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Published in the Slovak Republic
Russian Journal of Comparative Law
Has been issued since 2014.
E-ISSN 2413-7618
2020, 7(1): 38-46

DOI: 10.13187/rjcl.2020.1.38

<http://ejournal41.com>

More Rights Without Law? Comparing the Models of Youth Empowerment in Russia, Finland, Norway and Sweden

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Abstract

This review focuses on models of youth empowerment in Russia and in three selected Nordic states. Of the four states under consideration, only Finland has a youth-specific national law, i.e., 2016 Youth Act. Norway and Sweden generally pursue a youth-oriented policy based on the provisions of other laws, meaning that all public activities concerning young people should be assessed with the view of mainstreaming rights of young people. Russian legislation does not currently allow for decision-making to necessarily check if these decisions will match youth rights and interests. The article is based on scrutinizing sources of law, scholarly writings, and the results of the survey of student opinion, conducted during the implementation of the project on the social inclusion of youth.

Keywords: youth rights, public participation, empowerment, inclusion, youth perspective.

1. Introduction

This study surveys legal approaches to youth empowerment and participation in Russia and in three Nordic states, Finland, Sweden and Norway. The Nordic states exemplify jurisdictions where young and especially female citizens assume key positions in the government, e.g. Sanna Marin of Finland (Nurmi, Nurmi, 2019: 74). In these jurisdictions, problems related to youth political participation reflect the *ad hoc* nature of youth participation, i.e. negotiating with young people does not follow a transparent and consistent procedure.

Moreover, the need for supporting opportunities for young people to engage in social life is important, since younger people frequently relocate from rural areas in search of education and jobs, finding themselves lonely, in an unfamiliar environment. Probably, the situation in Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands differs from that of the rest of the Nordic states jurisdictions, since, with the exception of their capitals, they cannot be considered as typical urban environments with an active political culture. Yet, the issue of youth migration is relevant for these areas. In Greenland, young people migrate to the capital Nuuk or abroad to get an education (Bouckaert et al., 2017: 154). In the Faroe Islands, the emigration of particularly young females is seen as a problem (Nolsøe, 2017). In the Åland Islands, the emigration of young Ålanders is mitigated by intensified immigration from Finland, Sweden, and other states to the Islands (Spiliopoulou Åkemark et al., 2019: 3). The problems of youth marginalization remain serious due to the fact that the rural areas are sparsely populated and distances between towns and regions are considerable.

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Scholarly findings, nevertheless, suggest that even in the Nordic states, a systematic analysis of the evidence-based impact of youth empowerment is currently lacking (Knudtzon, Tjerbo, 2009). Although there are studies and projects conducted in the Nordic states on youth inclusion (see e.g. the study on youth democratic participation, and influence in Norway (Fauske et al., 2009); the study of local channels of influence for youth conducted in Norway, (Knudtzon, Tjerbo, 2009); the CAGE Nordic collaborative project on migrant youth integration through labour in the Nordic states (Gauffin, Lyytinen, 2017); the study of youth participation in legislative process (Heiskanen, Meriläinen, 2018); the ALL-YOUTH study exploring the obstacles that hamper youth engagement with society (ALL-YOUTH, 2018) or the study by the consortium of Åbo Akademi University and the University of Gävle on Promoting Social Inclusion of Youth in the Nordic States and in North-West Russia (Riekkinen, 2019a), not much is known about the outcome and impact of youth participation in decision-making in education and in the development of public services, despite the fact that, theoretically young people should be involved in relevant deliberation and consultation processes. For example, the 2009 study of the participation of youth (aged between 8 and 18) undertaken in Norway finds, *inter alia*, that while young people felt that their opinion was taken into consideration in such areas as culture and leisure activities, they did not feel a strong degree of involvement in decision-making in healthcare services, schooling and education and city/urban planning (Knudtzon, Tjerbo, 2009). Moreover, the respondents found it difficult to know if their opinions had any impact on decision- and policy-making. There may be several reasons for this. One of them concerns the lack of regular participatory opportunities emphasizing the need to engage young people in decision-making already in primary school. Thus, the problem is that the younger the person is, the less involved he is in participating in public affairs (Knudtzon, Tjerbo, 2009).

As for Russia, youth empowerment is marked by the top-down nature of youth engagement, when many youth advisory organs functions at the national and regional levels, albeit the efficacy of their actual impact on decision-making remains open (Riekkinen, 2016). The official channels for public participation appear to “pay less attention to real-life problems occurring when young people enter adulthood” (Antipov et al., 2019: 49). In all the four jurisdictions under consideration, in the vast majority of cases, the opinions of young people are vetted from prescribed options. Rarely do young people have a real opportunity to formulate an agenda for engaging in a dialogue with public authorities.

In the comparative legal field, studying this problem is complicated by a lack of a universal standard for implementing youth participation rights. The rights of youth are not taken into consideration in separate international treaties at the UN level (with the exception of underage youth covered by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). Even at the national level, not all states have adopted youth acts. Accordingly, national practices vary significantly, some of which follow the path of adopting separate youth acts (as in Finland), while others forego specific acts, pursuing, instead, a youth-sensitive policy based on existing legislation (as in Sweden, Norway, etc.). At the same time, program documents adopted by the European Union and the Council of Europe make vigorous and convincing statements regarding the need to include young people in decision-making processes and to expand opportunities for youth to participate in the conduct of public affairs (Riekkinen, 2019b). Drawing attention to youth-specific rights at the level of the EU and the Council of Europe can be explained not only by the ‘specialisation’ of international law, which gradually differentiates between different vulnerable groups based on age, such as e.g., elderly law or child law. A paradigm shift occurred in the European states in the 1990s when the costs and pressure on public welfare systems led to the need for greater public reforms. When these reforms were introduced, the urgency of rethinking the “place of youth and young people’s autonomy” became apparent as significant issues, which were “never clearly thought out in these systems” (Călăfăteanu, López, 2019). Previously, families provided support for young individuals, as nowadays in Russia, which resulted in public measures of supporting young persons being “inadequately addressed by any state support schemes” (Călăfăteanu, López, 2019). Nowadays, it is common for the European public welfare systems to assist in facilitating the independence of young persons. The Nordic experiences are also relevant for Russia in this regard: the Nordic youth support system through special allowances is designed to ensure that young people receive a quality education. If a citizen cannot prove that he or she had tried to enroll in further education

after school, social benefits will cease, and the citizen will have to resort to less favorable unemployment benefits.

2. Materials and methods

This contribution is based on scrutinizing the provisions of national law taken in conjunction with scholarly reflections on this issue. The author also reports the findings of the survey included in the project conducted under her leadership, entitled “Promoting Social Inclusion of Youth in the Northern Industrial Towns: Experiences in Finland, Sweden, and Russia” with a grant from the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2018-2020 ([Riekkinen, 2019a](#)). The project aimed at reaching students, academics, and public authorities by focusing on youth social inclusion in the context of northern industrial towns (in Finland, Sweden, and Russia). The Nordic partners are Åbo Akademi University (Finland) and University of Gävle (Sweden). The Russian partners are Baltic Federal University named after Immanuel Kant (BFU, Kaliningrad), Saint-Petersburg State University of Economics (UNECON, Saint Petersburg), and Pskov State University (Pskov). The overall goal was to raise awareness in Russia of implementing youth rights, taking into account the most optimal Nordic inclusive practices. The definition of “youth” is based on the guidelines of the Council of Europe and the European Union determining that youth comprises persons between 16 and 29 years of age. Empowerment, inclusion and participation are approached in the light of the barriers young people might face in their pursuit of self-realisation and full participation in society and public affairs.

3. Discussion

3.1. Approaching Youth Empowerment in Russia

In Russia, a national Youth Act is currently lacking. The previous Law of the USSR “On the General Principles of State Youth Policy in the USSR,” which regulated the main directions of youth policy at the federal level, is no longer in effect since 1 September 2013. Youth policy is, hence, regulated based on the provisions of other federal laws. At the same time, regional acts on youth policy are adopted in most constituent entities of the Russian Federation, resulting in sometimes contradictory provisions where in one region youth are those under 30 years of age, and in another region the threshold is 35. The maximum threshold for youth as an age group differs at the federal and at the regional level. Federal legislation establishes a 14-year minimum threshold for participation in youth public associations and an upper threshold for participation in youth public associations up to 30 years. Thus, according to the federal standard, youth are defined as persons aged between 14 to 30. With respect to the maximum age of young people, the legislation of the constituent entities in the Russian Federation establishes an age framework ranging from 30 to 35. The 2010 Law of the Oryol Region “On State Youth Policy in the Oryol Region” includes young people under the age of 35 in the category of youth. At the same time, Youth Acts in the Republic of Adygea, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and the Krasnodar Krai consider persons between 14 and 30 years of age as youth. Such a situation is possible, since Art.72 of the 1993 RF Constitution stipulates that the issues of upbringing, education, as well as social protection, directly affecting the implementation of youth policy, pertain to the joint jurisdiction of the Russian Federation and its citizens.

The lack of a federal youth act does not mean, of course, that enabling young people to participate in decision-making is not implemented in Russia. Collating youth opinions most commonly occurs via social networks and youth associations. There are, of course, consultative youth organs in Russia, e.g., a Federal Youth Parliament as well national and regional youth chambers. the Youth Parliament operates under the aegis of the RF State Duma, and at the level of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, one finds youth public chambers where young people participate in discussing issues of public significance. The All-Russian Public Organization “Unified Youth Parliamentary Movement of the Russian Federation” promotes the development of young parliamentarians and youth parliamentary structures in the Russian Federation, Yet the law does not contain a mechanism allowing these organs to acquire expertise by public authorities in order to mainstream youth perspectives on a systematic and consistent basis (information and critique of the official channels of youth participation in Russia can be found in [Riekkinen, 2016](#)). The same comment regarding an *ad hoc* basis of involvement applies to youth associations which under the law can be present during the sessions of public authorities. As for participating in surveys, feedback is increasingly sought e.g., when students are required to complete self-

evaluations at schools; high school students are asked to provide course feedback; patients can be asked to fill in various questionnaires upon the reception of health-care services, etc. As a result, Russian youth as consumers of public services also find themselves locked in formal paperwork, and are unlikely to find the time and energy to fill in more forms.

In addition, participation of young people in decision-making was proposed as a principle of youth policy in the draft of the Federal Law № 340548-6 “On the Basics of State Youth Policy in the Russian Federation.” This draft had been rejected by the Parliament in 2015. The main reason underlying this rejection was that its provisions replicate the provisions of several other federal acts: “On the Basics of Protecting the Health of Citizens in the Russian Federation”, “On Employment in the Russian Federation”, “On Public Associations”, etc. Since implementing youth policy is regulated by Russian law and subordinate regulation, these acts could address issues existing at the regional level and consolidate basic principles of youth empowerment in order to pursue youth-oriented decision-making.

An interesting observation on the differences in socialization between Russia and Finland is how the socialization process is handled at school. The Finnish primary school prepares the children for responsible social and political life, e.g. the ability to work in a team and the ability to express one’s own opinion are graded separately. By contrast, Russian schools emphasize individual leadership qualities. Finnish pupils change their seats in the classroom to learn how to get along not only with their desk-mate, as in Russia, but also with all others pupils. Later on, when reaching the minimum age for participating in public affairs, which is 16 years of age in local gatherings, the lack of regular experience of participation is manifested to a greater degree in voter turnout or antisocial protest behavior (Riekkinen, 2016). For instance, researchers Omelchenko, Maximova, Goncharova and Noyanzin in their publication “Youth Understanding of Political Protests: The Limits of Legal and Illegal” describe the results of a sociological survey of young people aged 15 to 29 years in the Altai Krai of Russia (n = 1200), conducted in December 2014 – March 2015 by the staff of the Altai State Sociology University (Omelchenko et al., 2015). Persons participating in the survey were asked to express an opinion on the possibility of using legal and illegal ways to protect their interests. The most alarming opinion was the readiness of about 1/10 of the respondents to resort to illegal methods of protecting their interests, e. g. addressing the issue to criminal leaders (15 %), blocking streets, roads (10.5 %), participation in the seizure of buildings, enterprises (10.4 %), resisting authorities with weapons (9 %). Unauthorized demonstrations can obviously lead to violence and the willful destruction of property, exemplified by the opposition protests in Moscow in the spring of 2017. Law enforcement authorities detained dozens of schoolchildren, because the rallies were not approved by the authorities, according to Russian law. Still, less than 5 % of young Russians sympathize with radical youth organizations, (the latter, nevertheless, “are very aggressive and inventive” (Gorshkov etc, 2007: 87).

One way of dealing with disaffected youth would be to design co-decisional mechanisms that allow young people to formulate agenda for discussions with authorities.

3.2. Regulating Youth Rights: Finnish, Swedish, and Norwegian Approaches

As a general observation, in the Nordic states, illegal youth protest most often manifests itself in property crimes in order to attract attention to the problems of protecting the environment or championing animal rights, e. g. breaking into the premises of mink-breeding farms or climbing on drilling stations or similar constructions, following the course of the organization GreenPeace (Litmala & Lohiniva-Kerkelä, 2005) whose followers are notorious for protesting by e.g., climbing with the mountain-climber equipment to the drilling station, perpetrating the private property regime and putting own health at risk.

The channels of communication with authorities are, as a rule, well established. The acting political parties often establish own youth departments work with young individuals. Although the constitutional systems in the Nordic states share common features (Suksi, 2018), there is no common approach in Finland, Norway and Sweden to regulating the rights of young persons. Finland opts for the model based on a national youth-specific act and the mechanisms of its implementation (Riekkinen, 2019a), while Norway and Sweden employ the existing legislation in promoting youth-friendly policies. In Finland, the 2016 Youth Act was adopted by Parliament as a means of “promoting the social inclusion of young people and provide them with opportunities to exert an influence and improve their skills and capabilities to function in society”. In Finland, there

are seven different mechanisms for involving young people in the conduct of public affairs (Riekkinen, 2019b).

At the national level, there are Youth Centers of Expertise that monitor the rights of young people. Based on this Act, each new Government adopts its own youth programme every fourth year. One of the strategic mechanisms of youth empowerment is the canvassing of youth opinions regarding this plan. Nevertheless, the totality of 'Youth opinions' about the contents of the current programme was 67 opinions received via the online consultation service Lausuntopalvelu.fi. An insignificant number of opinions were received via comments on the Ministry's website in the form of a Webropol survey and by directly addressing youth via social media (Programme, 2017: 5). To deal with this and similar problems, a mechanism exists in Finland entrusted with youth affairs in accordance with the 2016 Youth Act. To canvas the opinions of youth, the State Youth Council publishes several surveys and studies of young people in cooperation with the Finnish Youth Research Society and other research actors. The FYRS has also developed a set of youth indicators that it follows and updates. This data should be assessed at different levels of policy-making which affect youth. However, no national impact study of youth empowerment has so far been conducted.

Norway and Sweden both lack specific youth acts. However, based on the provisions of other laws dealing with the rights of youth, these states pursue a policy of youth-oriented decision-making to assess youth rights in order to mainstream these rights. The Swedish youth policy document entitled "*Med fokus på unga – en politik för goda levnadsvillkor, makt och inflytande*". With youth in focus – a policy for good living conditions, power and influence provides that all government decisions and actions that affect young people between the ages of 13 and 25 years must have a youth perspective. The document provides that all young individuals should have the power to shape their own lives and influence the direction and development of society. This youth perspective accepts that youth should be considered a diverse group of individuals with different backgrounds and different life conditions. In preparing the document, several meetings were arranged with young individuals in five cities: Stockholm, Göteborg, Jönköping, Malmö and Luleå. The monitoring system is based on indicators of youth living conditions, annual thematic in-depth analyses of these conditions and periodic studies of youth attitudes and values. Nonetheless, young people in Sweden remain underrepresented in decision-making bodies, although the percentage of young people aged 18-24 among those elected in municipal elections has increased from just over 2 percent in the 2002 elections to just below 4 percent in the election year 2014 (Ekman, 2016 : 3). Hence, enhancing youth participation both in society and in a representative democracy remains a priority for Sweden.

Likewise, in Norway, a youth act is lacking and legislative provisions pertaining to young people are instead found in laws governing the needs of the child (under the age of majority). In particular, Section 32 of the Children Act provides that children who have reached the age of 15 shall themselves decide their educational options and options of applying for membership in, or resigning from, associations. The Education Act, applied to primary, lower, and upper secondary education, promotes pupil participation in the school environment. Section 1.1 of this Act provides pupils with a general right to participate in education. Moreover, under this Act pupils are obligated to participate in environmental activities. The Act provides for a sophisticated system of pupil representation in educational organizations. As for exerting influence on educational matters in public decision-making, the Act stipulates a provision of empowerment in section 11-8. According to these sections, pupils' representatives in upper secondary education have the right to attend and speak at meetings of county boards, the principal organs of local self-government. Norway has, in addition, a comprehensive and inclusive youth policy. In particular, the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality produced a 2011 Guide on Establishing and Working with Youth Councils, which we will use as a reference for developing our instrument to measure youth empowerment (Veileder, 2011). When it comes to policy-making, there is no governmental agency or ministry that is predominantly responsible for drafting youth programmes engaging young individuals (Satsing på barn og ungdom, 2015).

As a result, Norway faces challenges pertaining to youth empowerment. In particular, consultation with youth is predominantly *ad hoc* or practiced whenever official reports or programmes are sent out for extensive consultation, albeit only if these are considered relevant to youth. The general bargaining power of youth councils is considered weak (Høyingsnotat, 2016). Moreover, no national evaluation has been made of the effects of youth empowerment (Knudtzon, Tjerbo, 2009).

3.1 Youth empowerment in Finland and in Russia: opinion survey results

Working on the project on youth inclusion (see [Riekkinen, 2019a](#)), our team conducted a survey of youth opinions on the efficacy of youth involvement in social affairs in September 2018. We collated the opinions of 140 students from Russian universities, namely the Baltic Federal University named after Immanuel Kant (Kaliningrad), Pskov State University (Pskov), and Saint Petersburg State University of Economics (Saint Petersburg). In May 2019, the second survey was conducted after holding a series of lectures and seminars on youth rights. The idea was that after students had been exposed to training in youth rights they would gain more confidence in implementing their rights.

The survey included 15 questions targeted at identifying the views of youth on (a.) specific difficulties youth may encounter in combining education, work, and social and private life and (b.) the support provided by public authorities in order to access education and the labor market. Both surveys revealed that Russian young people face specific problems in life, compared with older citizens, such as unemployment and establishing financial independence, receiving recognition from the older generations, finding one's own path in life, as well as the loss of childhood beliefs as a result of confronting the realities of adult life. As for the differences, the respondents were divided into two groups: – a general group, which accepted answers from all those young persons interested in taking part in the survey; and – a control group, which targeted those young people who took part in project events. As for *the general group*, 5 % more respondents provided accurate information on the legally established age group delimiting youth as a special category in comparison with the results of the 2018 diagnostic survey. 2 % more respondents in the general group could indicate the special channels which exist in Russia for the youth to inform public authorities of their rights and interests. This can be attributed to the impact of rigorous information-sharing campaigns, which had been waged in Russian partner universities disseminating information on youth rights and youth legislation in Russia. As for *the control group*, the differences between the first diagnostic survey and the final satisfaction survey were more significant: 40 % of respondents could correctly indicate the age limits of youth, according to Russian legislation. 50 % of respondents could name concrete channels for youth to exert influence on decision-making regarding their rights.

We also conducted a survey among the students of the universities in Turku (Finland), which revealed comparable concerns regarding the difficulties experienced by young people. Our respondents in Turku felt that young people are not taken seriously by adults and need support as they go through many different stages in their biological and mental development. Moreover, they consider that young people are not sufficiently included in decision-making, especially in making decisions about their own future. At the same time, almost all the young people interviewed in the Nordic states, with rare exceptions, were members of political parties and other public associations. The number of young people surveyed in Russia who were a member of a political party did not exceed 2 %. If we consider the statistical data in the regions of Russia, we can see that the number of young people participating in the elections varies. In the Tyumen region, where campaigns are regularly held in educational institutions aimed at increasing the prestige of participation in elections, this number reaches 40 %. Yet, in the Samara region, this figure does not exceed 28 %. This confirms the hypothesis positing the connection between the targeted involvement of citizens from an early stage in participatory processes and future electoral activity. Our findings, taken with this background information, only confirm the hypothesis that cities in northern Finland, Sweden, and Russia experience comparable challenges regarding ensuring the transition of young people from education to working life and from family dependency to autonomy.

Hence, comparing the responses to our two surveys confirms the value of education and information sharing with respect to youth rights, based on the fact that the perceptions of youth inclusion changed considerably among those respondents who have taken courses in youth rights. The respondents became more aware of youth rights and concrete channels through which young individuals can exert influence on matters regarding their rights and interests. These findings emphasize the benefit of promoting a youth perspective and mainstreaming youth rights.

4. Results

In Russia, a specialized set of laws on youth is currently lacking, akin to Norway and Sweden which, nevertheless, adhere to youth-oriented decision-making when each decision concerning

youth rights is assessed as to its relevance to the interest of young people. Finland accommodates both the national Youth Act, coupled with the practice of youth-oriented decision-making. In sum, the mere existence of the Youth Act and formal practices of empowerment, such as e.g., merely spreading feedback forms among young individuals without monitoring whether young people will ever fill in and return these forms, runs the risk of undermining such fundamental concepts as democracy, reciprocity, solidarity and inclusion. Yet in all of these states, deficiencies in effective youth empowerment can be found. The question remains what can be done? The ideal approach would be an open discussion of issues, encouraging the meaningful participation of youth as a way of resolving the conflicting interests of equal stakeholders. And this observation holds true for both Russia and the Nordic states as well.

5. Conclusion

There are many open issues pertaining to the efficacy of youth empowerment in Russia, which lacks a federal youth act but accommodates various platforms where young people can discuss issues of public significance. The examples of Finland, Norway and Sweden show that amidst the conditions where actual channels for such empowerment exist (varying from youth councils under the aegis of public authorities to supporting the activities of youth NGOs), it is difficult to identify genuine self-directed expressions of opinion by youth. We confirmed this conclusion, as mentioned before, when facing difficulties in obtaining responses to a questionnaire on youth inclusion during a tour project on youth social inclusion: in effect, young people were often not sufficiently motivated to complete the survey form.

This overview emphasizes the need for a systematic and inclusive youth policy, since although legislation in Russia stipulates that youth opinions should be sought when public bodies make decisions concerning youth rights, young people often do not believe that their views are taken seriously. This again dictates the need to address more effectively the issue of involving young people in decision-making, asking for their opinions not merely pro forma but in good faith, in order not to overlook the fundamentals of democratic governance where youth rights, empowerment and participation lead to actual exclusion from decision-making. For instance, the authorities might distribute the feedback forms but these forms never reach the addressees. The authorities consider the need for feedback but fail to encourage youth to express their genuine opinions. Even amidst the conditions of Russia's legal architecture, where a national youth act is lacking, the Nordic approach, where each decision entailing youth interests must reflect a youth perspective could be used as a basic strategy.

6. Acknowledgements

This review emerged from the project of the Nordic Council of Ministers 'Promoting the Social Inclusion of Youth in Northern Industrial Towns: Experiences in Finland, Sweden, and Russia', No. 18113, call 'Civil Society & Human Rights Initiative', Nordic-Russian co-operation.

A part of this analysis related to legal regulation of youth policy is also supported with funding from the RFBR Foundation, grant No. 19-29-07134.

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