



## **PROMISE: Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement: Opportunities and challenges for conflicted young people across Europe.**

**WP6: From Conflict to Innovation: Ethnographic Case Studies**

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# **Struggling against hegemony: rural youth in Seto country**

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### **Executive summary:**

The young people in the Seto ethnic region in South Eastern Estonia experience conflicts in relation to the hegemonic role that Seto culture has taken in the region and that is felt to have superseded those for whom Seto heritage is secondary or unimportant. The political, cultural and social rejection that the young people report has framed their lives in ways that make them feel unwelcome, and labels them as less valuable, even celebrating their migration. The division between those locals supporting Seto heritage and those indifferent or opposed to its centrality in local life has effects in the economic opportunities (funding and employment) and cultural choice (most, especially the more visible events are Seto heritage related), and the latter choices, in particular, feed into the social division and emerging class lines. The lack of willingness to participate, partly deriving from lack of choice, is carving out a new lower class identity to which the Seto activists allude when explaining the non-presence of many young locals.

For the local youth, the choice is one of non-involvement and removing their more sought after free time activities, and, later, migration. Those who have stayed do make an effort to carve out their own opportunities but have experienced rejection and appear to have resigned to this reality. Together with recent changes and liking the region for its peace and quiet, the potential for retaining the local connections, including with the more Seto-minded peers and sparking a light that would force the Seto heritage activists to reconsider their exclusive policies and discourses, is still there and could possibly increase with the new amalgamated Setomaa municipality even though this could also simply increase the power of the heritage-based Setoness. Awareness arising from this project might, however, gently coax the key decision makers towards a more inclusive approach.

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## 1. Introduction

The group of young people chosen for this case study lives or is related to the South Eastern corner of Estonia on the border between Estonia and Russia. As their conflict arises from the specifics of the local history and socio-politics, it warrants a brief overview of the background and sources of this divergence.

The region has over the last 25 years become recognised as the indigenous area of the Setos, a historically unique ethnic group with notable history between the two countries. The Seto, historically seen as backward, uneducated, un-Estonian, overly religious (and Orthodox<sup>1</sup>) etc have become highly celebrated in the country for their difference but also for being one of the few remaining groups with clearly unique local living customs. However, its success today also has political beginnings: the Seto movement (Jääts, 1998) started from the movement to reinstate the Tartu border agreement which Russia unilaterally rejected after 1991, turning the borderline created in the 1950s between Russian and the Estonian Soviet republics into a *de facto* border between the two new countries.

As the political hopes of restoring the original border crumbled, the unity that this aim had created amongst the Seto and the rightfulness of their claim (and its significance for the rest of Estonia) for the part of their territory now in Russia along with the ancestral graves and property, had brought the Seto to the centre of attention of the rest of the country. Their pride grew, having suffered from derision and ridicule throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to their perceived backwardness, and relatively lower levels of education and poverty. The region, along with the rest of peripheral South East Estonia, is still relatively poor with higher than average unemployment and high rates of subsistence benefits per inhabitant - currently even higher than ever before during the independence, in contrast with the country's average (SW42, Statistics Estonia, 2017). Differently from many other peripheral regions, however, the Seto culture was seen to potentially provide an income to the region, which, along with the rest of rural Estonia, had lost the vast majority of agricultural jobs. The Seto started receiving state support for their cultural activities under the auspices of the Setomaa Cultural Programme. In addition to the locally substantial funding received from this body, local governments were often focussing their financial attention on various Seto-related activities and constructions, and local businesses oriented themselves to products bearing either some sort of links to local traditions, or at least, insignia of the Seto culture. Other recent funding bodies such as the Setomaa Development Programme and Piiriveere Leader, whilst mostly supporting simply local entrepreneurial initiatives, have also demonstrated to either fund initiatives that can be presented as relevant to the Seto culture (half of the projects SDP supported in 2015 were directly related to the Seto traditional culture) and/or have allegedly been acquired by the relatively limited active Seto 'elite' – people representing, working on, or protecting the Seto heritage culture.

The Seto cultural elite comprises of by far the most visible people in the area enjoying a considerable symbolic and social capital (see also Bourdieu, 1986), as well as various perks that come with this status. Their presence is visible in the public arena, for example the local and national media<sup>2</sup>, and in

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<sup>1</sup> The specific kind of religion is in Estonian case less important than the fact that religiosity has much capture at all, as Estonia has, over the 20th century, evolved into one of the least religious countries, especially amongst the young people (80% of the 16-29 year olds declare 'no religious affiliation' in the European Social Survey 2014-2016, Bullivant, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example this front page from a recent newspaper reports on a Seto traditional Easter event.:  
[https://www.setomaa.ee/kogukond/docs/file/ajalehed/Setomaa\\_ajaleht\\_341.pdf](https://www.setomaa.ee/kogukond/docs/file/ajalehed/Setomaa_ajaleht_341.pdf)

terms of a more general national reputation, for example, the Seto representatives are invited to nationally prominent events such as president's receptions events to entertain international and national dignitaries and frequent events across other Finno-Ugric countries (primarily in Russia) funded by various grants. Whether or not this also means economic advantage in any other ways is less obvious, however, their assumed access to various funds is perceived as problematic. Some of the members of this group are the *nouveau* Seto; people who have moved to the area because of the appeal of this traditional culture, folk music and customs, and the idea of wholesome rural idyll, and have not grown up there or have no earlier links to the area.

From this focus on the Seto cultural activities arise several issues to which local people respond according to their structural position, and which have triggered various social categorisations that impact different groups differently. The inhabitants of the region are far from homogenous ethno-politically, and the increasing dominance of the Seto culture is not welcomed by many locals, no matter whether they consider themselves Seto and practice some of the Seto customs, or not. They have grown unhappy with the presence and centrality of this in their lives and do not recognise the rural idyll that appeals to some of those who have moved to the area more recently.

Politically, the area has been prone to rather vocal and angry rifts between political allegiances, with fighting within the local governments for power and accusations of corruption as well as evidence of inability to cooperate within as well as across various divisions. Furthermore, the Seto activities, called *setotamine* (a neologism roughly translatable as Seto-making) by some of the critics and disgruntled locals, are often seen as interfering with sensible decision making by the local politicians, and, in some cases, can be demonstrated to challenge the range of available local activities (e.g., Annist, 2011). 2017 was a particularly tumultuous year because of the national municipal reform. Postponed over several decades, it was then that the changes were finally pushed through. Until 2017, the region was split into four rural municipalities and two counties. During the negotiations of amalgamations that the municipalities had to go through, two of the councils preferred the option of joining with larger or more urban municipalities outside of the Seto region. As an example, the Karitsa<sup>3</sup> municipal council split unequally between those wishing to join the neighbouring non-Seto municipality and those who wished to stay with other Seto municipalities. As nationally the idea of Seto unity has been highly appealing to the government and parliament which includes a number of Seto activists and lobbyists as well as other sympathisers, after several rounds of failed negotiations as well as a curious variety of local referenda, the councils wishing to join municipalities outside the symbolic Seto borders were defeated and the Setomaa municipality was born. It is now led by 15 councillors, most of them from the same electoral union (local party) *Ühine Setomaa* (United/Joint Setomaa) with not just political unity but the Seto culture and heritage at its heart.

The political changes and the position of the culture locally run parallel to socio-economic processes. The local facilities have been in flux over the last decade; nurseries and schools have given way to care homes for the elderly. The main reason for such changes include on the one hand the declining and aging population and slow reduction of local inhabitants as opposed to summer dwellers, and secondly, various state level reforms which have pushed for the amalgamations of municipalities and schools in particular. The age group 15-29 comprised of about 650 individuals out of a 3,600 strong population. Migration from the region has been notable for many years, and Võru county, where

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<sup>3</sup> Names of the municipalities and villages in the Seto region are anonymised to protect the identity of the respondents.

most of the data for this case study comes from, leads, in particular, to the numbers of people who have left the region for work abroad (43% of the pendulum migrants from there go abroad, 41% work elsewhere in Estonia and only 16% go to Tallinn and the surrounding county, otherwise a great draw for such migrants from most of the rest of Estonia (Tiit and Servinski, 2011).

The division between the Seto activists, sympathisers or simply those proud of their heritage and unbothered by its increased visibility and centrality on the one hand, and those resentful, disappointed, indifferent or perturbed by its role in today's Setomaa on the other, have an undercurrent of stratification running through them. Whilst Estonia has only recently started seeing the emergence of classes (see also Helemäe and Saar, 2012), this division has become part of the rearrangement of the symbolic, cultural and partly also economic capital. Whilst such losses can be conceptualised as a form of economic dispossession (Harvey, 2007, pp. 159-65), the Seto case could answer whether this might also combine with cultural dispossession (Creed, 2011) and social dispossession (Annist, 2015).

The region has also been symbolically divided according to its loss of heritage, and in contrast to traditional Seto homesteads, prayer houses and churches stand Soviet period buildings, both large scale state or collective farm constructions, mostly abandoned and towering the landscape, as well centralised villages built to house the workforce for those farms. These villages include 2-3 storey apartment blocks with roughly 10-20 apartments in each; some villages would have just 2-3 houses like that, but larger villages could have 8 or more. A centralised village would often include shop(s), a nursery, school, doctor's office, municipal offices and other conveniences. These buildings as well as their inhabitants are seen to epitomise a type of hybridity considered by the local Seto 'elite' to be the sites of a problematic lack of Seto commitment where a non-Seto new generation is raised.

Combined with the overall picture of disappearing jobs and services in the countryside and emerging class-relations, permeated with assumptions about cultural activities, the region has experienced tensions between the culture-centred Setos and those distancing themselves from this or even opposing it. In this context, the youth find themselves categorised according to not only their own preferences and judged against the regional identity politics, but also their family's social position. Whilst still forming their own understanding of where they belong, the youth are at the receiving end of negative identity politics which 'purifies' a region symbolically for a local minority group. The Seto case study can, therefore, be expected to offer some insight into a particular kind of cultural conflict, the creation of identities as a minority or a majority, and its juxtapositions with class-making amidst national discussions about the role of culture and the economy. The following research questions will be addressed in the following analysis:

- What kinds of stigma are created in the conditions of new and celebrated cultural minority hegemony?
- How do the non-minority young people experience these stigmata and how do they rationalise these?
- What kinds of obstructions and loss of opportunities do they consider to have been triggered in this process of stigmatisation or have experienced personally to result from this?
- What are their own responses in practice or in attitudes to living with such reality and what meaning do they see these responses to have?

## 2. Methods

The Seto case study was based on the recorded and/or noted semi-structured interviews with young people primarily in Karitsa municipality but also in Tartu and Tallinn where some of the young people had moved. Further, context of the case has been obtained during long-term participant observation in the Seto region and from background interviews with older individuals in Saadoja municipality and in Karitsa municipality. Conversations and interviews with key players in local life, participating in meetings discussing youth related issues, and observations in relevant Facebook groups were another data source for contextualising the situation and/or the opinions of the youth.

The conversations were recorded whenever possible but in many spontaneous situations, they would have been hindered by such interventions. Those conversations were reconstructed afterwards from memory. Some pictures were taken during the participant observations of the youth, but some of these situations were awkward: some young people did pose for pictures during the activities but glanced uncomfortably when I took out my camera any other time. Therefore, additional pictures have been obtained from Facebook posts to clarify presence or absence of some individuals but not used otherwise in the analysis. The fieldwork for contextualising the issues in the studied municipality and gaining access has taken about 90 days between March and July 2017; fieldwork specifically focusing on the youth lasted 35 days between June and August 2017, in October 2017 and in January 2018, in addition, specific Facebook groups have been followed since March 2017 but due to the sporadic nature of such research, it is hard to put these into numbers. Observing the Facebook groups was useful to provide information both about the types of events the youth participated in as well as the topics that appeared to trigger interest and conflict.

The interviews were carried out with 20 individuals (between 14 and 29 years old, see Appendix) that can be divided roughly to two groups – those under 16 and those over 25. It appeared that the 16-25 group, possibly for educational reasons, was the least attainable locally: local schools are all for up to 16 year olds, after that age nearly all children join schools away from the area and their friends groups and activities appeared to have also shifted. Those over 25 seemed to be in a different place in their lives and were far more approachable and willing or able to be interviewed. Had more in this age group been willing to be interviewed, more substantial and further ranging information might have been obtained. However, more than half of those approached, whilst agreeing first with the mediating acquaintance that they were interested, did not, in fact, return emails or calls and, thus, it was eventually not possible to get more interviewees from this group.

The interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 1.5 hours, with the average of 38 minutes. All the interviews with younger youth were less than 35 minutes long, and two were very brief: one young man who I thought to have actually created more of a rapport already during the participant observation clearly disliked having to give answers to any questions from the start, and no matter which topic I tried to introduce, his replies were one syllable. Another young man, although not trying to make a point of derailing the interview, also did not expand on any topic. Many of the youth gave “I don’t know” replies to questions that had nothing to do with knowledge, and perhaps the set-up at school was contributing to this. All the interviews with the older youth lasted an hour or more.

Originally, I had hoped that the youngsters were accessible via the Karitsa municipality youth centre, the head of which was supportive of the research and suggested it would be easy to get the youth to

talk. She proposed to conduct group interviews. Before taking this any further, I suggested to get to know the youth during a day out with a fun activity they might enjoy, and the youth worker identified a 'survival course' as something the youngsters would be more interested in than, for instance, a photography course. During the course, which lasted a day and a half, it became very clear that a group interview would not offer any results as the main form of communication in group situations was mockery and even confrontation of the adult leading the survival course, plus mild bantering with the youth worker. Whilst I was not seen to be a similar potential target and during various games, I felt that I was seen to be part of the group; I was certainly also treated with cautiousness. Similar trips away might have had the effect of allowing me to get closer to the youth but nothing else similar was organised during the time I was there. In group situations, the youth's main bonding strategy was teasing each other and "taking the mickey" out of any serious topic – something which convinced also the youth worker that finding a way to interview the youth separately might be a better approach. We advertised a photography competition with prizes to various free time activities that the youth worker suggested would be popular, and were hoping for active participation. Only two youth participated and were also interviewed at the youth centre. It was also expected that not all youth go to the youth centre, and indeed, two of the youth at school reported that they never go there. On the other hand, neither the youth centre nor the school were providing access to those youth who did not participate and did not go to school in the centralised village where the school was located. This was an important consideration as the choice of school has been a contentious issue and partly reflects the different attitudes towards the municipal leaders that parents hold.

Further interviews were eventually secured when the youth worker came up with the idea that the youth will certainly be willing to be interviewed if they can miss school. With the approval of the director of the school and the teachers, I interviewed another nine local teenagers (aged between 14 and 16) at school during the school hours, in an empty classroom. Some of the interviews were unexpectedly short and taciturn, and with one of the boys turning to the strategy of one-syllable answers clearly to make a point that I cannot make him say anything and/or that he is not interested in any of the questions, despite the fact that these were about him. This age group, therefore, proved to be quite a challenge both for creating rapport and for interviewing. During participant observations, light-heartedness and ability to tease on the one hand, and to take a joke on the other, were very central in their conversations and mutuality, making it difficult to approach any topic of problems and dislikes they experienced as a group or as individuals.

The remaining interviews were carried out as follows: three in other places in Estonia (Tallinn and Tartu) with young women who had moved there to work or study and two young women and three young men were interviewed in a café in Atsi village (on separate occasions). One interview was carried out over Skype as the person was not available any other way.

One of the main ethical issues was receiving consent from the parents as the children were either not interested enough or their relationship with the parents close enough to approach them with this request. This was eventually overcome with the help of the youth worker. The other potentially problematic issue was the location of the interviews with the older youth in the South East of the country - they all agreed to meet in a café in the centre of one of the most actively Seto villages. The café itself is run by two Seto activists and in many ways, represents the problem that those young people perceived to be central in Seto country. However, as they themselves suggested this location (it is, admittedly, one of the only, if not the main public meeting place and they might have perceived

it as such rather than as the ‘enemy base’), I did everything to ensure that we were away from the earshot of the staff or other guests – three of the interviews were carried out in a separate room with the door closed and two outside. The interviewees did not appear to be inhibited at all by the fact that they shared this space with people whose likes they criticised, which may suggest that the animosity is greater in words directed at a stranger such as a researcher than how it is presented in daily interactions. In order to make sure that the interviewees were aware of the potentially problematic situation, I did raise this with them at the beginning of the interview but this was met with indifference or even certain giggling, suggesting, and perhaps, that they were perfectly aware of entering ‘enemy’ territory but possibly saw this as a challenge to the opponents, or an opportunity to make their views known indirectly, without confronting the other side. In the case of at least one interviewee, the hosts were aware of their critical stance but did not show their unease in any way; on the contrary, they mentioned that they had been repeatedly approached by one of the hosts who is also politically active to join their party.

The period of fieldwork was possibly one of the most volatile and confrontational of many years, as the push for amalgamation triggered both high attendance and interest as well as (verbal) conflicts during Karitsa municipality’s council meetings. People came together also for protests and participated in a number of referenda and other surveys organised either by the state or by the councils. It is, therefore, the most likely period to have surfaced polarisation in ways that would not have been obvious and may have aggravated some people’s opinions. On the other hand, methodologically, this is hardly a problem as it is the nature of the case studies to concentrate on the specific and unusual cases to highlight particular human interactions. This reality, however, may have also had the opposite effect in some cases and might have potentially made some people tired of the topic and defiantly disinterested, which could affect the data. The older youth were clearly engaged and interested in the topic. Only the younger group were deeply disinterested, and it is unlikely that they had more exposure to those topics than other groups. Considering that this is exactly the opposite to the current regional climate and expectations for the local future, both discursively as well as in various practical steps taken, this disinterest in itself constitutes a stigma that these youth are identified with.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed with NVivo and the following themes emerged as most central: distancing from the Seto culture; unfairness of the funding decisions/access to opportunities; obstructions to involvement; lack of interest; migration. The fieldnotes were scanned with such keywords as “funding”, “*setotamine*”, “youth/young”, “opportunities”, “centralised villages” etc as well as the names of some places, events and individuals to provide context and links to other topics to form extended cases with greater analytical power.

### **3. Key Findings**

#### ***3.1 Sites, agents/agencies and forms of conflict in Setomaa***

##### ***3.1.1 Conflict and hegemony***

The Seto represent a curious example of a minority that has become so successful and dominant, and so central in building the local identity that it has created a new minority within. It has become a central identifier in the region in a uniform way locally, but perhaps more importantly nationally and symbolically, it has become a hegemony; furthermore, a hegemony with which some - estimated half



of the local people – identify their disgruntlements. It has also and crucially for this study, taken on the function of a tool to restructure the society in the situation of new class emergence. This is further aggravated by the institutional support the Seto culture has received over the last 15 years. As Fischer (1983) points out, funding bodies are the key institutions in both, the reproduction as well as the production of cultural hegemony. The awareness, but also dislike of such reality, documented for example in Annist (2009; 2013), has been present for many years, trickling down from families to the young people. Not only do such families, left aside in this restructured society, see this to epitomise an unfair and undeserved capital acquired by some Seto, they also recognise that it has deprived the rest of the region and population of something important; and has switched the local focus politically from local people to only select people or areas which have associations with Seto activities.

...there was this support for the large families – we knew that parents do the Seto things [get it]. Who sang in the [Seto] choir – then that family got [the money]. Then you could just see why and where the money went. (Siiri, older youth)

See, it's different in Kõrbõ village. There is nothing here. This is why we have been given the role of an orphan. When they build a bus stop house in [Atsi village], ours can leave as it is as not many tourists come there. Like I found recently that there are these new village signs, with Seto pattern. They could have done that in Kõrbõ village too, why not? Would be nice, right? But no. So such small details that no one else notices, but [I] myself look and see how Kõrbõ village has been left aside. (Meeli, older youth)

Seto is for them, well, they see this as a source of income and how to get by here in the periphery. I have nothing against this, each can find a way to cope, but there is a limit to this. You cannot impose that this is the only way to get by. So this is why certain groups here cannot get along here... (Marko, older youth)

The sites for such conflicts have changed over time. One of the earliest examples of this I encountered in the field was in 2000s during a Seto event in a village (see also Annist, 2013). I participated in a traditional open-air village party, a *kirmask*. Some of the people at the party were non-Seto, some were returnees after years spent studying outside Setomaa, and some were locals known in the Seto heritage setting. Many were wearing Seto costumes or parts of costumes. A group of younger people were playing *karmošk*s, Russian button accordions. *Leelo*<sup>4</sup> singing sprang up spontaneously here and there, and a few foreigners with some exotic instruments were making the environment even folksier. In the opposite corner of the party grounds, a group of local youth set up their own alternative musical environment – with a CD-player and pop music. They played it loud enough to disturb some of the Seto music and made a few attempts to bring their music more to the centre of attention. Although their attempts were occasionally successful, control remained in the hands of the Setos and

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<sup>4</sup> Polyphonic singing tradition (on the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list since 2009) with one lead singer delivering a verse line followed by a choir joining in for the final syllables to repeat the whole line. Whilst lyrics are repeated, borrowed and amended across time and geographic locations, the lead singers do also make up whole songs on the spot. The choirs primarily consist of women only but there are also some all-male choirs. At parties, *leelo*-singing is accessible to the audience as well who can join in or suggest songs. The *leelo*-choirs are present at most public events in the area, performing wearing the full folk costume. The pejorative term *setotamine* is often attached to the singing and presence of the choirs.

their fans. Eventually, leelo singing won the ground and the local youngsters returned to the opposite part of the field. As I was, at the time, studying the Seto rather than those not those uninterested or opposed to Setoness, I left with the former. However, one of my first interviewees of the older youth group in 2017 was a young man, who had been part of this group as a teenager. He recalled the event, although not in great detail as he said he had been ‘too drunk’ and too interested in the pretty girls to remember much else. He did mention his anger about the events, however:

After they ‘sang us off’, I just went around and wanted to kick someone so bad. Had anyone come near me, I would have. Yeah, I was drunk too. Not something I do anymore but boy I wanted to that day. (Indrek, older youth)

Interestingly, one of the Seto activists commented to me in passing at the time that a traditional Seto party would have been exactly like that – everyone doing their own thing without being bothered by the neighbouring singing or dancing ‘corner.’ Of course, this could be interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate the all-inclusive, permissive nature of the Seto culture. It might equally be seen as the ultimate demonstration of the success of Seto hegemony, so successful that any attempt at resistance would simply become incorporated into the schema of the dominant culture. From the point of view of the local youngsters, it was another experience of exclusion, as the party grounds remained dominated by the folk event. It was during those years in the 2000s when most of the older interviewees were teenagers and had experienced similar ‘invasions’ where Seto visibility was rapidly increasing. Although none of the other interviewees had a similar recollection of direct attempts at confronting the Seto dominance, other direct conflicts described in various recollections included tearing down or soiling the ads for Seto events in the village and gate crashing events. One of the Seto activists recognises the danger signs:

[We are] raising enemies in our midst, people should not be pressurized...[Some activists] have not accepted their own people, we are scaring off the new generation. (Oskar, Seto activist)

Most Seto activists, however, put this down to the unwillingness of the remaining locals not involved in organising to pay the price for the tickets, and expecting that everything is offered to ‘them’ for free.

### 3.1.2 Political obstructions

The more recent conflicts are related – or are felt to be related – to the position of, on the one hand, the Seto culture has in the region, but on the other hand, also the Seto ‘elite’; the cultural, symbolic and social capital-rich group of people who are seen to get all the funds for all the projects, whilst the rest of the population and issues suffer.

As one example, Siiri described the attempt her and her peer group to develop an area in Atsi village near the lake.

We had a big group something like 6-7 years ago, we still get on. We went to the council to get that lake sorted – to clean it up. We did all the work, got the plan on the paper in a really detailed way and everything, we had these big plans how to develop it, and so we presented it to them. And they just rejected it. They said they

have other priorities....That really threw us, we were so ready – but they just rejected it. It was one of the reasons for bitterness of the young people towards the municipality. (Siiri, older youth)

Similar experiences were reported by Ergo (older youth) whose friends' group similarly had put forward a proposal to clear a spot for benches and a grill near Kõrbõ village. They had experienced similar rejection, and Ergo's take on this was very similar to that of Siiri's:

They just don't care about anything else than their Seto issues. You go there with your proposal and they just see this as trouble.

The same events were also recalled by Meeli who belonged to the same friend's group.

The political conflict involves also mild, subtle pressure not to have the opposing views even on the social media, as Indrek (older youth) experienced when expressing his critical views on Facebook:

I: But then I pulled out as there was so much of this spitting around...

A: How do you mean, someone responded to you publicly in this way?

I: No, personal calls were made and I was asked why am I doing this and...as if I cannot.

The same young man was approached by the Seto representatives to join the political party, which he rejected. He did not join the political opposition either, feeling that he is not around enough as a pendulum migrant – but he emphasised several times 'The time might come [that I will join the opposition]'

### 3.1.3 Social and cultural dispossession

Seto culture is, on the one hand, something that dominates the everyday life of the locals. The monopolisation of what Seto is by the Seto heritage activists has restricted access to defining it to those not clearly engaging with the heritage side of Setoness. Living legitimately as Seto within the sphere that these young people inhabit is, somehow, constantly in doubt and has contributed to their removing themselves from the competition. This cultural dispossession, to borrow a concept from an ethnography on Bulgarian peasants loss of access to their identity as culturally grounded (see Creed, 2011) is coupled with certain cynicism that the greater access to cultural capital does not derive from the greater knowledge of Seto culture of the Seto activists:

Around Atsi village, I have noticed that paasapäev (local holiday), a really important day for the Seto...but the 'big Seto' [elite] around here do not participate, they are not interested...so it raises the question what is it that this is about actually? If it is so important for the community and the people, how come it can be ignored like this? Yet [folk] costumes are put on, and [they] go to some Udmurtia to sing and represent the Seto abroad...This creates bitterness towards these people. They demonstrate they are Seto when it suits them and when it is useful for them. (Siiri, older youth)

Siiri (older youth) worked at the museum in Atsi village during the summer. She described how she kept seeing the tourist buses going into the village centre just across the field, but never coming to the museum. One day, the mystery was solved:



Then one day we had this group [of tourists] whose guide was from somewhere else in South Estonia so she took the group to the museum – an unusual event. When Laine [an adult staff member at the museum] asked [what had they had heard about the museum at the village centre], they told us that [the Seto activists there] had expressed the attitude that – oh, well, there is nothing interesting at the museum.

So it really felt they do it for themselves...

The same view of ‘everyone for themselves’ was repeated in other interviews and conversations. But people clearly recognised the selective nature of this – Seto culture allowed more opportunities yet Seto activists were seen not to make an effort to spread their fortune –

Laine asked Eero [a Seto activist] that, you know, otherwise you are always saying Setos and collaboration and...but why are you not collaborating with the museum?

When I asked whether it was felt that joining in and flaunting their own Seto heritage was the solution, most did not feel they even could, or wanted, and many older youth mentioned they had ‘drifted away’ from ‘Seto stuff’ (setondus).

I have never done any of those things here, it would really not work to suddenly take it up and start, I don’t know, participating in the café days [a two day event every summer where different homesteads open their doors to public and offer meals, often somewhat traditional]. (Riina, older youth)

I am absolutely not interested in the Seto stuff anymore. (Meeli, older youth)

But furthermore, this was not necessarily considered even to be key. I asked Siiri who had given a detailed account of unfairness at the local council funding schemes whether her family might have considered they should send a family member to a leelo choir to increase their chances of getting funds for building a bore well.

Not at all. It was joked instead that one should start getting along with [this or that person] to get the money... (Siiri, older youth)

In other words, the monopolisation was seen to extend further from the cultural sphere into the social sphere, the dispossession taking place, therefore, with both. This is a more generally observable process in rural areas where the fragmentation of social relations has aggravated the misfortunes of a sector of the population (see also Annist, 2015).

For the younger youth, the ‘Seto thing’ is brushed aside as unimportant. Their whole attitude to Seto issues is more one of rejection and passive distancing rather than openly worded resentment, disappointment and lived struggle that the older youth are describing.

It’s pointless, the Seto thing, as there are so few of them. There is no use [for it] for other people... It’s a kind of waste of money. (Kaarel, youth at school)

This lack of interest extends to free time activities on offer in the region (‘I don’t go out here’, as Triin and Kaarel explicitly stated). The youngsters plan their free time around ‘getaways’ and travel away

from the region to various leisure centres. This is also often organised by the youth centre which most of my younger respondents went to. The activities were mostly described as ‘just being’, hanging out, and planning the next ‘getaway’. One of the main locally organised activities and the most popular event for the youth are rally competitions on a field between the Kõrbõ and Atsi villages. This brings together the youth who go to the youth centre and some who go there less often but are friends with those frequenting. Otherwise, non-confrontational and in no way Seto specific events, sometimes funded by different EU bodies, the youth reported how the local police is on the alert in case they would drive onto the roads – the law would forbid that for the under 18 year olds. Problems have been avoided so far, and the youth are quite proud of these occasions and their achievements in speed. More recently (after the end of the fieldwork), the youth centre has also been offering information on courses and organises travel there.

Disregarding these events, youth non-presence at Seto events is problematised by the Seto activists. It is seen as a worrying passivity – but they do not connect this to the lack of opportunities for those uninterested in Seto-centred activities. Instead, they link the lack of Seto mindedness with a general lack of interest and activism. The same view is common amongst the younger Seto-minded people too, most typically stated as: ‘They just don’t care’. Furthermore, Seto activists neutralise the potential criticism that youth lack of involvement could be seen as with their view that these youngsters are from families that are ‘not cultured’, have ‘no values’ and have ‘lost their culture’. The interviews I have had with the representatives of the Seto elite demonstrate that they see a link between a lack of keenness in Seto culture and the homes in block houses of the centralised villages. Such homes are seen to not uphold the cultural values enough:

in those apartment blocks...these people, there was this period where the young decided not to speak Seto to their children... [They] spoke in Seto with the cow but in Estonian with the calf...these houses are characterised by disappointment and bitterness and the sovkhos time is the ideal they uphold....And now that Seto culture has become visible, something they [in the block houses] used to be ashamed of has become a matter of pride...now they cannot deal with this... (Eero, Seto activist in his early 60s)

The youth are aware of this vision but also what this is implying about the value and socioeconomic position of those not Seto-minded is picked up by the youth:

They [Seto activists] think they are ultra-cultural people and others are...I don’t know, plebs...’ (Indrek, older youth)

Or another Estonian local:

It’s like...they try to create some sort of a reserve here where there are all these pure Setos and it’s actually better if the rest would leave! (Anne, older youth)

A similar sense of feeling rejected by the locals is also reflected in some Facebook rows where people became defensive and some were led to ask ‘is this only for the Seto here?’ More direct experience of this is described by young parents who have had to face various channelling or imposing forces particularly in relation to local schools.

Kõrbõ village school has then got Seto language. I said: “What is the child doing today, in the present era, with Seto language?!? When everything is in English?!?” [...] My child doesn’t need this! They’re learning less of something else, right? (Ergo, older youth)

I’d like to show you this conversation [that I had with the council head on Facebook]: he and some others, you know, they wrote that it is better indeed if such mothers [emphasises the derogatory implications of this phrase by facial and body movements] – imagine! – put their children to a non-Seto school! I just could not understand how some public figure can despise other people like this! (Meeli, older youth)

The sense that the Seto culture is so prevalent is also met with a certain mild annoyance by some:

Yes we are Seto but we don’t need to...advertise this so much... [...] People don’t always want to listen to leelo. Yes, it is the culture [here] but it’s not necessary to always stress that one line...I don’t feel that I must do something because I am Seto...it does not fit me... (Riina, older youth)

Seto language has not been taught to any of the respondents themselves – this was introduced more recently. But the thought of it is not appealing.

A: Do your parents speak Seto?

Urmast (school youth): Yeap

A: Can you as well?

U: Mkm [No]

A: Was it not taught at school?

U: They started when we were already bigger so we were not taught [the language].

A: Not at all? Would you have liked to [have it taught to you]?

U: No

A: Why not?

U: Not necessary

A: Why not?

U: Just not necessary.

### ***3.2 Consequences and constraints: migration and lack of opportunities***

Development of any hegemonies inevitably creates or affirms exclusions. Establishing a cultural hegemony triggers the weakening or omission of alternative versions of local culture; institutionalised activities lead to the success of certain spheres, approaches and values, while alternatives wither.

It is, however, not only the importance of Seto culture that dominates the life of the young locals. It is due to their lack of connection to the Seto culture that is seen to make them part of a social strata that is emerging as lower. It ties in with a similar process going on in the rest of the country, and possibly, more generally in the countries that have started stratifying relatively recently and in

relation to the impact of neoliberal policies and practices on society. The challenge for the youngsters has, therefore, been not simply this environment where a particular culture has become hegemonic and appears to have limited the opportunities locally to what they do not feel they can or want to partake in. The challenge is in the way it is tied in with social hierarchy that places them as not only different, but inferior for the region, as well as socio-economically. The effect of this, whilst also creating resentment and critique amongst the older youth, is most prominently creating passivity. The avenues to this are difficult to grasp but Indrek's (older youth) description offers a revealing take:

'A: So why did you give up [on your critique on Facebook]?

I: No I just....I just could not be bothered<sup>5</sup> anymore...all of this is just...too much, I cannot be bothered...I don't...I think [the Seto topic] is already for so many complete bollocks, they know nothing will change...and I personally think it is getting worse or if it is not getting worse then at least nothing is getting better...

The same attitude is reflected in the younger youth complete withdrawal from the topic and their weary lack of interest in anything related to their surrounding cultural revival. Whilst the older youth all expressed negative views on this, the younger youth expressed instead lack of interest and rejection of Seto culture. Several of them say more or less the same thing: 'I don't hate that Seto thing but...'

We don't talk about the Seto stuff at all. Well, at least we don't talk about this between ourselves; if it comes up [from someone else] then it does... (Triin, younger youth)

Indrek recognises that the ability to celebrate Seto culture – or any culture for that matter – is related to socio-economic circumstances:

I don't know...when the economic activities are there, yes, then cultural activities work as well but...if people struggle then...yeah, sure you would want to go to a party or burst into singing...' (Indrek, older youth)

Those critical of the Seto emphasis suggest further that the economic opportunities and efforts to create circumstances in which these can arise are omitted in the name of cultural matters. This view, reflected also in the political struggles over the last year, has far reaching consequences. Eventually, such a lack of opportunities locally results in migration, as the older youth are pointing out. Nearly every one of the older youth has either left the region themselves or reports to be the only one in their peer group to still be around. Marko (older youth) laughs that he is 'The only fool who stayed'.

All those my age have left. The majority have moved away. (Riina, older youth)

...those who have no anchor here, they have left. (Marko, older youth)

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<sup>5</sup> 'Ei viitsi' is a hard to translate word in Estonian as 'cannot be bothered' does not actually fully convey the array of meanings in it. 'Ei viitsi' refers to feeling overwhelmed and under-resourced to deal with something as well as feeling that one just does not care about the topic.

‘For the young there right now...It’s the lack of opportunities....you can say even peripheralization...especially in the smaller places. (Viiu, older youth)

The response of the Seto activists appears to be one of appealing to the ‘cultural obligations’ of the inhabitants:

Those who leave, they don’t recognize you need to work hard to get here... (Eero, Seto activist)

Even the young themselves rationalise these decisions along the lines of worthiness, depending on their own circumstances:

...All the youth who have left, they are mostly those with higher education...and I think this background and this attitude [towards local life] there is thus also very different. They are perhaps happier with their choices [than those left behind], they have had the opportunities... (Viiu, older youth)

### ***3.3 Responses: passivity and disgruntlement***

The prevailing response to the reality that youngsters are facing is one of passive rejection or simple airing of disgruntlement. As a group, they have few features in common, not enough to be able to respond with any kind of social mobilisation. In the rare cases that some kind of common identity has emerged (as in the case of Indrek who was trying to organise some people around the identity as non-Seto in the region), this has eventually faded – however, last year’s activism over the municipal amalgamations might have planted the seeds to newly found recognition of some kind of common interest. Whether such oppositional identity is useful, remains untainted by various other struggles and lasts, also benefiting the younger generation remains to be seen. None of the respondents had been involved themselves which does suggest a certain bystander attitude from this age group. The most common response also reflected in the local statistics is migration – whether this is a direct result of the same passive rejection or disgruntlement or simple lack of opportunities to find a suitable job without a particular relation to the Seto issues is, of course, difficult to tell with any certainty.

Most of the younger youth would like to stay or return after their studies. Surrendering to the reality of it being impossible may only come with time, as one of the older youth with such experience described:

I do think I would like to go back...but there is nothing there I could do. So for now it will be the summer home hopefully. (Viiu, older youth)

It appears that the debilitating forces that have come together in this region have left little room for the young to respond in any meaningful way. The positive signs hide in the almost unanimous expression of liking the peace and quiet of where they live but with all the constraints and rejections; this might not be enough to enable the youth uninterested in Seto life to stay and change the circumstances. However, paradoxically, the act of migration itself is something that is likely to be a



wake-up call to politicians and activists, some of whom appear to imagine the possibility of some sort of ‘purified Seto reality’, only inhabited by committed Setos.

The willingness of the older youth to take initiative suggests that they do both see the need and have the knowledge to organise things in their interest. Further, some possibilities are also in organising around village identity as opposed to regional, thus, Seto identity, and awareness of the need to support this is slowly emerging in the Seto circles. Also, the young Seto activists themselves are often critical of the purified Setoness. A ‘heritage theatre’, organised by young women in their mid to late 20s has presented many critical plays, and the museum in Atsi village has had an exhibition questioning the singular version of Setoness. Whilst still within the Seto heritage space, the need for a more open local identity is recognised.

This conflict between the ‘heritage Setos’ and the remaining locals is not intergenerational and has also been there for the older generations. They have carved it out for the young and it has deepened along with the deepening of the new class divisions to the point that the two groups are involved in activities where the participants barely overlap. Such institutions as the youth centre do not appear to have taken the role of creating a common identity, being seen as simply the place to hang out and spend time. However, the activities there do provide the space and, thus, the chance to take it a step further and offer opportunities outside heritage Setoness.

The individuals, who have attempted to achieve change so far and have experienced failure, may also still come back. The new amalgamated Setomaa municipality will create new circumstances where perhaps the Seto identity is felt to be secure enough not to undermine and reject alternative activities.

## 4. Conclusions

The young people in the Seto ethnic region in South Eastern Estonia have experienced conflicts in relation to the hegemonic role that the Seto culture has taken in the region and that it is felt to have superseded people for whom Seto heritage is secondary or unimportant. This reality has framed the lives of the young in ways that make them feel unwelcome, and labels them as being less valuable, even celebrating their migration – in essence, they have experienced stigmatisation in relation to their lack of cultural identity in a newly emerged hegemonically heritage oriented region.

Seto identity has become central in the region in a uniform way both locally, nationally and symbolically. This is supported institutionally as finances are offered to the Seto culture specific activities. Such support has become the centre of local disgruntlements amongst those locals who do not identify with heritage-based Setoness. It is recognised to benefit the Setos economically, and the cultural alliances are the source of further social allegiances which drain the rest of the population of both opportunities as well as hope. Crucially for this study, such processes have become a tool to restructure the society in situations where new classes are emerging. As a result, divisions emerge along the economic lines partly because of the cultural lines, diminishing the opportunities for those not related to the cultural activities. The studied local youngsters, all from families that do not identify themselves as Seto activists, are considered to be culturally unrooted; their homes hybrid, not supporting, sustaining or enhancing the local heritage.

Whilst the Seto may be dominant or be seen as dominant, the disgruntled local minority – nationally a majority – respond in ways that reject the identity, suspect the “heritage Seto” to be corrupt and selfish, as well as move away. The latter response has perhaps the greatest, albeit diffuse effect on the local politicians as loss of population is one of the major issues regionally. It has a diffuse effect however, as the reasons for this are not necessarily recognised to have to do with what the critics would put it down to: to the excessive emphasis on Seto culture. Rejection and suspicions have the effect of creating a certain stand-off which also brings attention to the issue no matter how hard it is denied.

This kind of challenge is, however, to some degree dissipated by the manner in which the local youth with little interest in Seto heritage are stigmatised. The cultural divisions are transposed onto an emerging social hierarchy that places them as not only different, but inferior for the region, as well as socio-economically. Their critique and responses, therefore, are presented as at least partly arising from this, and as such, reflecting their lack of roots, substance and relevance to the region, rather than the issues that could be solved by addressing the problem of exclusion in the current tendency towards cultural fundamentalism.

In other words, the stigma experienced by the youth is manifold: the stigma of non-heritage, or even Soviet hybrid identity is related to the stigma of belonging to “uncultured and rootless” lower class, a new, emerging identity; in turn, the response of passivity or rejection and even migration of the youth is further reinforcing their inferior, failing status in the region. The obstructions on their way to contribute to local life as well as the feeling that the region is not providing them the same range of opportunities as there might be in other regions is seen by many of the respondent to link to Seto focus in the region, whether or not this is actually the case. They remove themselves from being involved in local activities and even from confronting the challenges, making them less visible and able to have an impact. To add insult to injury, lack of participation is taken as further indication of the inferiority of the young locals who do not align themselves with the Seto heritage culture. This may further temper their chances of finding successful avenues to present critique and finding solutions. Instead, they spend their time in smaller groups, often away from the Seto region itself. It is possible that them staying away has the potential of carving out more common features which enable them to move forward together in the future.

Whilst 10-15 years ago, more forceful rejections and attempts to regain the cultural ground to more ‘mainstream’, global youthful sounds and activities were common, today’s younger youth do not appear to pose such challenges to Seto events and do not participate in the protests of the older generation either. The response of the youth, apart from recognising the unfairness of both such generalising attitudes, and loss of opportunities for themselves or rejections of their efforts, is rejecting Seto heritage culture even further. They do not feel they can or even should make an effort and incorporate Seto heritage in their lives in order to be more successful. This rejection can be considered on some levels an innovative positive reaction that would sustain alternatives in the region where some are politically airing the view of the need to strive for purity. Further, as a parallel critique of this purity discourse is emerging from amidst the young with Seto heritage interest, awareness of the need for a more complex and inclusive local atmosphere could be possible in the future.

## 5. Future analysis

The Seto case is directly related to the economic dimension as the cultural identity has remarkable implications on the class and economic status of the youth. Furthermore, as leisure spaces were one of the sites of conflict, some data may be relevant for that aspect of the cluster, too. Not all of the data on the role of schools in framing young people's lives was included in the above analysis but could contribute into the education cluster.

The data from WP4 could be seen as confirmation of the link between lower socio-economic status and lack of trust of politicians and lack of belief in the ability to have an influence. Political and civic engagement is low in the rural regions, and possibly reflects on the issues raised in the case study. The low expectations that in particular the rural dwellers have on immigrants' value in the society might align with the issues of inclusion described in the case study.

Whilst notable differences have taken place between 2008 and 2017 in Estonia. The case study offers insight into the passivity of Estonian youth and their relative lack of political activism and participation in data from WP4. Further links and interest could be seen in the data on belonging-based concern amongst the youth.

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## Appendix: Table of respondents' socio-demographic data

Pseudonym	Gender and Age	Socio-economic status	Location	Family status	Ethnic status	Link to Setomaa
1. Siiri	F 26	Employed	Tallinn	Single	Seto	Born, school, migrated but visits regularly
2. Meeli	F 29	Employed, accountant	South East, rural	In a long distance relationship, child from a different relationship	Seto	Born, school, works there
3. Marko	M 28	Employed, teacher	South East, rural	In a relationship, child from a different relationship	Seto	Born, works there
4. Indrek	M 28	Employed, builder	Pendulum migrant, South East, rural and Northern Europe	Single, lives with mother when in Seto	Half Seto	Born, school, home nearby
5. Ergo	M 29	Employed, builder	South East, rural	In a relationship with a child	Seto	Born, school, works there
6. Anne	F 29	Employed, office worker	Tallinn	Married with children	Estonian	Has lived in Seto, migrated
7. Riina	F 29	Employed, office worker in Tartu	Tartu	In a relationship	Seto	Born, migrated
8. Viiu	F 28	Student	Tartu	In a relationship	Seto	Grandparents Seto, frequent visitor
9. Üllar	M 15	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with family members	Seto	Born, at school
10. Kaire	F 15	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with family members	Seto	Born, at school
11. Grete	F 14	Pupil	SE, rural	Parents divorced, lives with mother	Seto	Born, at school
12. Nelli	F 15	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with family members	Estonian	Born elsewhere, at school



13. Triin	F 15	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with grandmother	Estonian	Born elsewhere, at school
14. Rain	M 14	Pupil	SE, rural	Parents divorced, lives with mother	Seto	Born, at school
15. Pärtel	M 15	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with family members (incl uncles)	Estonian	Born, at school
16. Kaarel	M 15	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with family members	Is not sure	Born at school
17. Urmas	M 15	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with family members	Half Seto, half Estonian	Born, at school
18. Minni	F 16	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with mother and some of the siblings	Seto	Born, at school elsewhere
19. Kata	F 17	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with parents	Seto	Born, at school elsewhere
20. Reelika	F 16	Pupil	SE, rural	Lives with family members	Estonian	Born and at school elsewhere, lives here