



National POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: ESTONIA (1 OF 2)

Struggling against hegemony: Rural youth in Seto country

October 2018

INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society. In Estonia, our research focussed on young people who are engaged in a distanced relationship with their home region and who do not feel related to the nationally and internationally supported local heritage culture, Seto culture.

This policy brief is concerned with the way such circumstances alienate young people from local life and potentially turn them into unengaged citizens. The divide between the highly regarded heritage elites and citizens, and the rest of the population contributes to a disengaged citizenry and an unintegrated society. It can create new dimensions of stratification and low self-worth amongst a certain section of the population. The young people studied demonstrated a clear lack of interest in the local life and were disappointed with what they felt was a bias towards the Seto enthusiasts, and believed that a patronage system had developed in the region where such individuals are unfairly privileged. Furthermore, the youths have had direct experiences of lack of support or interest from the political bodies to their projects which they see partly as related to lack of interest in anything not relating to Seto culture. The divisive and fragmenting potential in these grievances comes partly from the approach of Seto activists and decision-makers towards those who are uninterested in heritage culture. For the activists, this indifference is a sign of their lack of culture and roots, a lack of education and a signal of low status, which is seen not as a concern to be addressed but as a justification for exactly the opposite.

These policy recommendations are primarily directed towards local and national policy-makers, and national funders, but also towards other local and national stakeholders (entrepreneurs, non-governmental activists, etc.) and the representatives of international funding bodies, especially those working on various heritage programmes because similar issues are likely to be reflected in some other situations across the regions where diversification has included increased support to heritage culture. The aim of the recommendations is to, firstly, increase awareness of the effects of heritage funding on creating a particular disengaged heritage elite and heritage citizenry at the expense of the engagement and self-worth of the rest of the population. The latter become less involved in their home region, are more likely to

migrate, and may undermine the very objectives of the heritage group. Secondly, considering the lack of population in peripheral regions, encouraging locals engage is very much in the interest of both local and national policy makers. Thirdly, the ability to cross the various divides and value the variety of activities that people engaged in needs to be supported, and its local, national and global value recognised.

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural youth in Seto country, Estonia, do not participate in the local activities or decision making, and have expressed disappointment in and appear to disengage from local life. They have not felt support from the local politicians which they see, at least partly, as related to the fact that their interests are not very high in the local agenda. Hence, such local people, including youth, do not engage with local political activities nor everyday local activities more generally.

There is animosity and suspicion towards the people in Seto circles who are seen to unfairly command the funds and attention due to their cultural heritage position. This forms a barrier against willingness to work towards the same goals.

In turn, the heritage elites regard the rest of the population as uneducated and without potential to get involved – hence barriers are also established from the side of the Seto elite.

The population who do not engage with local life are unlikely to contribute or consider any local opportunities. As a result, migration from the area is considerable; yet some politicians have expressed the view that people uninterested in Seto cultural activities do not even belong to the area.

Support the initiatives of local youth independently of their identity

The young people involved in this research did not participate in the local activities or decision making. They have had negative experiences when trying to change something in the area: politicians have not supported their activities or have said that what they do is not a priority. A couple of cases were reported where the youth had worked hard to propose a local development project unrelated to Seto culture or identity, and when they were rejected, they felt they had wasted their energy, suspecting that the rejection came because of different local priorities. In other words, they see that what they do is not regarded as important, especially in comparison with the Seto activities. Hence, such local people, especially the youth, do not engage anymore with local political activities.

This is a lost opportunity. The policy recommendation thus on *the local policy level* would be

- ⇒ **value and support the efforts of any local group, youths in particular.** If the particular activity is problematic or impossible to achieve, **time and attention should be dedicated to** explaining this to the interested groups and **working out alternatives.**
- ⇒ **work out strategies to involve** these people in local life, which could defuse their suspicious attitude to politicians and other groups in the region, and pay off in the long run because they will likely feel more supported and on an equal footing with others. Instead of running into far more time consuming and politically costly confrontations with disgruntled groups, feeling valued with regards to forming local solutions could shift their position from disgruntlement to potentially willing to work towards common goals.

The groundwork for valuing such groups and individuals could be laid on ***the national policy level***:

- ⇒ **change the limitation of the current focus of what constitutes a successful citizen** from that either profit-oriented entrepreneurship or various forms of heritage activism (political, NGO etc) towards one that recognises other forms of activities as valuable for the society, especially in the long run.
- ⇒ **value and support local adaptive strategies** such as subsistence gardening and small-scale local living skills.

Finally, on the ***international level***:

- ⇒ supported heritage listed regions **must take into consideration the diversity of local interest groups** rather than assume a similar heritage commitment from all locals in a heritage listed region.

Support to and cooperation for local activities for varied interest groups without stigma

The research demonstrated the rural youth who have no Seto culture interests are disengaged from the general everyday local life. Their preferred activities are mostly **outside of the region**, making it more likely that they will leave the region early, even if they might have plans to return. When living in the region, they do not consider this their own “backyard” to develop and value. In other words, in addition to disengaged citizens, this situation breeds the distancing of young inhabitants from local life and activities, including engaging with neighbours, from local work, and free time opportunities. There is a certain inevitable lack of activities for youth in peripheral regions with low population numbers. However, the most involved young people are in organised activities and are more willing to participate in these.

Therefore, we recommend

- ⇒ **a positive and supportive approach to locally based activities**, independently of whether or not these are heritage based
- ⇒ **a cooperation between locally placed institutions**, including youth centres, governments, activists, entrepreneurs and a diverse number of institutions (from police and schools to NGOs etc) is needed to work out dedicated strategies to **involve youths in organising local life** (from free-time activities to apprenticeships) and **getting positively involved in their initiatives**. For example, the some local youths were involved in organising a car rally in the region; they participated willingly in this event although most of the time the same youths did not get involved in other activities in the region and as a result, are seen as passive.

There is, however, little support from the rest of the population and institutions. There is even a certain stigma as many of the youths are underage and would be arrested if driving on the road, and the police watch from the fringes to make sure this does not happen. However, instead of such hands-off vigilance, local police could instead get involved in the process of organising and supporting safety and awareness during this, or other similar events. Active engagement with young people’s initiatives pays off, not only on the level of political involvement and in creating active citizens. Being locally involved in organising free-time activities, rather than being stuck with a negative, stigmatising mindset which in turn creates a similar approach amongst the youths, would potentially help such youngsters seek and find as well as create active opportunities locally.

The existence of non-heritage identity should be recognised and valued rather than rejected

The present attitudes of the active heritage-devout inhabitants towards the rest of the population are frequently problematic; furthermore, their additional incomes from heritage bodies are not fully transparent and the general view of the rest of the population tends to be feelings of unfairness when lack of willingness to share or cooperate is felt. Whilst one party is aggrieved, the activists themselves tend to

reject those uninterested in heritage as somehow hybrid, rootless, and by extension, less valuable citizens of the region. Furthermore, even when locals themselves are aware that there is no one singular heritage community, the funding initiatives and political attention tends to stress such uniformity. Some politicians in the Seto case approach the region as ideally a purely Seto space, even expressing views that those without Seto interests are not entirely welcome and their migration is to be applauded. This in itself is problematic because all people independently of their roots and background, let alone preferences and interests, should be equally valued. Such attitudes are unhelpful and alienate a considerable proportion of the locals and undermine also the heritage maintenance.

Instead of rejecting those who are not interested in the local heritage culture, the existence of differing interests could be turned into an opportunity by:

- ⇒ **offering a safe and supportive space for all such groups to come together without stigma and hierarchies** of what is valuable locally and what is not
- ⇒ **working out ways of mutual benefit from funding and other opportunities** across different types of bodies and interests (e.g., cooperation between museums, shops, cafes as well as schools, entrepreneurs, those simply living locally but potentially able to benefit or get involved in local activism etc. as the norm)
- ⇒ **recognise that the heritage space** should consist ideally of a variety of citizens whose support to the local culture will come from their feeling welcome and equal independently of their interests.
- ⇒ **working out a local “best practice” guide** which would establish both heritage-related as well as other positive activities in the region as equally valuable for local life. In some cases, this could need further support, for example, how youth workers could be best involved in building bridges between a variety of youth groups in the region, including the heritage dedicated individuals or groups and those with highly non-local interests (e.g. internet based gaming groups etc.). Schools, youth centres as well as internet groups could advertise opportunities to apply diverse interests locally.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

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. The 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 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. 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.

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FURTHER READING	Annist, Aet 2013. Heterotopia and hegemony: Power and culture in Seto country. <i>Journal of Baltic Studies</i> , 44 (2), 249–269. 10.1080/01629778.2013.775853. Annist, Aet 2018. PROMISE Case Studies. Struggling against hegemony: rural youth in Seto country Estonia. http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Struggling-against-hegemony-rural-youth-in-Seto-country.pdf