender disparities in the EU, at both occupational and sectoral levels. The concentration of women in certain occupational areas, such as healthcare and social services, is disproportionately large (Sotsiaalministeerium 2010: 35). Such segregation in the labour market is one of the major causes of the gender pay gap in Estonia, which is currently among the highest in the EU. According to different statistics, men earn on average 22.9 per cent (Statistics Estonia 2012) to 30.3 per cent (Eurostat 2009) more than women (Aavik 2013). Women are generally marginal in the top managerial ranks, as well as in the country’s political leadership. Only 38 per cent of Estonian men think that companies would benefit from more female managers (Vainu et al. 2010: 34).

Third, LGBT activism is related to the situation of civil society and activism in a wider sense. Estonian civic activism has been rather passive during the two decades after the restoration of independence. A recent study in Estonia indicated that 51 per cent of respondents have never been members of any civic organisations and only 31 per cent were (active or passive) members of a civic association. The most frequently mentioned reason for why a person did not belong to any organisation was the lack of interest. Ethnic Estonians were relatively more involved in organisations than Russian speakers. As a rule, Estonians tend to see other people as not very active. Eighty per cent of the respondents believed that Estonians are socially passive and 74 per cent believed that citizens do not know their rights (Kodanikeühiskonna uurimis-ja arenduskeskus 2012).
1.2 Theoretical insight

LGBT activism in Estonia can be conceptualised using theories of new social movements. Briefly described, the phenomenon and theories of social movements have moved from class-based movements to identity-based movements. Strain theories focused on how disconnected individuals organised themselves to challenge their suffering and to fight for a better future (Merton 1968); resource mobilisation theories considered formal, rational organisations as a core of social movements and focused on strategically organised action around a particular complaint (McCarthy and Zald 1977); and political process/opportunity theories stressed the political dimensions, focused on the external environment of social movements and claimed that movements emerge when political opportunities arise (McAdam 1982). These theories neglected identity movements because of their ‘non-political’ goals. However, the focus has switched to cultural values and identities in new social movements theories. As many movements after the 1960s were not only about the rights of oppressed groups but about lifestyles and cultural meanings, it was inevitable that scholars would turn to these dimensions as important aspects of movements (Goodwin and Jasper 2009). New social movement theories insist that much of the relevant activities also take place outside of organisations and directly political context (Melucci 1994; Scott 1990). The dividing line between the ‘social’ and ‘political’ is believed to be blurred in contemporary society.

According to Giddens, late modernity has replaced traditions with a consciousness of a constant need to make numerous, ultimately subjective choices between a ‘puzzling diversity of options and possibilities’ and individuals face the challenge of constructing a self-identity through morals, lifestyles, and belonging. That has also changed the understanding of politics, and Giddens conceptualises that change as a movement from ‘emancipatory politics’ to ‘life politics’ (1991: 210). Emancipatory politics, which has resulted in the creation of the modern capitalist welfare state, is concerned with freeing the individual from oppression or patronage, be it by religion, tradition, upper classes, or a rigid gender system. The essence of that type of politics has not, according to Giddens, been guidance in moral or lifestyle choices, but in giving the individual the autonomy that is needed in order to enable those choices in the first place. The central essence of life politics is no more about the conditions of individual freedom and autonomy, but about the values guiding our choices once we have reached the possibility of making them. Critics have pointed out that the view of individual citizens that Giddens presents may be unduly optimistic (Rojek 2001: 123). Objections are related to a more general criticism of his notion of life politics. This analysis of the LGBT movement in Estonia tends to agree with the perspectives of Mouzelis (2001), according to whom continuity in emancipatory politics should not be underestimated. It can be seen as a broadening of the latter’s rights discourse to include not only civil, political and socio-economic, but also cultural rights – such as the right to define one’s identity (Allaste and Lagerspetz 2013).

The LGBT movement could be considered the quintessential identity movement. The cultural barriers to the acceptance of homosexuality and the challenge of the self-acceptance of LGBT people require a cultural struggle. According to new social movement theorists, identity
movements seek to transform dominant cultural patterns or gain recognition for new social identities. As Mary Bernstein (2009) has pointed out, identity movements shift their emphasis between celebrating and suppressing the differences from the majority. She has distinguished several dimensions of the identity such as: ‘identity for empowerment’ which, by focusing on constructing new collective identity, is necessary for any community or movement solidarity; ‘identity as goal’, which deconstructs restrictive social categories; and ‘identity as strategy’, which could be approached as a form of collective action when identities are deployed strategically. These strategies could be divided into an ‘identity for critique’, which confronts values, categories and practices of the dominant culture, and an ‘identity for education’ that challenges the dominant culture’s perception of the minority (Bernstein 2009).

1.3 The LGBT movement in Estonia

Since the gay/lesbian networks were completely ‘underground’ in the Soviet Union, there were no official organisations and no official documented information is available from that time. Male homosexual acts were decriminalised only in 1992, but small-scale changes started in the late 1980s. For example, the first ‘yellow newspapers’ were established at that time - this is where gays and lesbians were looking for connections through private advertisements, which made communication easier. In the 1990s, some pioneering NGOs were established, the first one by Lesbians (Mea Culpa). In the last decade, several NGOs (including a LGBT information centre) have been established but closed after a couple of years for different reasons. 4 Gay Pride parades have been held in Estonia from 2004 to 2007. Parades brought up many contradictory emotions and mostly negative emotions within society – generally people preferred not to see and talk about the LGBT issues in public.

Today, the LGBT movement in Estonia is rather loosely structured, but has considerably strengthened over the few last few years. Various clusters of activism can be distinguished. Estonian Gay Youth (EGN) was established in 2008 in order to connect the Estonian LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, Queer) community and to stand for an open and tolerant society where everyone can lead a safe daily life regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This organisation can currently be considered the most prominent NGO. In 2012 they changed their name to the Estonian LGBT Association. In 2011 the OMA (Expanding Your World) Centre was established as an information centre for LGBT people. The OMA Centre is a project run by the LGBT Association and is funded by the Open Estonia Foundation and the Council of Gambling Tax. The centre is open for different activities organised by activists and has become the most important venue for the LGBT community. There are other NGOs that could be related to the movement and that work with gay-related issues. SEKÜ (which translates as the Protection of Sexual Minorities Rights) is led by a lawyer and focuses on legal issues. There are also smaller, specialised NGOs (groups), such as the Gay Christians and Gendy (an NGO for Estonian transgender people, their friends and members of their families). A specific cluster in the movement is related to political art dealing with the topic, which is becoming rather visible and powerful in Estonia. Gay activists retain strong co-operation with the Estonian Human
Rights Centre which is an independent public interest foundation dedicated to the advancement of the protection of human rights in Estonia and abroad.

Estonia does not have critical problems with the rights of LGBT people and is not labelled as ‘anti-gay’ a country as Russia, Poland or other Baltic States. However, although LGBT people have basic legal protection, low awareness of LGBT issues may influence their lives negatively at times. According to a few studies conducted among sexual minorities, they perceive Estonia as strongly heteronormative and intolerant of any differences in the wider sense (Strömpl et. al. 2007). It could be said that LGBT people in Estonia are sometimes also discriminated because of their sexual orientation. At the same time, until recently LGBT activism in Estonia has been rather hectic and unsystematic. However, the movement has become stronger and more focused in recent years.

This research aims to describe and understand the development of LGBT activism as an identity movement. Some of the previous literature suggests that many activities take part out of a directly political context and the identity movement could be related to lifestyle politics. As a fragmented movement with different clusters in Eastern European society, LGBT activism is an interesting case study since the movement is situated on the borderline of lifestyle and emancipatory politics. This study seeks answers to the following questions: What have been the reasons of fragmentation and distinctive identities within the community and the movement? How has the wider social context in Estonia influenced LGBT activism? How are the LGBT community and LGBT activism related to and dependent on each other? How are inclusive identities and common strategies created?

2. Methods

This research relies on fieldwork conducted between May 2012 and November 2013. The material consists of ethnographic observations, recorded and transcribed in-depth interviews, numerous informal unrecorded conversations, newspaper articles and other written materials. The initial respondents were people who were named as LGBT activists by people known to the researcher as activists themselves. As the researcher had been involved in organising a conference centred on the topic of LGBT issues and problems and in publicly speaking about LGBT issues a couple of times before, she already had some contacts among LGBT people. The preliminary list of potential respondents was provided by a person involved with the LGBT movement and known to the researcher over a longer period of time. All those who were interviewed were also asked to suggest potentially relevant respondents for the study. As the circles of more active LGBT people are relatively small, then suggested names started to recur almost from the beginning, and soon there were no new suggestions. Towards the end of the fieldwork period, a couple of people were included in order to fulfil certain categories, such as heterosexual LGBT activists, a Russian speaker and young people who were ‘budding’ activists. MYPLACE information sheets and participant sheets were distributed to all respondents who were not obliged to sign anything. Two interviews took place at the researcher’s office, two in a
The ethnographic observations included visiting different events during the one and a half year fieldwork period. On numerous occasions, the researcher visited the OMA centre which is the central venue for LGBT youth in Tallinn for several purposes, starting with meeting people there, but also including some special events (e.g. a discussion group on parenting; a brainstorming meeting for the OMA festival preparation, the organisation leader’s report/experience sharing about a study trip to the USA). The researcher also participated in informal gatherings, such as a ‘women’s party’, an LGBT bar and a birthday party. Since lively public debate over LGBT issues in Estonian society started in spring 2013, a number of newspaper articles are also included among the analysed material. Other written materials include the LGBT Association’s documents (information sheets, some of their minutes of meetings, applications for funding, etc.), comments on the draft legislation concerning civil partnership, a petition initiated in 2012 and its formal answers, and a proposal for an LGBT umbrella organisation written in 2011.

For data analysis, all recorded interview materials were transcribed and coded using Nvivo 9.2 software. Thematic analysis is based on all the material and illustrated by extracts from interviews and other textual material. All interview extracts are identified by the respondent’s pseudonym (in order to assure his or her anonymity).

As stated above, the researcher had no difficulties while interviewing people involved or visiting various events, and she always felt welcome. As mentioned above, she had publicly discussed LGBT issues on many occasions before starting the ethnographic case study. Also, in 2012 she had jointly taught a course on queer theories at Tallinn University which was highly appreciated by LGBT activists as it was the first academic course at the university on LGBT issues and most probably influenced her reputation positively. However, it would be an exaggeration to claim that relations were warm and friendly. While spending time at the OMA centre or at other events, the barriers between the researcher and others were always felt, even though communication was always very polite. It was only during interviews that these barriers came down and that respondents seemed to (in most but not all cases) engage in an open and trusting conversation.

An ethical issue arising from this case study concerns the anonymity of participants within the LGBT circle itself. As the number of activists is very small, it was rather difficult to anonymise people to the extent that other activists will not recognise them should they have occasion to read this report.
Key Findings

3.1 The LGBT community in Estonia

‘Community’ today often refers to a collective identity and togetherness that exists in people’s minds rather than to a tightly knit community living together, and it is also an ideological term in which people believe (Amit 2002; Cohen 1992). The focus of this study has been activism rather than the community in and of itself, so this report has no ambitions to analyse different aspects of the community and to focus on the activists’ views and representations of the LGBT community and its problems. As Karel Parve has written in the 2011 document ‘A Proposal for the Creation of an Estonian LBGT Chamber of Cooperation’ (Eesti LGBT Inimeste Koostöökoja Loomise Ettepanek), the LGBT community in Estonia lacks sufficient self-awareness.

Contacts with the community have revealed the existence of homophobia inside the Estonian LGBT community itself. Even though the share of those who are “out of the closet” is rather large, their attitudes towards themselves as well as their own human worth are very negative. When it comes to the civic activity of LGBT activists, it’s not unusual to see irrational criticism that stems from the community itself.

Most of the interviewed activists tended to also see the LGBT community in general in Estonia as rather weak. As many people would rather hide their sexual orientation, it becomes also an obstacle for creating a strong community that would be based on a common identity:

In Estonia, generally … gays and lesbians are afraid to come out of the closet, others are afraid to stand up for them. I think they’re even afraid of coming out to each other or afraid of supporting each other and afraid to belong to that ‘gay group’. (Anna)

Even if a person does not hide their sexual orientation, they are not necessarily interested in the LGBT community’s activities and especially in activism. There’s a certain passivity that could be extended to the wider part of the Estonian society and is not necessarily only the problem of LGBT people.

The community itself and the people are rather passive, they are often not very interested or naturally they would like everything to be fine in the society and to be treated as equal etc. But, as usual, people have no time for activism in their everyday life. //...// I actually do not feel that a clear-cut community exists. (Helle)

One interpretation might also be that LGBT people in Estonia were in a structural condition that did not favour a strong community and common identity. Compared to some (Eastern European) countries, the level of open discrimination has not been high. For example, in Romania homophobia and oppression reached an extent where ‘gays and lesbians found a
paradigm for themselves as a mistreated minority, and mantled themselves in a discourse, that of human rights’ (Long 1999: 245). In Estonia, on the one hand, homophobia has not destroyed the lives of LGBT people so much that defending themselves from it would mobilise the community to fight for their rights. On the other hand, the Estonian social context has not been supportive enough for people to feel protected or aware of their human rights:

Nothing so bad has happened to our community to make it stand up as one //...// let’s say, the average gay or lesbian basically copes more or less OK... and the person could also have internalised homophobia – like, this is who I am, maybe I’m supposed to have it a little worse than others, I’m not even supposed to get married! The person, like, accepts this. (Lisa)

Coming ‘out of the closet’ is a social act that requires counselling and/or motivation. For example, in the US activists coming out was considered to be a ‘selfless act for the benefit of others’ and in the 1960s it quintessentially started to express the fusion of the personal and political, which was exalted at that time by radical movements (D’ Emilio 2009). In the Estonian context, uncovering one’s sexual orientation has been uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous because of the threat of discrimination. Many LGBT people, especially gay men who, more often than women, tend not to be interested in family or in child adoption but prefer to live their private lives peacefully. Rather than define themselves according to gay and/or lesbian identity, many people have preferred to hide their sexual orientation and private lives. Below is a quotation from a person who opened one of the first Internet sites for gay people in Estonia and got rather negative feedback:

Why have you done such a thing? Who needs it? Nobody liked the idea that we have our own gay info centre on the Internet. Oh my God, now everyone will know what we do and what we are! Then I thought like OK, I’m beginning to understand what the problem is in Estonia. That the gay community itself obviously has an identity problem. //...// a major part of the gay community does not associate itself with the gay community in any way. //...// It is like we need to introduce some kind of changes on the society level, like, in a new circle, like, re-connect them with this identity. (Ralf)

In Estonia, ethnic Estonians and the Russian-speaking minority form two different communities, separated by language and by the public sphere. This distinction between language-based communities is not bridged within subcultures, social movements or more specialised, smaller communities including the LGBT community. A mixed couple can fall in separate communities, as Renate explains, ’So, let’s say there’s this mixed couple, two women. One is Russian, the other Estonian. Then ... well ... one of the women is accepted in one community, either the Estonian or the Russian-speaking one’. As the Russian-speaking minority has even more conservative and patriarchal norms than is common in Estonia in general, coming ‘out of the closet’, becoming an activist or getting organised is even harder than among ethnic Estonians:
They don’t have an organisation //... // since the minority communities are a bit more conservative, especially when it comes to gender ... So in that sense ... both girls and guys have, well, for them it’s sometimes much more difficult to tell their parents that, actually, I’m a lesbian ... after all, girls are expected ... to get married and have kids ... (Renate)

The above is a description of Russian speakers in general, but respondents also had knowledge of LGBT people within a smaller ethnic group (e.g. Armenian) in Estonia, which is conservative, tightly knit, and where coming ‘out of the closet’ would be extremely difficult. Russian speakers who, in many cases, are already in a disadvantaged position in the Estonian society would risk double marginalisation in case of open sexual orientation:

To me it seems that this community is more ... fragmented perhaps, since well, Russians, they’re like second rate citizens ... and if you’re Russian and don’t speak Estonian, then you’re like third rate even maybe ... and then and then, if in addition to that you’re gay... then you’re, I don’t even know if there is a class for that ... (Sveta)

One of the most important features in building solidarity within a community is having venues where people can spend time together. For those who might not want to get involved in organisations, partying and leisure time venues are especially important. Some respondents define community according to participation at LGBT parties and social life. For example, Olev defined community as ‘Those who are, so to speak, out of the closet ... like, those who are brave enough to come to gay parties with me. Those who have a social network’.

In the 1990s, there were famous gay clubs in Tallinn – some of them were half underground and for a restricted public, with a strict door policy, but several of those famous nightclubs also became popular among straight clubbers. As illustrated by Renate, one of the most famous clubs, Angel, which is closed down now, ‘Was that kind of place in town, where everybody went. It was a cool place and when you went there you knew that there would be beautiful boys and you’d see familiar faces’(Renate). As a permanent venue, although mostly for partying, it was also a place where LGBT people could meet. Also, since access was not exclusively for gays and lesbians, visiting the club was easier also for those who preferred not to directly expose their gay or lesbian identity.

The respondents claimed that at the moment the situation with venues is worse in Tallinn, when it comes to permanent clubs or bars for LGBT people. The only venue that is open has a slightly suspicious and dirty reputation. In Tallinn, ‘women’s parties’ are organised for lesbians every couple of months, and in Tartu there are regular parties in different places aimed mostly at gays and lesbians, but open also to straight people who are interested. On the other hand, especially in smaller places, these parties are hardly visited by the majority of LGBT people. As Jan, who is involved organising the parties, stated, ‘Actually, well, the group of people who goes to these parties is, like, a pretty small part of the whole Tartu LGBT community ... because some
even ... well, they are afraid to come to the party, because then they’ll be seen’ (Jan). Besides Tartu, there is also some LGBT social life in other bigger towns in Estonia, but they tend to ‘keep a low profile’, as expressed by Olev, meaning that these are halfway underground, small groups who prefer not to advertise their activities.

Another alternative for gathering is special venues for meetings and discussions, which are, for example, organised by the LGBT Association in Tartu and Tallinn. The most important gathering centre for LGBT people over the last few years has been the OMA centre in Tallinn. It is well described by LGBT Association members in an award application at the end of 2012:

At the OMA Centre, a novel approach with regard to LGBT and human rights organisations is used. The Centre is a well-functioning platform for all Estonian LGBT organisations, providing space and resources. Hence, the Centre functions as a community centre, an office space and a meeting room, which has proven to be an effective approach because we link three highly important aspects - the community or the people we work for, an office and staff of the Estonian LGBT Association to provide the competence and knowledge, and the experience of other LGBT organisations (Estonian American Innovation Award Application 2012).

As stated in same application, over 100 events were organised in the first year that the OMA centre was opened. Events included the usual leisure evenings with dinners and movies, activities for specific groups (e.g. reading groups, a bear-men gay group, special themed events, etc.), and discussions or activities that are interesting for people, even if they are not strongly feeling part of the community. As Sveta explains, ‘In theory, I like going there, to the OMA centre, and whenever they have these ... initiatives or, umm, exchanges of ideas, then of course I like to participate.’

Last year in Tartu there were weekly ‘Rainbow’ discussion groups, mostly including LGBT people but also straight people who were interested in the topic. There are more LGBT people than those who are more regularly involved in LGBT social life. Many gays and lesbians probably do not feel that they belong to the community and are not particularly interested in it:

we actually don’t feel that this community exists, that there’s this clearly defined community. Actually, this community is so heterogeneous that it’s not possible to describe it as one group //...// people don’t want others to say that, like, you belong to this community, they’re just people who happen to be gay or lesbian, but they don’t feel like that makes them part of any community. (Helle)

In other countries, a collective identity and solidarity within the LGBT community have mostly emerged before the strong organisations and LGBT activism (D’ Emilio 2009). Since in the Estonian case it is hard to speak about a community with a collective identity, it also explains
partly relatively weak and unstable activism. As has been discussed in meetings, it is even hard to find a sponsor from among LGBT people, while possible sponsors do not feel part of the community strongly enough. Besides passivity and unwillingness to get organised, which has been usual in Estonia in general, LGBT people have probably preferred to stay away from a community since it is easier just to live your life ‘in the closet’.

3.2 **Activism and its image in Estonia**

Attitudes towards LGBT activism vary and are influenced by the connotations of activism in general. While it might be associated with courage and concern towards social issues, in the Estonian context the connotation of ‘activist’ is not necessarily always positive, and some people treat the expression more like name-calling:

Someone asked me, he had heard I had become an activist, to which I replied that I have not yet earned such a title of honour. If I speak up in a couple of places or take part in events, it doesn’t make me an activist right away. But in this person’s sense, that activist, that I have now become a raucous person. (Chris)

In Estonia, the term ‘activist’ tends to have a negative connotation, especially for the older generations but sometimes also for young adults. That could have several explanations. First, for the older generation the term ‘activist’ is associated with the ‘communist activists’ of the Soviet times, when in the Estonian context activism had nothing to do with courage or the wish to make the world a better place, but instead referred to someone egotistically pursuing a career in a system in which nobody believed. Even though the Soviet Union collapsed more than 20 years ago, terms such as ‘left’ and ‘social’ have been demonised in Estonia until recently. ‘Activism’ continued to have a negative image, while according to the Estonian neo-liberal worldview, it has been more associated with working for personal success than fighting for the rights of a group.

While people have believed that they are responsible for their lives and positions in society, complaining and stirring up problems has been far from honourable and as a result activists might be seen as ridiculous. As Ralf put it, ‘It has always been like that. “Activist” has meant some character, who is constantly demanding, imposing something, arguing, criticising, like something’s eating at him.

Protesting and speaking openly has not been common practice in Estonia in general until recently. As is exemplified by Lisa below, that also affected the development of LGBT peoples’ situation in society – many people stay in the ‘closet’ while speaking up has been associated with ‘activism’, which has a negative image.

I don’t *like* to consider myself a gay activist since *in Estonia* the word like has such a poor meaning. /*... // like it is someone who’s lamenting again, has some kind of problems, is being harassed by somebody, like demands some special rights //... //
I always have the problem why don’t celebrities like come out of the closet. But they don’t, because they’re afraid of being labelled with this activist title, they don’t want to be activists //...// if you openly support any point of view, in Estonia, this is actually still activism.

As stated previously, it is not self-evident in Estonia that people are open about their sexual orientations. It is already a very big step to follow the events organised for LGBT people.

you know what, to me it seems that in Estonia, since like Estonia is so small, everyone is so deathly afraid, so I think it is already kind of like activism when people show up at those OMA centre events, and they even perceive it as activism ...

(Brita)

As protesting or demanding for the rights has not been common in Estonia in general, then people also do not understand LGBT activism so easily. As stated by Helle, ‘People don’t usually get it, like what’s your problem? Things are not that bad in Estonia!’ However, over the past few years the situation in Estonia has started to change and activism is also starting to have more positive connotations and to be perceived as a means for social change. As Chris pointed out, ‘An activist is a person who constantly, in different contexts, draws attention to the LGBT community’s situation and needs’. Although there are definitely not many activists, they deserve respect for their devotion:

Now I have come to understand that gay activists are indeed extreme. That, let’s say, it is unusual to devote your own life to achieving those goals. Individual, enthusiastic members have decided that let’s make this life better and it would be nice if that gay community would perceive that these people’s work is valuable and that it is worth supporting, that would be the ideal. (Anna)

3.3 Community and different activists

As the LGBT community has been weak, it has also weakened the position of LGBT activists, as they feel that their activities are not legitimated:

The community, as such, does not exist, see? And that’s the whole point //...// let’s say, if a community came together and activists grew out of that community //...// I have been cussed out many, many times, in Angel, in X-bar, who the hell are you, coming to represent me, right ... //...// umm, so it’s really a stupid situation, isn’t it? So I’m only representing myself and what I have thought could be good to a lot of people like me //...// for example, in Sweden and other Nordic countries, right, like ... yeah, there’s something that has grown out of it... but we don’t have that. There are just a few individuals, who have just, well, started
things on their own and that’s why they also don’t have that, so to speak ... well, support of the community. (Lisa)

Ideally, activists would expect more feedback and support from the community than is currently available, in order not to decide alone about issues that influence all LGBT people:

By now, gay activism in Estonia has become a political movement. We are dealing with or we are trying to influence politics. //...// the importance of community is still there, because of, well, we as gay activists, we are still trying to understand what the needs of our community are. We still, yes, [our activities are] based on what we think the community lacks. //...// Individual, dedicated members have decided that let’s make this life better and it would be nice if that gay community would perceive that these people’s work is valuable and that is worth supporting. (Anna)

As previous activists did not get enough support from the community and at the same time received a lot of negative feedback from the society at large, some of the organisations have been closed down because the people responsible for them have left Estonia. As Helle states, ‘A lot of people have left because they have got tired of living here. They’re going to some other country where they can be in peace’.

Although the number of dedicated activists is by no means high in Estonia in general or in the LGBT movement in particular, they are a rather heterogeneous group with sometimes different views. LGBT activism occurs on different levels and for different reasons. There is a limited number of people who have become ‘celebrity LGBT activists’ – public figures known mostly as LGBT activists, who are not ashamed of it or scared about the possible negative impact on their lives. ‘Celebrity activists’ mostly also have contacts in political circles and through these connections they have better means to influence political decisions. Some of them are rather independent activists, even if they have leading positions in some of the small organisations connected to LGBT issues, like the informant quoted below:

I guess I’m the only one to speak out in the Estonian press. I’ve developed the impression that there are perhaps only four or five activists in Estonia in this sense, who are, like, at least a little worried and push some kind of subjects from this field in the media //...// I’m the only person, gay, who goes around city streets yelling and I’m also the cannon fodder anyone can shoot at whenever the need arises, right? //...// People are afraid ... they do not know what will happen to them tomorrow. If he is unemployed today, tomorrow he will go to his future new employer and is told like oh, you’re the person who was yelling in the streets with a flag in hand. (Tom)

There are more people who are connected to organisations or helping voluntarily, but who would rather stay away from public attention:
I think I am an activist. In the sense that, well, I am not a person who would so bravely go to the media, but I think that my way of thinking is that of activists. When I compare [myself] with many friends around me, the central fear is let’s not touch these things. Let’s live our own lives quietly and actually everything is OK, everything is normal. But I think I am the kind of person who always looks for things to pick out, things that seem all right, but are not OK. And if I don’t do it, then who will? Something like that, I do have more than my friends at least. (Hanta)

At the moment, there are some people in Estonia who are actually getting a salary for their work in organisations, having responsibility for it and, in the end, doing most of the practical work that needs to be done, since other people who could contribute voluntarily are too busy with their jobs and other things:

That’s the whole problem with everyone, they all have their own lives and work, and even though their hearts are in it and they want to contribute, then in reality these people, like, may not get things done. So the responsibility, well, rests on us, the ones who are doing it as a paid job, and we actually do have more time as a resource available for us. //...// the support that the others provide is more moral support //...// even though sometimes we do agree that you do this and you do that, ], in the end these things might not get done. (Helle)

Besides, there are art-related people who tend to call themselves semi-activists and who discuss or present LGBT issues publicly though art, cultural festivals and intellectual discussions.

3.4 Co-operation within the movement, with other organisations and internationally

Different clusters of the movement tend to have different interests and according to their activity different collaboration partners. As stated bellow by Chris, it is divided in a way that some deal with solving legal problems and political lobbying, while others with raising awareness and education, collaborating with different state organisations and NGOs:

The society for the protection of sexual minorities is mostly concerned with political lobbying and providing legal assistance. Then the LGBT Association is more about raising awareness and so on among different target groups, and there, well, collaboration, there is some, but it seems to me that there should be more. But when it comes to other organisations, such as that Gendy and the Gay Christians, then they do work more with the LGBT Association, I think. They do have these joint events for, like, their own members, but the things that reach outside of that, there’s less of that. //...// to me it seems that there are quite a lot
of young people among art students who deal with gender and sexuality. As far as I know, they haven’t organised themselves, but they just work together. (Chris)

In recent years, LGBT issues have been rather well represented in the Estonian art scene. There have been a couple of big exhibitions that have received lot of media attention, also one of the most prestigious prizes for young artist in Estonia was awarded to gay artists whose works are explicitly about gay topics. People who are connected with both, the art scene in Estonia and LGBT activism, claim to have LGBT people as an important target of their work as is explained below:

And when I do an exhibition, I think about how I’m not just doing it for the artists, but I’d like another type of public to come as well, so I work with that in mind, so that they’d come. I’m always thinking about the LGBT community. //...// they are probably my primary target audience. Or, well, somehow... they are that first mirror, from whom I can imagine getting some kind of feedback... (Renate)

Here there is a strong overlap between the art related/intellectual cluster of the LGBT movement and the feminist movement. There is a rather popular reading group for feminist/queer texts, which has been meeting weekly already since 2010, and for the last couple of years they meet at the OMA centre. The group which actually gathers and discusses different texts is not very big, but in their Face book group they have almost a thousand members. Different information related to feminism/LGBT issues is distributed in this group and sometimes online discussions are also held. Activists in the gay art and reading group are also connected to Ladyfest – a non-profit, ‘Do It Yourself’ (DIY) cultural festival of music, art, film, discussions and workshops, which traces back to the Riot Grrrl movement in the US in the beginning of the 1990s. Since the year 2000, the festival is organised on a voluntary basis by feminist women’s/lesbian/trans/inter activists, artists and musicians of various genders, who have organised it in different places around the world and over the last couple of years also in Estonia. The festival targets women’s issues in a wider sense and is not necessarily about LGBT issues, but the latter is well represented:

We consciously try to include lesbian, bi and transsexual issues. Most probably, if we would be heterosexuals, we would not think of it //...// I believe in fighting for women’s rights and standing against patriarchy is easier when you don’t have a husband at home to whom you have to explain everything. It gives a lot of freedom in my opinion, psychologically. (Stina)

As in many other countries, lesbian and feminist movements are partly related in Estonia. As any kind of lesbian and feminist movements started in Estonia at the same time, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there might even be a stronger connection, as they are both opposition movements criticising patriarchal society.
Although there are some critical remarks about co-operation within the LGBT movement, mostly about the past, the majority of respondents agreed that collaboration has developed considerably recently, with different clusters supporting each other and working towards the same goal:

So were sitting there at this OMA centre event and talking and then this little midget in leather pants and a jacket pops in the door and says, ‘Hi, I’m Leather Man Estonia, can we leave our materials here’... to me everything that’s expressed, we all stand for the same thing. Even though people do understand that we compete for the same funding, we’re competing also for attention, but the end goal is still very similar... so there’s definitely much more of that. (Liina)

Different people are satisfied with the division of activities and rely on each other. As Lisa put it, ‘This division works, because we like trust each other and everyone has come to understand where their comfort zone is in terms of work, right?’ The LGBT association is united with different clusters as well as other organisations working similar fields:

We’re really happy about a few of our partners. One of them is the Estonian Union for Child Welfare, with whom we have a wonderful relationship, and we’re really relying on their support, especially in the question of adoptions. And then there’s the Estonian Sexual Health Association and clearly they would support us. Then there’s the Tallinn Youth Work Centre //...// they are very supportive when it comes to spreading all kinds of information //...// Of course, there’s the Estonian Human Rights Centre¹. Even though they deal with different human rights issues, they actually do deal with LGBT topics a lot too. //...// The Ministry of Social Affairs, their Gender Equality Department, well, with them we actually also have this mutual understanding, I would say, and the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner are definitely in the same boat with us. (Helle)

Other organisations not mentioned above by Helle include the Estonian Women’s Studies and Resource Centre, Estonian Women’s Association Round-table, Estonian Network of PLWH (which supports HIV-positive people and their families).

People who organise parties and distribute leaflets collaborate with health institutions. As Jan who organises parties himself explains, he has good co-operation with, ‘The National Institute for Health Development, well, let’s take the party today for example. The fast track testing and then the project application that deals with HIV prevention, after all, that’s submitted by them and I’ve been working with them.’

¹ This organisation has organised the project ‘Difference Enriches’, whose aim is the better implementation of the legislation on non-discrimination and to foster the dissemination of information on EU and national policy and legislation in the non-discrimination field. In that framework they have supported publishing special issues on LGBT topics in a daily newspaper, organised several discussion groups on LGBT issues etc.
In addition to official organisations, there is collaboration also with different movements and NGOs. For example, in Tartu the LGBT association’s branch co-operates with the anarchists. LGBT people visit their events and *vice versa*. As Hanta explains, ‘We go to their events, they come to ours, and somehow we provide this moral support for each other. The Anarchists were the heteros who were brave enough to come to Pride, who were brave enough to march. Things aren’t right and we’re ready to support you so that things would change.’

There is some overlap with people who are involved with the animal rights movement, vegans, and active communication also exists between the movements on the basis of valuing the rights of all living beings:

> I’ve seen it from the side, how the LGBT association does cooperate more with other organisations. For example, volunteers from what are those movements, and then there are the vegans. I don’t know if they’re organised in any way. I have, however, noticed it quite often that in the LGBT association there are a lot of women who are vegans or vegetarians. For them, that side of things is very important. (Chris)

That could be extended to co-operation with different shelters at which LGBT people sometimes help: women’s shelters and animal shelters. The main reason is supporting each other as well, so that the members of the LGBT movement could relate to these institutions:

> We went to the animal shelter because of the idea that among LGBT people there are so many of those who have experience with taking animals, cats and gods from the shelters or with providing a temporary home for them. Somehow that need to care for and love someone in a family, especially if you’re not planning on having kids, is really strong. (Hanta)

LGBT activism has had a lot of influence from international organisations, experiences from abroad as well as direct influence from foreigners staying in Estonia. According to some of the stories told during interviews, many initiatives that have been launched were inspired by examples from abroad (for example, Pride); and the LGBT Association, currently the strongest organisation, was initiated by a young Belgian woman, who temporarily lived in Estonia. Activists who have belonged to different organisations have had different opportunities for International co-operation. As Jan said, ‘During GLIK² there was this project, where you had Baltic States and Poland and some Scandinavian countries that were doing the instructing. We met every two months and talked about what had happened in the meantime and what we could do together.’ International organisations have been actively recruiting Estonian LGBT organisations, and the few organisations known to be active have been invited to networks:

> The whole point of this gay movement is that we have some kind of organisations, we have the names, yes, but we do not have the one who would actually

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² Gay and Lesbian information centre from the second half of the 2000s, now closed.
represent us. When the Sexual Minorities Protection Union was established, ILGA\textsuperscript{3} Europe started to send invitations, they had also found out that some sort of activism has emerged here. (Tom)

Since organisations have emerged and disappeared over a long period of time, it has also influenced international co-operation because it has been difficult to establish stable relations nationally alone:

In my opinion, the situation in Estonia is like a little unique in this sense. There is confusion with Estonia in ILGA Europe. There are people in Estonia, but what organisations do you have? We like somehow don’t have such a ... common thing or ... like such a unified front... as in other countries. (Lisa)

Within wider discourse, the LGBT movement in Estonia (as well as in other places) positions itself in a human rights framework, which is sometimes also extended to the rights of all living beings. Within the movement, the ambition is to gather all sexual minorities under one umbrella identity LGBT, sometimes extended to LGBTQIA (+ queer, intersexual and asexual) and work for their rights; co-operate strongly with either official organisations or more diluted movements that focus on the rights of all living beings. International collaboration certainly strengthens LGBT activity and offers activists some abstract community to which they can belong.

### 3.5 Gendered LGBT activism

Most of the respondents agreed that LGBT activism in Estonia is very ‘female’. Previously there were different organisations that were run either by lesbians or gay men, but there was not enough co-operation between them. At least Ralf is of the opinion that ‘The Estonian gay movement was actually started by angry lesbian women. And if we look at the real situation today, gays and lesbians do not sit peacefully in the same room with each other’.

However, most respondents agreed that compared to the previous situation, today co-operation between gays and lesbians is much better. The LGBT Association, which is the strongest organisation at the moment, have been run mostly by women, but the quotation below reflects the usual situation in Estonia, where women are more involved in grassroots activities:

> The board of our organisation currently includes five women and no men, and although we really purposely tried to get some men on the board and personally invited people, we did not succeed... and it is like if you consider other countries,

\textsuperscript{3} ILGA is the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
this is not common at all, since in most cases men even outnumber women. Actually, if you consider any NGO in Estonia, women generally still make up the majority. To some extent, this is definitely associated with the fact that the movement is so much based on voluntary work, so perhaps women in general do more voluntary work than men. (Helle)

Although the LGBT Association emphasises the wish to include all sexual minorities, which is clearly indicated already by the choice of name for the NGO, some male activists have critical views about the recruitment in the organisation:

If you have an organisation with a core group of very active women, then it is not sufficient to just say, well, we expect men also. We would like to have men but they do not come. Well, if you have already established an organisation or created a system, you have to think why it is that they do not come. (Chris)

However, more recently the situation has changed and as of autumn 2013 there were also two male board members in the organisation. It has not dramatically changed LGBT activism, which still tends to be ‘female’, but certainly proves that the efforts invested in the inclusion of men and the further development of co-operation have been fruitful.

The explanation of gendered activism also differs among men and women in terms of what points they emphasise – there can be either advantages or disadvantages of being female in the LGBT movement in Estonia. As stated above, it is believed that women in general do more voluntary work compared to men. In Estonia, which is still a patriarchal society, girls and women might still have less opportunities compared to boys and men, and grassroots activities might be an avenue of self-realisation for them. Lesbians are both women and belong to a sexual minority group, so they are even more likely to have a disadvantaged position in society:

Activism is a bit like acting on grassroots level... for men, I think it might be easier to find self-actualisation themselves in some official power structures //...// for women, it’s this sense of mission that channels activism //...// activism is the main way in which you can reach self-actualisation //...// and I truly believe that for men the doors are always more open in Estonian society. (Brita)

Women also see themselves as carriers of ‘softer values’, such as caring about others and considering the family important. As pointed out by Stina, ‘Perhaps the sense of justice is more developed in women, and it is associated with wanting to have a family.’ Men, on the other hand, stressed that in patriarchal Estonian society, it is not as hard to be openly lesbian as it is to be a gay man. As Jan said, ‘It is probably like easier for women to come out of the closet, in my opinion.’ As women and their sexuality are a secondary concern in a patriarchal society, their deviance from heteronormativity is not condemned as strongly as it is in case of men whose ‘sexual deviance’ is perceived as undermining patriarchal norms and hegemonic masculinities:
Women will not be stoned! In our society, it is acceptable to stone men; it is, like, okay, right? When women like raise this subject, it feels somehow soft, like it is okay to be lesbian in Estonia but not okay to be gay. (Tom)

It seems that within the LGBT movement, gender-based identities have been the strongest distinctive identities and the hardest to overcome, as homosexual men and women tend to have slightly different problems in a patriarchal society based on gender, regardless of their sexual orientation.

### 3.6 Recruitment of younger activists

Most of the LGBT activists today are in their thirties and the active involvement of very young people (teenagers or people in their early twenties) is relatively low. There are several explanations for that. As the venue, the OMA centre, has been open for a relatively short time, young LGBT people are only starting to get used to visiting it frequently. As Brita puts it, ‘Well, to me it actually seems that you have to create the conditions, like, why not at that OMA centre, so that young people would like dare to come out of the closet, so that they would feel that they do have a safe place where they can come.’ As long as young people do not ‘come out of the closet’ or feel part of a community, it is also hard for them to become activists. It could be said that LGBT people have partly continued to live in ‘underground’ circles (similarly to the Soviet times), which makes personal contacts very important. For younger people who are not socially connected with other activists, it might be difficult to get involved in activities. As Jan explains, everything ‘Is like based on personal relations a lot and it’s maybe not so formal, and in some cases the circle can seem like it’s closed, and well, it’s hard to get in there for those who are just starting out.’ The systematic recruitment of young people to the organisation is currently almost inexistent. Although the LGBT Association is looking for volunteers and offering different opportunities, the lack of resources does not allow working with younger people systematically or providing help in case they take initiatives that are not exactly related to the organisation’s activities:

But I think that there is still a long way to go before we start getting good quality cooperation partners from among young people, though they can already be seen in the youth movement in Estonia. The Estonian National Youth Council and all that, where the activities happen on a level that’s almost too professional. We most definitely don’t have that in the gay movement today. //...// So that’s like the problem, in general the structure of the organisation in Estonia hasn’t been built in a way that it would say, come and make me better, but rather, come and do what we’re doing. (Ralf)

LGBT activism is not comparable with youth activities in general and there is no LGBT-specific youth work that would prioritise younger people’s needs. Since there is no strong community with active communication, there is also no ‘natural base’ for younger activists. Attitudes between generations towards homosexuality are also slightly different – the younger
generation tends to be much more tolerant. It could be speculated that younger LGBT people are also not interested in LGBT activism because they do not experience problems because of it.

3.7 Different strategies: Identity for critique versus identity for education

The analysis of different strategies relies first on the discussion of the Pride march, which could be considered as a tactical part of identity for critique, symbolising difference; and secondly on the discussion of activities related to the civil partnership act which could be considered to be a part of identity for education. As stated previously, the first Pride in Estonia took place in 2004, and it was initiated by lesbian activists who were inspired by similar events abroad:

Two thousand… four, at some point at the beginning of the year, we were sitting in Noku and this girl or woman was talking about how she went to a gay pride march in Stockholm and that it was cool and that we should do something like that too… so that people would, like, understand that we do exist. (Lisa)

Especially 10 years ago, the act of openly presenting one’s identity was important to lesbians and gays:

This march is a very strong statement of will and desire and viewpoints. Something that you cannot leave aside, while that is so powerful and visible. Compared to some cultural festivals where this message might not be so clear //...// To feel once in a year that no matter what you say, I still exist, and I do not have to apologise all the time or be in a defensive position. I can walk along the street and be who I am! (Hanta)

However, when looking at it retrospectively, even though they could have worked for the empowerment of identity and could have been a means for establishing solidarity, Prides did not have that effect in Estonia. It could be interpreted that Prides (both in 2004 and 2007) maybe even had the opposite effect on the community itself, because LGBT people who had been living rather peacefully, received quite a lot of negative feedback from public discussion that was initiated by the Prides. Rather than rising self-awareness and strengthening the LGBT community, gays and lesbians outside the activist circles most probably internalised homophobic attitudes among themselves in response to the hostile atmosphere around the Prides. As emphasised by Liina, ‘The Prides in Estonia were received with a huge amount of scepticism //...// the fact that there were all these leather-clad men staring at us from the side... we didn’t see that coming. Here they threw eggs at the procession and the discussion that came with it...’

On the other hand, long-term LGBT activists consider the educational aspect of the parade organisation that occurs in cooperation with the official institutions to be more important. As Helle explains, ‘If the society is in a situation, where you have problems getting the permits,
then you definitely have to do it, you have to fight for that permit. So that the police and the city and whoever else understands that this demonstration is something that must be allowed, so this is an important stage to overcome...’ Partly as a result of these struggles, today at least ‘political correctness’ towards LGBT people is common among officials.

Previously there have been strong discussions and different understandings among LGBT activists about whether to organise Pride or not. Currently, most of the activists tend to prefer the approach that would not stress the difference of LGBT people from others, but would instead try to convince the wider society that LGBT people are just regular people who deserve similar rights as everybody else:

I have absolutely been a supporter of this direction for years that in Estonia shifts in the society cannot be achieved through angry activism. Like, instead this is a constant reminder of why we are different or how we are different. This is more likely to incite this hate, misunderstandings, such strong reactions and, actually, it continuously takes us further away from what we are like jointly trying to achieve, which is like understanding within the society or changes in legislation. That all this activism is like pulling us back all the time. (Ralf)

As could be interpreted from the statement of long-term activist, Helle, below – in the Estonian context, actively imposing gay and lesbian identities in public becomes an extreme activity, which is not much better than the extremist opposite side that constantly keeps the conflict at a simmer:

I don’t have the feeling that because of this parade like, I don’t know, a significant number of people will understand me better or my world or my life that is actually not so different from the lives of those who are yelling and waving the bible with angry faces on the other side of the fence, right, but, well, oh, okay, it is different to some extent in this sense, but our everyday life is not significantly different //...// there are a lot of opinions in Estonia, that well like there are two sides, those who believe in the parade and those who do not believe in the parade, and there are conflicts there. (Helle)

Mary Bernstein has stated that in movements that lack both political access and an organisational infrastructure or a collective identity, emphasis on difference is needed to build solidarity and to mobilise the constituency. Once the movement has been established – with constituency and organisational actors - then structures might change (Berstein 2009). In the Estonian context, emphasis on difference failed to build solidarity or mobilise the constituency. On the other hand, LGBT activists hardly had a clearly focused strategy when organising the Prides. It would also be an exaggeration to claim that the LGBT movement and organisations are well established in Estonia today. However, activists and organisations have learned from their previous experience and have thought over different approaches to have more focused tactics today:
I am very glad that the Pride parades aren’t organised anymore the way they were in the past. Because when you have these men with sprayed bodies wearing g-strings and feather boas, it really doesn’t get the message across in Estonian society that we are families and couples and people like everyone else. (Liina)

People who are not directly connected with activism tend to also agree with this approach. It is hard use Prides to make a good example of LGBT people, as Sveta explains, ‘Sorry, but if there were people there like me, who have obtained higher education and who can speak languages and who are decent citizens, then it wouldn’t be interesting at all.’

After 2007 there have not been any Estonian Prides and that has been replaced by the OMA (Oma Maailma Avardamine - Expand Your World) festival, which was organised in Estonia in 2011 within the framework of Baltic Pride. The next OMA festival would be in summer 2014. The brainstorming meetings for the preparation of the event started already in spring 2013. The discussions have been largely focused around the issues – which message and image the event should have and what would be the best strategies to positively communicate both within LGBT community as well as to wider society. Among other things, the OMA festival aims to gain respect and equal opportunities for LGBT people and to prevent mistreatment and bullying. Compared to Prides, the OMA festival is a cultural festival that is not so aggressively visible but certainly more educational for those who are interested.

Mary Bernstein has written that access to influencing policy favours the identity for education. In Estonia, one shift towards that was when the civil partnership act was initiated in autumn 2011. In 2012 most of the activists have become more united than previously because of the co-operation around it and most agree with strategies emphasising peaceful negotiation:

The civil partnership act, for me, has been one of those things that if I get that done, then I can die a happy woman [laughter] ... so that’s been my goal for ten years and... we’re pretty close to getting there. And that’s why I have also left the public eye, because it makes lobby work easier, lobbying for the civil partnership act ... (Lisa)

In October 2012, the LGBT Association sent an open proposal with comments and recommendations as a result of group work to the Ministry of Justice. Almost at the same time, the Estonian Council of Churches sent the Minister of justice their opinion on the civil partnership act, which stated that homosexuality is a sin and they would not support either marriage or any other forms of partnership among gays and lesbians. In November 2012, the NGO Perekonna ja Traditsiooni Kaitseks (In Defence of Family and Tradition) started a campaign and petitions against the civil partnership act. A strategy in their campaign has been to make an association between religion and belief in better life and to confront people with the question as to what the civil partnership act represents. This campaign has been very successful and by spring 2013 more than 38000 people had signed the petition.
In a statement written on 15 March 2013 in response to the aforementioned petition, a representative of the LGBT Association (one of the leading LGBT activists) called on all people to respect families with the slogan ‘Estonia has to care about all its families!’

Estonian society is too small for people to be set against one another. There are all kinds of families living all around us: families with lots of children, blended families, single parent families, families with same sex parents, extended families with grandparents involved. The question is, how safe can all these families feel in Estonia and does the state recognise their existence, does it give them the opportunity to be and feel safe in this society?

Her explanation clearly stands on the line of identity for education, claiming that LGBT families are just one ordinary type of family among different contemporary family types. In her argumentation, she relies on positive examples from Western societies:

For Estonia, it would be beneficial to move towards being a more caring society, where everyone is valued and all families are cared for, that’s when our state will be one where people are happy and safe. For example, in Sweden marriage is allowed for all couples, and without a doubt the level of wellbeing and feeling safe among the people of Sweden is high. In Canada, same sex couples can also get married and that has helped create a caring society. However, when people and different types of families are put in opposition of each other, it creates nothing but pain and sadness. (Representative of LGBT Association)

As of the beginning of 2013, the draft of the civil partnership act has been left aside and currently the topic is off the political agenda. The person who initiated it, got in the middle of the political scandal and other topics have been probably been more important compared to partnership act.

3.8 Recent trends and future implications

In February 2013, the most influential weekly newspaper in Estonia published an e-mail conversation between a well known LGBT activist and a Member of Parliament (a previous Olympic Gold medallist), where the latter explicitly explained that homosexuals should control their desires and the company of homosexuals should be avoided. The activist responded to that offence with a critique, which continued in a discussion between them. Publishing this discussion raised wider public debate over the topic, to which many Estonian intellectuals contributed through interviews or articles. That debate could be considered rather fruitful, as it directed people’s attention to LGBT rights. As Ona explains, ‘The positive articles or opinions were more dominant in the Estonian media in the end, in my opinion. Because ... I don’t know... all those negative articles and opinions ... these opinions are the ones that make people talk about their point of view, I find it positive.’
Even before the debate in 2013, the respondents had rather positive attitudes toward changes in Estonian society, as for example Brita said, ‘It seems to me, that society is still pretty homophobic, but it has gotten better and after a debate where many LGBT-neutral celebrities expressed their opinion in defence of LGBT people, the latter have even more positive feelings. As Olev stated, ‘It seems to me that the attitudes of our society’s opinion leaders have changed in a more positive direction. Discussions are more reasoned, there are less empty words thrown at each other.’

The LGBT movement has become stronger, more systematic and inventive. There is less copying of Western models, as activists have understood that the specific social situation in Estonia also requires specific action. As Anna puts it, ‘The situations are really different. When you look at Scandinavian countries, where they tackled the issue in the 1960s, [we need to ask if] those are the methods we should be using or not.’

4. Conclusions

The LGBT movement in Estonia is influenced by the context of the wider society in many ways and the aspects considered most relevant are elaborated in the introduction (Soviet past, patriarchal society and weak civil society). Even though the LGBT movement is an identity movement and consists of different clusters and activities, it probably does not fall entirely within the framework of Giddens’s (1991) life politics. This is because in the Estonian context, the movement has been a process of freeing LGBT people from the oppression of a rigid system, a process that is still not completed. It is probably too early to speak of the values guiding the choices of LGBT people, when their conditions of individual freedom and rights are not yet self-evident for them. The work of a small number of activists seems to fit better with definitions of emancipatory politics, especially if the right to define one’s identity could be considered a part of it. The reason might be that Estonian society is still different from more developed Western societies, where conditions of individual freedom are better guaranteed for different groups in society. On the other hand, the movement itself is also different, since it is younger compared to similar movements in the West. The LGBT movement in Estonia is partly reminiscent of gay and lesbian movements in the 1960s or 1970s, similarly to some other subcultures or movements in Estonia. As Estonia was behind the ‘iron curtain’ and missed the countercultures and movements from that time, the issues that were important in Western countries already three to four decades ago became topical in Estonia only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, while for example in the United States gay and lesbian movement shared a similar political perspective with the New Left and was supported by the counterculture ‘vibe’ in society (D’ Emilio 2009), the Estonian gay and lesbian movement started in a completely different social environment in the 1990s, which has influenced the whole movement. Rather than getting support from other processes in society, the LGBT movement started in an environment which tended to be hostile towards different minorities (including gays and lesbians), where individual success oriented values prevailed, and neither activism nor communities in the wider sense were something that was valued in society. An LGBT community with a strong collective identity was not born and activism was short-term.
Organisations broke apart because they had been closely tied to specific individuals, who got tired after a while and when they left, the organisations died.

Over the last five to six years and especially the last couple of years, there have been changes in society, in the prevailing mentality and also in the LGBT movement. As a reaction to the economic crisis, the neo-liberal mentality and success-oriented material values have not disappeared, but are not as prevalent as they were in the past. New trends in society, such as community building, protests and criticism of mainstream policy have provided a more supportive context for LGBT activism as well. In addition to that, LGBT issues have been recognised in the discourse on human rights and organisations. The LGBT Association in particular has received funding from different sources for relevant activities. The opening of the OMA centre could be considered to be one of the crucial changes. Analysis has revealed that a weak community and the small number of activists are interrelated. The Oma centre has strong potential for both community building and the recruitment of younger activists.

It could be said that identity for empowerment has not worked well in the Estonian society, which is mostly exemplified by the failure to gather an LGBT community with a strong collective identity. This could be explained, among other things, by many structural factors, such as low awareness about civil rights among Estonian people in general, negative feedback in public discussion in connection with Prides, but also the lack of common venues where people could communicate.

Identity as a goal could be witnessed in the work of the LGBT Association, which has moved towards more inclusive identities, as is reflected already in their change of name. Estonian Gay Youth, which was registered as a youth organisation, changed its name with the clear goal of communicating to the outside that the organisation is for all sexual minorities (not only lesbians who had the power position), and also that youth is important, but not the only target group. Identity as a strategy has moved from stressing difference to emphasising similarities and educating society for raising awareness about LGBT people instead.

Analysing the movement in a longer perspective, relying on interviews with people who have been involved for a longer period, reveals that the unstable and hectic movement has recently become more stabilised. The LGBT Union is starting to get a position similar to a strong umbrella organisation. Different clusters are not under control of the biggest organisation, but it functions as an organising centre.

5. Future analysis

5.1 Cross-case analysis

One of the central topics that unite some cases in the cluster is gender. In the Estonian case, the analyses of the LGBT movement could be extended to a wider issue – girls and women tend
to be more involved in different NGOs and activism. This is explained by their limited
alternative opportunities in patriarchal society. Gendered, especially girls’ activism, would be an
interesting topic to compare. Other possible topics that could be compared in relation to ethnic
minority movements would be relations between the community and the activists. The
Estonian case exemplifies that community support is needed for minority activism. However,
community building could probably happen in several ways and interdependence between
community and activism has different forms.

Analysis of the LGBT movement partly overlaps with findings from other cases in Estonia and
confirms that parallel participation is evident also in this context – it is a rather small group of
people who are active in many ways. On the other hand, LGBT activists tend to be more
strongly tied to their topic and identity than many other young active people.

5.2 Triangulation with other datasets
An issue for triangulation is the civic and political engagement of young people. The MYPLACE
WP5 Estonian report indicated that a lot of young people feel that they are not capable of
initiating any social change or that civic participation is futile in making a society a better place
for them. On the other hand, people tended to be most engaged in grassroots activism when
something had personal significance for them. This research analysis indicates that the number
of LGBT activists is small, but that the ones involved are dedicated and activism is certainly
personally significant for them. It could be interesting to compare the motivations of the young
people who are involved in civic or political initiatives and the extent and forms of personal
significance in those motivations (across ethnographic case studies as well as triangulation with
WP 5 datasets).

6. References
Aavik, A (2013) ‘Strategies for managing difficulties related to employment: narratives of
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224.

Back in the West: changing lifestyles in transforming societies, Brussels: Peter Lang
Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, pp. 9 – 28.

movement as a lifestyle and life policies’ in A-A. Allaste, (ed) Back in the West: changing
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Wissenschaften, pp. 225-240.


Estonian American Innovation Award Application 2012


7. Appendix: Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of respondents

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<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment</th>
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<th>Ethnicity</th>
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