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## **LGBT activism in Estonia - identities, enactment and perceptions of the LGBT people**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores how Estonian LGBT activists' make sense of their own activism. We analyze the activists' perceptions of their activism, their identities, and how those identities are deployed for action. All of these are, in turn, situated in how activists understand the broader Estonian LGBT community, and Estonian society's historico-politically complex relationship with activism as such. The article is theoretically grounded within the new social movement theories and theories of emergent LGBT and activist identities. The analyzed material consists of interviews, observations, documents and meeting notes gathered via ethnographic fieldwork with Estonian LGBT activists in 2012 – 2013. Pragmatic and iterative qualitative analysis revealed that the activists studied resist the activist identity, and perceive there to be a weak collective identity among the broader Estonian LGBT population. However, the lobbying for the Registered Partnership Law (passed in 2014) brought a shift in LGBT activists' ways of enacting their identities and their perception of the possibility of LGBT activism in Estonia

**Keywords:** Young LGBT activists, activist identities, deployment identity for action, Estonia, LGBT collective identity, LGBT activism, LGBT identity

## 1. Introduction

This article analyses how young Estonian<sup>1</sup> LGBT activists construct and enact their own (activist) identities. Because of the complicated political history of Estonia and the significant impact this history has had on the rights and cultural status of LGBT people, activism, and LGBT activism in particular, we situate our analysis in the relevant historical trajectories. Our focus is on making sense of the Estonian LGBT activists' experiences with activism and the development of their activist identities.

Civic activism has been rather subdued in Estonia after the restoration of independence and collapse of the Soviet Union (in 1991). A 2012 study (Kodanikeühiskonna uurimis- ja arenduskeskus, 2012) indicated that only 31 per cent of people were (active or passive) members of a civic association, and the most frequent reason cited for low levels of participation was lack of interest. Perhaps even more importantly, there is a well-established and internalized discourse of passivity, introversion and individuality among Estonians. According to the aforementioned study 80 per cent of respondents believed Estonians to be socially passive and 74 per cent thought citizens are not aware of their rights (Kodanikeühiskonna uurimis- ja arenduskeskus, 2012). LaSala and Revere (2011) found similar prevalence of inactivity and explanations of an internalized discourse of individualism and passivity among LGBT people. A more recent qualitative study with LGBT Estonians signals a change, pointing to early indications of collective identity creation in the community (Aavik et al., 2016). What complicates matters further, is that compared to the term's current meaning in wealthy, Western societies, "being an activist" held a completely different, and an overwhelmingly negative meaning during the Soviet period. In Soviet Estonia "activism" meant state-mandated communist practices that most Estonians interpreted as "selling out" or cynical

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<sup>1</sup> Estonia is a small (1.3 mil inhabitants) Post-Soviet country between Russia and Scandinavia.

careerism (Allaste, 2014). This has left a mark on Estonian people's perceptions of activism and activists to this day.

## **2. History of LGBT rights and activism in Estonia**

Estonia has had a tumultuous political history for centuries, but the many legal, normative and cultural shifts of the past hundred years have clearly influenced LGBT equality and LGBT activism. The founding of the Republic of Estonia (1918), its occupation by the Soviet Union (1940), its reinstatement in the early 1990s, and the drastic economic, political and social changes that followed, have shaped Estonian's perceptions on activism, LGBT issues and thus the social affordances for LGBT activism. Figure 1 offers a brief historical timeline of LGBT rights and the socio-cultural context for LGBT issues and people in Estonia.

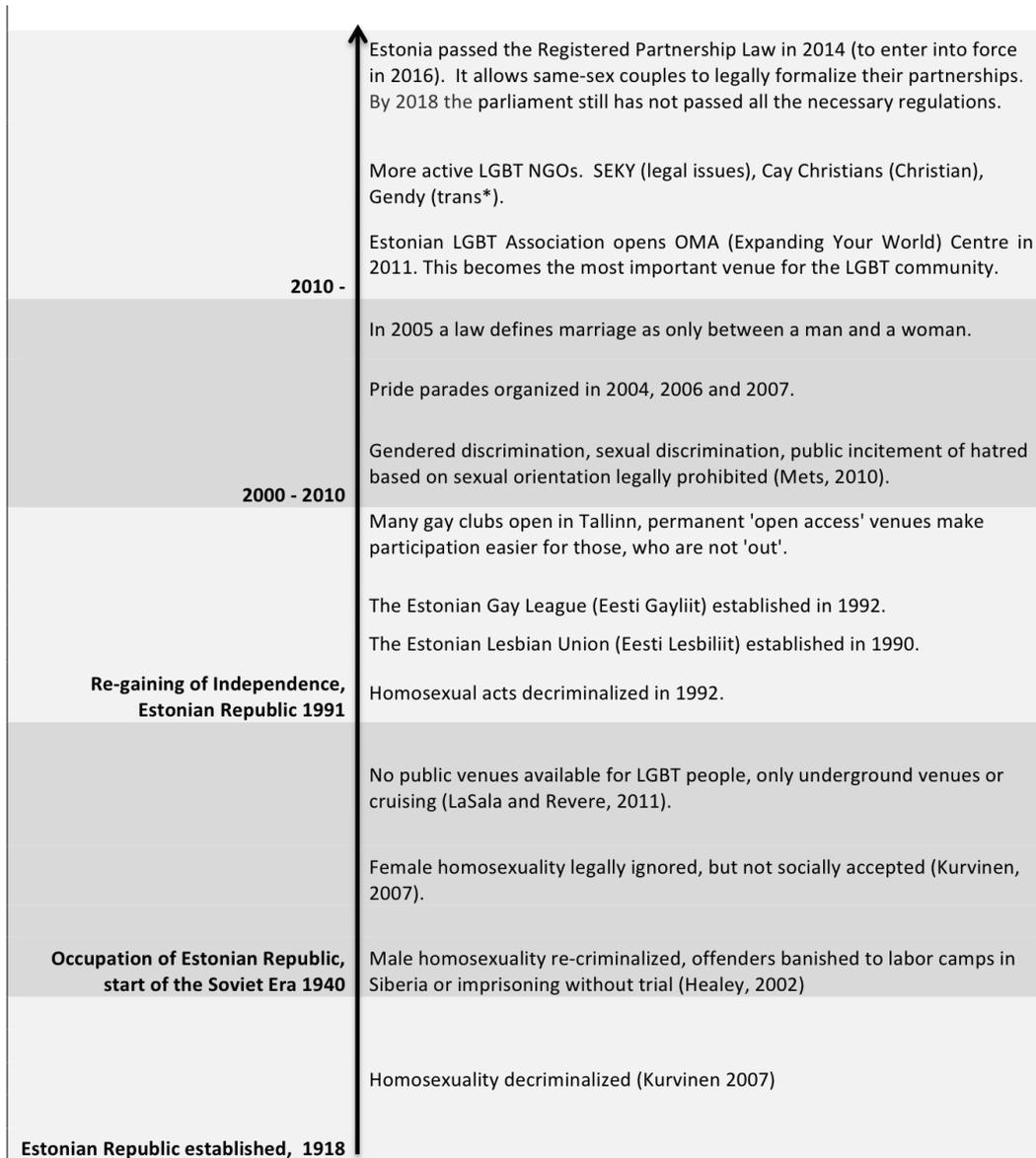


Figure 1: Historical timeline of relevant LGBT developments in Estonia from 1918 forward

The past hundred years have seen intermittent criminalization and decriminalization of (male) homosexuality, discrepancies between organizational (establishment of NGOs) and symbolic (Pride parades and their reception) efforts, and legal changes, which cultural acceptance of LGBT people lags behind.

While homosexuality was decriminalized in 1992, the broader atmosphere of the time right after the collapse of the Soviet Union was neo-traditionalist and heteronormative in terms of gender roles,

family values and acceptance of LGBT people. Media coverage of LGBT issues was sensationalist at the time, and LGBT rights were seen as an “imported” Western problem. Several NGOs (including an LGBT information center) were established, but most closed their doors after a couple of years due to lack of funding and waning motivation on the part of the organizers (LaSala and Revere, 2011). The precarious position of LGBT issues, rights and activism of the early 2000s is perhaps best exemplified in the fate of Pride parades.

The first Pride (in Estonia and all Baltic States) was organized by the (no longer active) lesbian youth organization Mea Culpa in 2004, and attended by around 200 people. One of the organizers and a well-known LGBT activist told the Estonian press at the time that the main message of that first pride was: “to show that homosexual people are ordinary human beings with ordinary lives. They have a right to exist without their lives, careers or families suffering due to their sexuality” (Delfi, 2004). The press also quoted her saying: “Estonia is small. The fact that the Pride in Berlin or Amsterdam is a hugely popular, massive event, where people expose their bodies, is not indicative of what will happen in Tallinn. Our society is different, our population is small, this is the first Pride, so I am sure the marchers will be much more modest” (Delfi, 2004). This indicates that the organizers were uncertain about how the Estonian public would react to the idea and the manifestations of Pride. In a press interview in 2017, the organizers of that first Pride said they had an extremely difficult time getting all the permits, as the city officials did not want to openly forbid it, but would have preferred for it to not happen, and thus made the organizers jump through all kinds of administrative hoops and climb over every imaginable bureaucratic hurdle (Kuusik, 2017). The second Pride took place in 2006, but the marchers were attacked by some onlookers, which resulted in the 2007 parade nearly getting cancelled on the basis of the police not issuing a permit until a month before the event (LaSala and Revere, 2011). The third Pride took place in 2007 and was the last one for the coming 10 years. Some of the marchers were attacked again, which scared

both the organizers and the potential participants, but some of the organizers had also started thinking that they needed to be more political, and work more strategically with lobby. The effort-to-outcome ratio of organizing Prides was deemed inefficient, the organizing committee was worn out, and some of its key members moved to work with LGBT issues in Europe. The fourth Pride was organized in 2017 and the organizers admitted that it still has the same aims that it did 17 years ago. They felt that after ten years of “modestly living in the closet” not much had changed, and the Pride still serves the goal of making LGBT people visible and allowing them a feeling of solidarity (Kuusik, 2017).

### **3. Theoretical framework**

Our approach is broadly situated within the new social movement theories and theories of social and collective identity, most predominantly drawing on conceptual frameworks that address how LGBT activist identities are activated or emerge.

New social movement theories (NSM), developed as early as the 1960s, typically mention feminist and LGBT rights movements as examples. Paraphrasing extant literature, Leah Lievrouw (2011:48) highlights that within NSMs (1) participants and constituents are often well educated creative workers, (2) people identify with and organize around their youth, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity, but reject identification with conventional abstract group identities like class, (3) and the central task of NSM is the construction of meaning and the control of information and representations. Thus, NSM theories suggest that a shared identity is a necessary prerequisite for any kind of collective action to emerge. While Taylor and Whittier (1992) suggested that this may presume, or emerge out of, pre-existing group ties and networks of strong bonds, Polletta and Jasper (2001: 287) specify that participation in NSM can afford defining, celebrating, enacting and deconstructing identities, including group and collective identities.

We differentiate between personal (or self-) identity, social identity and collective identity in this article, but are particularly interested in the latter two, especially the potentialities for some of one's social identities to activate a collective identity, which would then lead to collective action or a NSM. In accordance with much contemporary sociological scholarship, we see self-identity as reflexive, interactive (Goffman 1959) and enacted across multiple co-constitutive identifications (Lawler 2014). Identification refers to "the psychological process of association between oneself and something else (originally someone else)" (Woodward, 2004: 16). Thus, in conceptualizing identities, we commit to a processual perspective, focusing on the flux of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong (Riessman, 2008).

Social identity refers to our identification with various groups, categories and social roles (i.e. mother, teacher, lesbian). Therefore, social identity relies on classification and categorization. As Richard Jenkins (2000: 7-8) writes – social identification emerges from the internally oriented processes of self-identification and group-identification, and the externally oriented processes of categorization, or – combined - the "dialectic of identification" in how we "identify ourselves, how others identify us, and the ongoing interplay of these".

Collective identity is "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences and solidarity" (Taylor and Whittier, 1992: 105), which "may be imagined rather than experienced" (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 298), but which "carries with it positive feelings for other members of the group" (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 285). Collective identity thus extends one's social identities, as in addition to one's identification with the group, it also includes the group's united course of action (Gecas, 2000). Sometimes, collective identities are strategically deployed for political purposes. Bernstein (1997: 537) mentions two specific strategies: (1) identity for critique, where dominant values, categories, and practices are confronted head on; and (2)

identity for education, where minorities rely on uncontroversial themes to challenge a dominant culture's perception of them.

Therefore, one's various collective, social and personal identities are co-constitutive with participation in movements, collective action and a sense of solidarity. An individual's participation in collective action may stem from their personal and social identity as LGBT. Further, it may lead to a formation of a social or a collective identity as LGBT, as activist or as LGBT activist. But one's collective identifications (as LGBT, or activist) also inform one's personal and social identities. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities, in particular, are often conceptualized through stage-based models (e.g., Cass, 1979, 1984; Fassinger, 1998). Individuals are conceptualized as transitioning from a private sense of self as non-heterosexual, to public recognition of and integration of LGBT identity into their sense of self (Renn, 2007). These models focus on resolution of internal conflict and the so-called coming-out process (cf. literature review in Bilodeau and Renn, 2005) and have, in recent years, been enhanced by feminist, postmodern, and queer approaches that emphasize the cultural, interactional and political context of this identity work (Bilodeau and Renn, 2005).

In order to understand LGBT activism, we need to understand LGBT activists' various identifications, the intersection of sexual and activist identifications, and the emergence of activist identities. Renn (2007: 326), studied LGBT student leaders, and suggests a conceptual framework she calls the "involvement-identity cycle," wherein a person's increased visibility as LGBT is connected to their "increased sense of responsibility or activism." Therefore, activism becomes embedded in that person's LGBT identity. Particularly useful for our purposes in this article are two of the identity categories she describes: (1) LGB(T) activists, whom she defines as wanting to facilitate the group's work through positional and non-positional roles, and for whom activism is about commitment to personal passion; and (2) queer activists, who publicly embrace an

oppositional gender and sexual identity, and who have “moved away from a positional view of leadership to an approach that incorporates a commitment to changing social systems for the purpose of decentering power” (Renn, 2007: 323). Linking this to earlier work on identification and collective action (Bernstein 1997), we might interpret Renn’s LGBT activist as deploying their identity for education, while the queer activists in that model do so for critique.

#### **4. Research question and methods**

Based on the Estonian historico-political context which, according to limited existing studies seems to dis-incentivize civic engagement and public enactment of LGBT or activist identities, and inspired by the new social movement and LGBT activist identity theories, we ask: (1) how Estonian LGBT activists perceive and interpret the collective LGBT identity within the broader LGBT population, (2) how they perceive, interpret and enact their own LGBT, activist and gender identities, and (3) how they deploy their identifications for action.

This article is based on a variety of material gathered via ethnographic fieldwork between May 2012 and November 2013 as part of the Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement (MYPLACE) project. The analyzed material includes interviews with 15 Estonian LGBT activists; ethnographic observation of meetings and events at the LGBT center, and at a variety of LGBT venues; informal conversations; media texts; and other written materials like activist organizations’ meeting minutes and documents.

Fieldwork and interviews were conducted by the second author, who initially approached 3 well-known Estonian LGBT activists (who have been on boards of LGBT NGO-s, organized various LGBT events etc.). Those initial interviewees then suggested additional suitable people to

interview. As the circle of active LGBT people is very small in Estonia, these suggestions started to recur almost immediately, and the list of potential informants was soon saturated. The interviewed activists thus represent all relevant actors, as well as some young ‘budding’ activists among LGBT activists at the time of fieldwork. Interviewees were young adults - 23-35 years old, 10 of them female and 5 male, one ethnic Russian and all others ethnic Estonians. They could be described as middle class in terms of their social and cultural capital and were well-educated (see Appendix 1 for details). Interviews lasted from 40 minutes to two hours and were recorded, then pseudonymized and transcribed. All interview materials were transcribed and analyzed using Nvivo 9.2 software first using open coding and then axial coding (Charmaz 2006), with a conscious process of ‘theoretical matching’ in the later stages of analysis (e.g. Sipos & Pilkington, 2015). We analyzed interviews in the context of knowledge created via ethnographic observations, informal unrecorded conversations, media texts, activist organizations’ meeting minutes, and online texts.

Participatory observation was conducted in the Tallinn OMA center (the central venue for LGBT youth) during meetings and special events (e.g. a discussion on parenting; a brainstorming for festival preparation, the leader’s report about a study trip to the USA) and at informal gatherings (a ‘women’s party’, an LGBT bar, and a birthday party). Observation notes, documents and relevant publicly available texts (interviews published on the Estonian LGBT Association’s Facebook page or in media) were analyzed thematically.

Overall, we analyzed our data relying on a pragmatic, iterative approach as described by Sarah Tracy (2013). “An iterative analysis alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories. Rather than grounding the meaning solely in the emergent data, an iterative approach also encourages reflection upon the active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories the researcher brings to the data” (Tracy 2013: 184).

## **5. Discussion of Findings**

In the following we outline our findings in 3 segments. First, we address how the LGBT activists we studied categorize the broader LGBT population, in particular from the perspective of the population's perceived readiness to self-identify as LGBT and as a member of an LGBT community. Second, we explore how the LGBT activists experience, perceive and enact their own activist, LGBT and gender identities and the intersections of these. Finally, we analyze how LGBT activists deploy their identities for action.

### **5.1. Perceptions of the LGBT community**

While the OMA Center, which Author 2 repeatedly visited during her fieldwork is a warm and welcoming space, described in a 2012 blog post by the Estonian LGBT Association as “a second home,” a “safe space,” a “place where you can always drop in and where you can always be yourself,” our informants' perceptions of other Estonian LGBT people's self- and group-identification (Jenkins, 2000) paint a fairly bleak picture. Mostly, the LGBT activists we spoke to claimed there to be no LGBT community in Estonia, and the few who did speak of the LGBT population as a community, seemed to equate “community” with the bare minimum of being out of the closet and occasionally visiting LGBT specific social events.

Looking at how our informants made sense of this presumed lack of community, three overlapping and co-constitutive explanatory discourses emerged: (1) relatively low levels of what informants considered outright discrimination, which would force the group to mobilize; (2) internalized homophobia, and (3) LGBT identity experienced as private and a general passivity in terms of wanting to be a part of any collective identity. These were evident both in the interviews, as well as

some of the official documents and analyses created by various LGBT organizations. These are fleshed out in more detail below.

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

Our informants claimed that many Estonian LGBT people have neither the interest nor the time to be a part of any kind of community, and often explained this with: “relatively normal living conditions.” This may seem counterintuitive given that at the time of the interviews, marriage, registered partnerships or adoption were not an option for LGBT people, and no Prides were being held. While this does indeed lend itself to being interpreted as a sign of internalized homophobia, it is also worth mentioning that compared to some ex-Soviet and Eastern European countries, which many LGBT activists had contact with, the level of open discrimination in Estonia has been fairly low. This leads to a perception of relatively normal living conditions and human rights among the activists we studied. As Lisa says in the comment below:

*Nothing bad enough has happened to our community to make us stand as one //...// the average gay or lesbian basically does more or less OK... and the person could also have internalized 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)*

Thus, according to the interviewed LGBT activists, the wider Estonian LGBT population can be made sense of as paralyzed by a paradox of rights. On the one hand, the discrimination is not strong enough to lead to a shared identity of a mistreated minority, whose human rights are threatened. On

the other hand, the social context is not supportive enough for people to feel secure in their human rights and willing to demand real equality. Ralf, who set up one of the first internet sites for gay people in Estonia, recalls the negative feedback he received from his peers:

*Other gay people would say, 'why did you do this? Who needs it?' Nobody liked the idea that there is a gay info center on the internet. They were all like: 'oh my god, now everyone will know what we do and what we are!' This is when I realized that the gay community in Estonia has an identity problem. (...) a major part of the gay community does not associate itself with it in any way.*

It is worth mentioning here, that Ralf's website was targeted specifically at gay men, and according to our interviews, males tend to be more sensitive regarding the privacy of their homosexual identities than lesbians.

Overall, the LGBT activists we interviewed can therefore be argued to interpret the majority of LGBT population in Estonia as only having a "private sense of self as non-heterosexual" (Renn, 2007) and not a collective LGBT identity, which includes a shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests (Taylor and Whittier, 1992: 105) and carries positive feelings both for self as the member of the group and for other members of the group (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 285). In this, our informants' assessment of the broader Estonian LGBT population coincides with the few exiting studies (LaSala and Revere, 2011) as well as the formal opinion documented in the 2011 proposal for the Creation of an Estonian LBGT Chamber of Cooperation (Eesti LGBT Inimeste Koostöökoja Loomise Ettepanek).

*"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" (Parve 2011).*

Thus, our informants perceived the broader LGBT population of Estonia to not be ready to identify with the collective LGBT identity. One of our interviewee's, Helle, went as far as claiming that the community does not exist, as people feel they are "just people who happen to be gay or lesbian, but they don't feel like that makes them part of any community."

## **5.2. Identifications**

In the following we pay attention to our informants' self and group-identification across the categories of sexuality, gender and activism. While we do not have direct access to how our informants are categorized by external others (and neither do the informants themselves) we can, following the symbolic interactionist logic of the interactive self (Goffman 1959) and Jenkins' (2000) complementary framework of the 'dialectic of identification', use our informants' attitudes towards the broader LGBT population in Estonia (previous section) and their articulations of the cultural norms, as indicative of how they experience being categorized by others.

When discussing their own experiences as activists, our informants pointed to the importance of gender. Women were consistently described as being more active in LGBT circles. Our female informants framed this as emerging out of a sense of duty and gendered societal discrimination. They argued that lesbian women's activity stems from them having fewer career opportunities, which makes volunteer work a more enticing option, when in search of self-realization, but also from women being more empathetic to the plight of others. Below, Brita claims that lesbians –

because of being women and belonging to a sexual minority group - are doubly disadvantaged in Estonia:

*For men, I think it might be easier to find self-actualization in 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-actualization //...// and I truly believe that for men the doors are always more open in the Estonian society.*

Male respondents tended to point out that LGBT organizations of the past were led by “angry lesbians,” who purposefully excluded men. Some of our male informants offered a diametrically opposite interpretation of the double discrimination to what Brita described above. Here, coming out of the closet and being publicly LGBT is articulated as being easier for women than for men, because women’s ‘deviance’ is less threatening to the heteronormative status quo.

*Women will not be stoned<sup>2</sup>! In our society, it is acceptable to stone men; it is, like, okay, right? (...) like it is okay to be lesbian in Estonia but not okay to be gay. (Tom)*

This suggests that gender-identities affect how people experience and enact their LGBT and activist identities. Men and women tend to have different gender based problems in a patriarchal society, which are in turn differently amplified by how the society reacts to their sexual orientation.

Our informants’ self- and group identifications as activist and as LGBT-activist, seem particularly complex. Our informants articulate a reluctance to be collectively active among Estonians in general, and the Estonian broader LGBT population in particular. This can be understood, and is often rhetorically linked to, the discourse of ‘Estonian passivity,’ and the problematic historical valence attributed to the word ‘activist.’ But our informants themselves, whom we have categorized as activists based on their practices, also shy away from self-identifying as activists and identifying

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<sup>2</sup> Tom uses stoning metaphorically, stoning is not practiced in Estonia

with the group of LGBT activists. Their responses indicate that they may have internalized the negative connotations that come with the word. In Chris's quote below you see him balking against the label.

*Someone told me they had heard I had become an activist, to which I replied that I have not yet earned such an "honorary" title. Speaking up in a couple of places or taking part in events doesn't immediately make me an activist. But for this person I had become an activist, I had become a troublemaker. (Chris)*

In the quote above, Chris creates a rhetorical link between activists and troublemakers. Analyzing this in the context of the feedback Ralf received from within the LGBT population to him setting up the website, and the context of the proposal for the Creation of an Estonian LGBT Chamber of Cooperation (previous section) this can be interpreted as being a trouble maker for the other LGBT people, who want to lead quiet, inconspicuous lives; and not, for example, for the heterosexual majority. In 2014 the Estonian LGBT Association Blog started publishing various LGBT people's narratives on why the Registered Partnership Law is important to them. Many of these echoed the sentiments outlined in the interviews, and the conversations Author 2 witnessed during her fieldwork. "I have never wanted to be a gay activist," a narrative by a lesbian woman reads: "not because I don't respect the people who weather the wrath of the masses, but because I think it is pointless (...) every time the gay community takes a step forward, the conservatives do so as well."

The perceived low tolerance of Estonian society and Estonian LGBT people for "demanding activists," translates into rather mild forms of participation – e.g. taking any kind of a stand publicly – 'counting' as activism. Thus, framed via Renn's (2007) concept of identity-involvement cycle, where increased participation in an LGBT organization promoted self- and group-identification as

LGBT, and that in turn, promoted more activism - we can say that in Estonia showing up at events already helps internalize both the LGBT identity and the activist identity.

*You know what, to me it seems that in Estonia, since Estonia is so small (...) already showing up at those OMA center events is perceived as activism ... (Brita)*

There are not many people who are willing to bear the brunt of the LGBT activist label, so the ones who do publicly take it on, quickly become celebrity-activists. Like Tom below, they become the token LGBT-person for the media and wider audiences.

*I guess I'm the only one to speak out in the Estonian press. It seems to me 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 issues and speak up in the media //...// I'm the only person, the only gay man, who is vocal and I'm also the cannon fodder anyone can shoot at whenever the need arises, right? (Tom).*

These celebrity activists, like Renn's (2007: 323) "queer activists", publicly embrace an oppositional identity to try and change the social system and decenter power. Unsurprisingly, given the Estonian LGBT people's (and the general population's) aversion to confrontational activism and the "activist" label, the group of people practicing celebrity-activism is quite small.

### **5.3. Deploying identity for action**

Looking more closely at LGBT activists' experiences and their interpretations of both their own and their colleagues' experiences of enacting LGBT activism - two stages of deploying LGBT identity for action (Bernstein 1997) can be outlined. We delineate different repertoires of enacting LGBT

identity before the Registered Partnership Law lobbying started (2012) and during that lobbying effort.

### ***5.3.1 Deploying the LGBT identity for action before the Registered Partnership Law lobby started***

Our informants described LGBT activism as atomized and insular prior to the lobbying effort towards the passing of Registered Partnership Law began. Activists recount individual spurts of activity that lasted until the particular individuals depleted their energy. Occasionally social movement-like organizations were started, but most fizzled out because they didn't rely on a shared collective identity and were not met with collective support from LGBT Estonians. As Helle states below:

*A lot of people who used to be active have left Estonia, because they got tired of living here.*

*They've gone to some other country where they can be in peace.*

Perhaps the most poignant example of pre-partnership law era activism and its failures are the Estonian Pride parades. As described above, there have been four prides in total in Estonia - in 2004, 2006 and 2007, after which a decade long break ensued, and now in 2017. This can be explained via Bernstein's seminal work on strategic identification and identity deployment (1997). While some of the organizers saw Prides as a way to deploy collective LGBT *identity for education*, many in the broader LGBT population, the non-LGBT people in Estonia, the press and the city officials interpreted it as a deployment of LGBT *identity for critique*. As Ralf explains:

*I have been saying for years that in Estonia you cannot achieve shifts in society through angry activism. A constant reminder of why we are different or how we are different, and coming across as demanding something is more likely to incite hate, misunderstandings and, actually, it continuously takes us further away from what we*

*are ... like ... jointly trying to achieve; which is understanding within the society or changes in legislation.*

Thus, for many LGBT activists, Pride events of 2004-2007 were something that had, at best, an ambiguous effect in terms of activating collective identity or bringing LGBT persons together into a community. Author 2's field-notes show that Estonian LGBT people and the interviewed activists did visit other nearby Pride events during the years Prides were not organized in Estonia. The 2013 Pride in Helsinki was described as a "paradise", while the Baltic Pride 2013 in Lithuania was experienced as antagonistic and anxiety-inducing due to the large number of police and anti-Pride groups armed with eggs and tomatoes. Therefore, the attitudes outlined above do not necessarily pertain to Prides *per se*, rather to the presumed suitability of Prides in the Estonian context at the time.

### ***5.3.2 Deploying the LGBT identity when lobbying for the Registered Partnership Law***

In autumn 2011 the Registered Partnership Law was initiated and according to our fieldwork most activists considered it to be one of the issues that could be an LGBT activists "life work".

*The Registered Partnership Law, for me, is 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 (Lisa)*

It was important enough for many LGBT people that by 2012 previously insular activists had united to a considerable degree. A shared belief in a non-confrontational approach of peaceful negotiation also helped bring different players together. In terms of Bernstein's (1997) identity deployment

framework this approach can be interpreted as a strategy of *identity for education*. It plays on uncontroversial themes to challenge the dominant culture's perception of the LGBT people. It can also be interpreted as deploying *identity for empowerment*, because the chosen peaceful path and the disproportionately aggressive reactions from some groups in society helped create a sense "collective identity and a feeling that political action is feasible" (Bernstein, 1997: 536). Similar patterns have been noted elsewhere in Europe regarding gay marriage or partnership lobby. Calvo and Trujillo (2014) note that Spanish LGBT activists chose the tactic of "love rights," which refer loosely to rights for family, and include desexualizing the claims made in protest, de-radicalizing the LGBT movement, and cooperating with political institutions.

In October 2012, the LGBT Association drafted an open proposal to the Ministry of Justice about the partnership law. At the same time, the Estonian Council of Churches deployed a memo pertaining to the same topic. In their memo, the Council of Churches called homosexuality a sin and outlined their resistance to marriage or any other form of partnership becoming legal among gays and lesbians. In November 2012, the foundation for Defense of Family and Tradition (Perekonna ja Traditsiooni Kaitseks) started a petition against the partnership law. Their campaign equated respect for family traditions, religiosity, and a hope for a better life with negating the proposed law. It was very successful, gathering more than 38 000 signatures by the spring of 2013. This created a common enemy for the LGBT activists, and in a statement written on March 15, 2013 the LGBT Association launched a counter-campaign with the slogan "Estonia has to care about all of its families!" The campaign's rhetoric once again followed what Bernstein (1997) would call strategic *identity for education*, emphasizing the similarities between LGBT and straight 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 many 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 government recognize their existence; does it give them the opportunity to be and feel safe in this society? (campaign's call to action text)*

The 2012 and 2013 campaigns significantly furthered the collective identity of the LGBT people and LGBT activists in Estonia. According to our informants it has played an important role not only in unifying the LGBT activists, but also in bringing the broader LGBT population in Estonia closer to self- and group identities as LGBT, and perhaps even to a collective identity as LGBT.

The months leading up to the passing of the civil union law also saw LGBT related issues rising to an all time high in terms of media coverage. In the summer of 2014 Tarmu Tammerk, the National Broadcasting's journalism ethics advisor had to address the intensity of this coverage and rebuff the most diligent opponents' claims that pro Registered Partnership Law protests and opinions received more coverage than those of the opposition.

## **Conclusion**

The LGBT movement in Estonia is partly reminiscent of the Western gay and lesbian movements in the 1960s or 1970s. As Estonia was behind the 'iron curtain' of the Soviet Union, issues that were important in Western countries decades ago only became topical in Estonia after the collapse of the Union. On the other hand, while the US gay and lesbian movement shared political views with the New Left and was supported by the counterculture 'vibe' in society (D'Emilio, 2009), the Estonian gay and lesbian movement of the 1990s started in a neo-liberal, individualist, success oriented and neo-traditional environment. Rather than being supported by other transformations and processes in

the society, the LGBT movement had to find its way in an environment that did not value activism or community, and was hostile towards different minorities (including gays and lesbians).

This article explored how Estonian LGBT activists perceive and interpret their own LGBT and activist identities, how they enact and deploy their identities for action, and how they situate both of the above in their perceptions of broader cultural context. We found that Estonian LGBT activists perceive there to be a weak collective identity among LGBT Estonians, and cite internalized homophobia, relatively acceptable human rights and the inherent passivity of Estonians as the main reasons for this. We also found that activists themselves tend to balk at the “activist” label because of its historico-political connotations and negative interpretations both in Estonian culture as such, and among LGBT people, in particular among gay men. For the activists we studied, the Estonian LGBT population, in particular prior to the lobbying effort for the Registered Partnership Law, seems paralyzed by a paradox of rights - there is not enough discrimination to lead to a common enemy and a shared identity of a mistreated minority, yet the social context is not supportive enough to fuel true equality. As for activism itself, prior to the lobbying for the Registered Partnership Law it is described as having been short-term, persona-led and fractured between those who wanted to deploy their LGBT identities for critique, and those who wanted to do so for education or empowerment (Bernstein 1997).

In recent years, there have been some important changes in the Estonian society. As a reaction to the economic crisis of 2007-2008 the neo-liberal mentality and success-oriented material values have become less prevalent. New trends, such as community building (i.e. neighborhood communities, environmentalist communities), protesting for your rights, and criticism of mainstream politics have become more common, and provide a more supportive context for LGBT activism as well. New feminist and queer initiatives have appeared that blend feminist and LGBT goals into a larger agenda of dismantling patriarchy. In addition to that, LGBT issues have been

recognized in discourse on human rights and organizations. The LGBT Association, in particular, has received funding from different sources for relevant activities.

The effort to get the Registered Partnership Law passed spurred public debate, the emergence of a “common enemy” for LGBT people unified previously insular LGBT activists, and furthered the social and collective identity of the LGBT people and LGBT activists in Estonia. In synch with wider global trends of deradicalizing the movement and deploying LGBT identity for education and empowerment, not critique (Bernstein 1997), Estonian LGBT activist agreed on a non-confrontational approach for the Registered Partnership Law lobby. The Estonian LGBT Association, too, has been working towards a more inclusive identity among the wider LGBT population and activists. This is reflected in their name change from Estonian Gay Youth to the Estonian LGBT Association. While this non-confrontational approach to educating society and raising awareness about LGBT people has been noted elsewhere in the world (Calvo and Trujillo, 2014), Estonian LGBT activists consider it to be particularly well-suited for the Estonian context because of its historical baggage with activism.

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## Appendix 1

### List of respondents

<b>Pseudonym</b>		<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Relationship to Organisation</b>
1	Anna	25	Female	Undergraduate studies	Organiser
2	Brita	30	Female	postgraduate studies	Occasional Participant
3	Chris	32	Male	Undergraduate studies	Occasional Participant
4	Hanta	35	Female	BA	Organiser
5	Helle	33	Female	BA	Organiser
6	Jan	28	Male	Unfinished BA	Organiser
7	Liina	33	Female	BA	Occasional Participant
8	Lisa	28	Female	BA	Organiser
9	Ona	23	Female	Undergraduate studies	Occasional Participant
10	Olev	24	Male	vocational secondary studies	Occasional Participant
11	Ralf	32	Male	Undergraduate studies	Organiser
12	Renate	24	Female	BA	Organiser
13	Stina	30	Female	postgraduate studies	Occasional Participant
14	Sveta	25	Female	Undergraduate studies	Occasional Participant
15	Tom	32	Male	Undergraduate studies	Organiser