

Between Scylla and Charybdis: the youth (LGBTQ+) activism in modern Russia

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The empirical basis

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Youth civic engagement

- Institutionalized civic engagement and interest in formal politics is on the decline in most European countries, especially among young people (Putnam, 2000; Lister, 2002; Trofimova, 2015; Pilkington, Pollock 2015).
- debate about youth apathy, apolitical, anti-political and non-civic behavior of young people.

Transition from "the thesis of civic deficit to the thesis of new involvement" (Harris et al., 2007)

- Young people are creating new citizenship models based on everyday involvement (Stevenson 2003; Harris et al. 2007; Miller-Idriss 2006; Harris, Roose 2014; Coe, Vandegrift 2015).
- Young people significantly expand the range of forms of engagement and activism (Adler, Goggin, 2005; Ekman, Amna, 2012).
- Young people develop an agenda that includes diversity of lifestyles, tastes, consumption, etc. (Harris et al 2010; Berger, 2009; Sveningsson, 2015).
- Young people shape civil engagement by blurring the lines between the concepts of private and public, through the politicization of morality and micropoliticization of everyday life (Manning 2013:18).

Politicization of the private in Russia

Numerous political and socioeconomic transformations that took place in the USSR and Russia over the past century ultimately resulted in changes in the treatment of the private and the public.

From

- 1950-1980: radical 'privatization' of social life (Garselon, 1997).

Via

- 1980-1990: discursive articulation of private life (Rotkirch, 2000)

To

- 2000-2010: Unprecedented politicization of the private (Temkina, Zdravomyslova, 2014; Rivkin-Fish, 2006). The turn towards conservatism and the biopolitical agenda monopolize people's bodies and private lives (Sella, Nartova, 2016, Temkina, 2013). At the same time, there is a significant reduction in access to public space, and the development of civil society is restricted.

LGBTQ + youth activism

The LGBTQ+ community in the contemporary Russian society finds itself at the intersection of these two processes.

- LGBT activists choose new forms of participation and develop everyday citizenship in line with European youth trends.
- This choice is somewhat forced due to the restriction of access to the traditional public and political space.
- The creation of independent initiatives aimed at supporting various gender and sexual identities, broadening online discussions about choices, coercion and privileges of different types of identities.
- Such discussions are not autonomous - they take place in the situation where the issues of gender, sexuality, identity, sex as such, etc. are already in the public space, already problematized, and already closely watched by different players.

This structural inconsistency leads to a number of interdependent and interrelated but analytically discernible effects:

- the loss of the private;
- the rejection/impossibility of a consensus
- the actualization of security

The loss of the private

- The authorities' politicization and activists' re-politicization of gender and sexuality lead to the disappearance of the private.
- Any gender/sexual experience/identity is taken to the public space and becomes a subject of discussion, legitimization, marginalization, and claims to control or resistance.
- Giving sexuality extra importance for constituting agency leads to the fact that there is practically no experience that is protected and hidden from or not subject to articulation.
- Technological capabilities of modern communication make almost any online statement public or potentially public, similarly any offline participation can be recorded and broadcast online, which makes it public as well.

The rejection/impossibility of a consensus

- The use of the private as the basis for legitimation and a non-stop assessment of the private in order to find similarities and differences, privileges and vulnerabilities do not provide opportunities for consolidation and reaching consensus.
- Individual biographies cannot be reduced to one another and they do not represent static sets of statuses/positions/interests/interpretations. They are dynamic and changeable, contextually redefined, so they generate differences.

The actualization of security

- The primary concern in the discourse and practices of LGBTQ+ activists is emotional and psychological security.
- It is mainly problematic in the community itself. Different opinions certainly make the scene more heterogeneous and decentralize it (Kenny, 2016), but they also lead to risks of being unaccepted and not understood (which potentially poses a risk of delegitimizing an individual, as legitimation is based on individual experience/the private).
- The search for emotional/psychological security leads to the creation of small closed groups that include people whose experience is as similar to each other's as possible. This in turn leads to increased fragmentation, confrontation and the impossibility of reaching consensus.

Conclusion

The choice of new forms of participation and the development of everyday citizenship for LGBTQ+ youth activists is restricted by the limited access to the public and political space and by extra importance attributed to sexuality in the contemporary Russian politics, which, in turn, creates new effects:

- The repoliticization of the private and turning it public through technological means leads to its loss: there are no experiences that are protected from external supervision and therefore from new risks.
- Strengthening the role of individual biographies in this context reduces the chances of reaching consensus due to inevitable differences.
- Differences increase the risk of rejection, which means devaluation and delegitimation, resulting in the creation of safe, closed groups/spaces within the scene, and as a result, in greater fragmentation and possible confrontation.



Thank you!