

Kristiina Silvan

LEGACIES OF THE KOMSOMOL

Afterlife of the Leninist Communist Youth League and Contemporary State-Affiliated Youth Activism in Post-Soviet Belarus and Russia



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Academic dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary dissertation analyzes changes and continuities in the sphere of state-affiliated youth activism in post-Soviet Belarus and Russia. It explores the little-known afterlife of the republic-level organizations of the Leninist Communist Youth League of the Soviet Union and studies contemporary government-affiliated youth activism, thus making a contribution to Soviet, Belarusian, and Russian political history. The dissertation provides insights into the collapse of the Soviet Union, the operation of Soviet legacy organizations, the rationale and instruments of youth policy exercised by authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space and beyond, and the “compliant” activism of young people in the context of a consolidated authoritarian state.

The dissertation’s interdisciplinary approach to knowledge is reflected in its theoretical framework. Moreover, the study is grounded in the basic premises of historical institutionalism of political processes being structured in time. The Giddensian understanding of the interaction between structure and agency constitutes another metatheoretical, if not ontological, core of the dissertation. The multi-layered nature of political ruptures as well as the interplay between structure and agency are elaborated in all four publications of the dissertation, but the dissertation also employs other theories and concepts to examine government-affiliated youth activism in the post-Soviet context. Its comparative design exposes transnational dynamics and points to alternative trajectories, the paths not taken.

The theoretical pluralism of the dissertation is mirrored by its versatile and triangulated set of qualitative data. The dissertation’s research material was collected primarily between 2016 and 2018 while conducting fieldwork in Belarus and Russia. Archive material, newspaper articles, official government documents, and publications issued by the organizations under study were coupled with ethnographic field notes written by the author during participant observation and interviews conducted with current and former Komsomol legacy organization activists, state youth policymakers, and young people engaged in government-endorsed forms of activism. Thematic analysis was applied to the diverse dataset to condense the material in a theoretically grounded way while remaining sensitive to the temporal dynamics, concepts, and meanings embedded in the sources.

The dissertation consists of three published research articles, one forthcoming one, and a comprehensive introductory and summary section. The individual articles of the study examine the evolution and transformation of the Belarusian and Russian Komsomol organizations in the late Soviet and post-Soviet era and explore youth activism promoted on government-affiliated platforms in Belarus and Russia in the 2010s. As a collection, they map the evolution of late Soviet, Belarusian, and Russian

youth policy on macro, meso, and micro levels and highlight the interplay of structure and agency-related factors in producing both divergent and similar trajectories.

The dissertation puts forward three main arguments. First, it demonstrates that in both Belarus and Russia, union republic-level Komsomol organizations adapted to the changing political, economic, and social environment by transforming themselves into independent non-governmental organizations. At the same time, however, the Komsomol legacy remained operative within both organizations and influenced the way the associations rediscovered their roles in the post-communist era. Second, the dissertation finds that the authoritarian governments in both Russia and Belarus perceive young people as a “problematic resource,” which is why the youth policy decision makers of both countries seek to channel young people’s activism into government-endorsed platforms: a unitary pro-presidential mass membership youth league in Belarus and associations promoting “patriotic education” and annual state-organized youth forums in Russia. Third, the dissertation finds that young people who participate in government-affiliated forms of activism apply their agency to engage and disengage both with the official youth policy structures and with the general agenda on youth. This agency, it is argued, can have an empowering effect within the authoritarian political setting that is both restrictive and enabling.

In conclusion, the dissertation suggests that the collapse of the USSR, a major rupture in world history, looked quite different depending on one’s vantage point. Furthermore, thirty years after the collapse of Soviet communism, the afterlife of the collapse and legacies of the Komsomol are still operative in the way the government interacts with its young population. At the same time, however, the Komsomol “stamp” on state–youth relations in both Belarus and Russia is becoming increasingly translucent, and the dynamics of government-affiliated youth activism are reflective of youth policy conducted by authoritarian governments around the world. It is reasonable to question the extent to which the Soviet period is becoming increasingly distant temporally and whether the explanatory power of post-communism is approaching its end even in Russia and Belarus, considered the “core” regions of the former USSR.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Väitöskirja analysoi jatkuvuuksia ja muutoksia valtiollisen nuorisoaktiivisuuden saralla Valko-Venäjällä ja Venäjällä Neuvostoliiton hajoamisen jälkeen. Se tutkii Leninin kommunistisen nuorisoliiton (Komsomol) neuvostotasavaltatason järjestöjen toimintaa kommunismin jälkeisellä ajalla ja nykyajan hallitukseen sidoksissa olevaa nuorisoaktiivisuutta poikkiteieteellisestä näkökulmasta. Väitöskirja lisää ymmärrystä Neuvostoliiton romahtamisesta, neuvostoliittolaisten seuraajajärjestöjen toiminnasta, autoritaaristen hallintojen ajamasta nuorisopolitiikasta entisen Neuvostoliiton alueella ja sen ulkopuolella, sekä nuorten ”sopuisasta” aktiivisuudesta autoritaarisen valtion kontekstissa. Työ asettuu osaksi Neuvostoliiton, Valko-Venäjän ja Venäjän poliittisen historian tutkimusta.

Väitöstutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys kuvastaa sen poikkiteieteellistä lähestymistapaa ja historiallisen institutionalismin perusperiaatetta, jonka mukaan poliittiset rakenteet ovat sidoksissa aikaan. Ajallisuuden ohella myös ajatus rakenteiden ja toimijuuden vuorovaikutuksesta muodostaa väitöskirjan metateoreettisen ja ontologisen ytimen. Poliittisten katkosten monikerroksisuutta sekä rakenteen ja toimijuuden välistä vuorovaikutusta käsitellään väitöskirjan kaikissa neljässä julkaisussa, mutta työssä hyödynnetään myös muita teoreettisia malleja ja analyttisiä käsitteitä. Vertaileva tutkimusasetelma valottaa ylikansallisia dynamiikkoja ja toteutumattomia vaihtoehtoisia kehityskulkuja.

Työn monitieteisyys näkyy myös tutkimusmateriaalin valinnassa. Aineisto on kerätty pääosin vuosina 2016–2018 kenttätöissä Valko-Venäjällä ja Venäjällä triangulaation periaatetta noudattaen. Työ yhdistelee arkistomateriaalia, medialähteitä, virallisia hallituksen asiakirjoja ja tutkittavien järjestöjen tuottamia julkaisuja, etnografisin keinoin kerättyä aineistoa ja haastattelumateriaalia. Etnografinen aineisto koostuu pääasiassa osallistuvan havainnoinnin aikana laadituista kenttämuistiinpanoista. Haastatteluaineisto muodostuu haastatteluista nykyisten ja entisten Komsomol-seuraajajärjestöjen aktivistien, julkisen sektorin nuorisopoliittisten toimijoiden ja valtion nuorisopoliittiseen toimintaan osallistuvien nuorten kanssa. Temaattista analyysia käytettiin monipuolisen laadullisen aineiston tiivistämiseksi teoreettisesti kestäväällä tavalla, joka mahdollisti lähdemateriaalin ajallisuuden, käsitteiden ja merkityksien monisyisen tarkastelun.

Väitöskirja koostuu kolmesta jo julkaistusta tutkimusartikkelista, yhdestä julkaistavaksi hyväksytystä artikkelikäsitelmäkirjoituksesta sekä kattavasta johdanto- ja tiivistelmäosion. Tutkimuksen yksittäiset artikkelit tarkastelevat Valko-Venäjän ja Venäjän Komsomol-järjestöjen kehitystä Neuvostoliiton viimeisten vuosien aikana ja sitä seuranneella ajalla sekä nykyajan valtiollista nuorisoaktiivisuutta, jota Valko-Venäjän ja Venäjän

vallanpitäjät tukevat. Kokoelmana työ kartoittaa Neuvostoliiton, Valko-Venäjän ja Venäjän nuorisopolitiikan kehitystä mikro-, meso- ja makrotasolla ja korostaa rakenteisiin ja toimijoihin liittyvien tekijöiden vuorovaikutusta sekä erilaisten että samankaltaisten kehityskulkujen tuottamisessa.

Väitöstutkimuksen tulokset voi tiivistää kolmeen pääargumenttiin. Ensinnäkin siinä osoitetaan, että sekä Venäjällä että Valko-Venäjällä neuvostotasavaltatasoiset Komsomol-järjestöt sopeutuivat poliittisen, taloudellisen ja yhteiskunnallisen toimintaympäristön murrokseen muuttamalla itsenäisiksi kansalaisjärjestöiksi. Kommunistisen nuorisoliiton perintö kuitenkin säilyi molempien maiden seuraajajärjestöissä ja vaikutti siihen, millaiseksi yhdistyksien rooli muotoutui kommunismin jälkeisellä aikakaudella. Toiseksi työssä todetaan, että sekä Valko-Venäjän että Venäjän autoritaariset valtaapitävät näkevät nuoret ”ongelmallisena resurssina”, minkä vuoksi molempien maiden nuorisopolitiikassa nuorten aktivismi pyritään kanavoimaan hallinnon kannattelemille alustoille. Valko-Venäjällä sellaisena toimii yhtenäinen, joukkojäsenyyteen perustuva ja presidenttiä tukeva Valko-Venäjän isänmaallinen nuorisoliitto, Venäjällä puolestaan sekä ”isänmaallista kasvatusta” edistävät järjestöt että valtion nuorisoasiainviraston järjestämät nuorisofoorumit. Kolmanneksi työ osoittaa, että ne nuoret, jotka ovat aktiivisia hallituksen tukemilla alustoilla, toteuttavat toimijuuttaan sekä osallistumalla nuorisopoliittisiin toimiin että irrottautumalla niistä. Työ osoittaa tällä toimijuudella olevan mahdollisesti voimaannuttava vaikutus autoritaarisessa poliittisessä ympäristössä, joka sekä rajoittaa että mahdollistaa yksilöllistä ja kollektiivista toimijuutta.

Väitöskirja osoittaa, että Neuvostoliiton hajoaminen, valtava historiallinen taitekohta, nähtiin eri tavoin saman Komsomol-organisaation sisällä. Kolmekymmentä vuotta neuvostokommunismien katoamisen jälkeen romahduksen jälkimainingit ja kommunistisen nuorisoliiton perintö vaikuttavat edelleen vallanpitäjien ja nuorten välisessä vuorovaikutuksessa. Samalla kuitenkin Komsomolin perintö on käymässä yhä toisarvoisemmaksi, ja hallintoon kytköksissä oleva nuorisoaktivismi heijastaa autoritaaristen hallitusten harjoittaman nuorisopolitiikan globaaleja trendejä. On siksi perusteltua tunnustaa neuvostoajan loittoneva vaikutus nykyhetken politiikassa. Tämä antaa ymmärtää, että kommunistista perintöä korostavien selitysmallien aika alkaa olla ohi jopa Neuvostoliiton entisillä ydinalueilla, Valko-Venäjällä ja Venäjällä.

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

The dissertation is based on the following publications:

I **Silvan, Kristiina.** 2020. “From Komsomol to the Republican Youth Union: Building a Pro-Presidential Mass Youth Organisation in Post-Soviet Belarus.” *Europe-Asia Studies*. 72 (8): 1305–1328.
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IV **Silvan, Kristiina.** 2021. “Russian Youth Forums: Sites of Managed Youth Empowerment?” *YOUNG: The Nordic Journal of Youth Research*. March 2021. doi:10.1177/1103308821990932

The publications are referred to in the dissertation by their Roman numerals.

ABBREVIATIONS

AMO	administered mass organization (Kasza 1995)
BYU	Belarusian Youth Union
BPYU	Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union
BRYU	Belarusian Republican Youth Union
e.g.	exempli gratia
GiNGO	government-influenced non-governmental organization (Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019)
GONGO	government-organized non-governmental organization
i.e.	id est
Komsomol	Communist Youth League (in the Soviet territory)
RUY	Russian Union of Youth
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VLKSM	Leninist Communist Youth League of the Soviet Union

1 INTRODUCTION

Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered the creation of a new national youth organization, the latest in a long line of Kremlin-backed youth movements that stretch back to the Komsomol and Pioneers groups of the Soviet Union

(Eckel 2015)

In 2015, Radio Free Europe–Radio Liberty reported on the establishment of the Russian Movement of Schoolchildren (Rus. *Rossiiskoe dvizhenie shkolnikov*). The author of the article argued that the new movement was yet another youth association created by President Vladimir Putin in post-Soviet Russia in the spirit of the Soviet Union. As I started working on my doctoral dissertation, such arguments were often voiced in the media. In the case of Belarus, commentators would note that the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), a contemporary government-organized mass membership youth league, was mockingly called the “Lukamol” due to its political affiliation with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and its alleged resemblance to the Leninist Communist Youth League of the Soviet Union (VLKSM), the Komsomol.

The statements about the presumed link between the Komsomol and the mobilization of youth by the Putin and Lukashenka governments were puzzling to me. Was there really a Komsomol legacy that had remained operational 25 years after the collapse of communism? If so, what was the legacy like? How could it continue influencing state–youth relations in the former Soviet Union? On the other hand, if there was in fact no connection between the Komsomol and present-day government-organized youth movements, what was the source of arguments like the one quoted above? Did the communist past still shape state–youth relations, and if so, how was it possible given the fact that contemporary youth had no firsthand experience of communism? As I started to look for answers to these questions, I became absorbed by the debates on not just the legacy of Soviet communism in post-Soviet regions and the relations between an authoritarian state and its young citizenry, but also by those related to the end of the Soviet Union.

When I started working on my dissertation in 2015, important political changes were taking place in both Belarus and Russia. Following the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine, Russian policymakers proceeded to systematically dismantle the remaining democratic institutions in the country to such an extent that, it was argued, such actions finalized Russia’s political transformation from a “hybrid regime” into a consolidated autocracy (Gel’man 2015, 517–19). Belarus, on the other hand, entered a period of somewhat less repressive (but still hegemonic) authoritarianism

accompanied by more freedom within society, in the spirit of “soft Belarusianisation” (Wilson 2018). These developments framed and influenced the research process undertaken for this dissertation; after all, the temporal crossroads of 2015 significantly impacted the design and direction of my dissertation research just as much as such a crossroads was crucial for the politics studied in the dissertation (see Pierson 2004).

The temporal tension between the past and the present (and, according to Reinhart Koselleck (2002), the future) is what lies at the heart of history as a discipline. As a contribution in the field of political history, this dissertation remains sensitive to issues of temporality underpinning government-affiliated youth activism in late Soviet and post-Soviet Belarus and Russia. Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a major rupture in society, elements of institutional, behavioral, and cultural continuity are a fundamental part of the story of the Soviet collapse. Despite their nascent sovereign statehood, Russia and Belarus were far from a tabula rasa created at the very “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992). In other words, the past mattered.

This dissertation studies changes and continuities in the sphere of government-affiliated youth activism—a concept developed in this dissertation—in Belarus and Russia from the era of *perestroika* until the end of the 2010s. It analyzes the structures and individual and collective agency that propel government-affiliated youth activism as well as the rationale and bottom-up responses to state youth policy measures. My desire to examine the given socio-political phenomenon from various perspectives prompted me to employ an interdisciplinary research strategy. Despite the variety of theoretical frameworks, methods, and data yielded by such a strategy, the fundamental disciplinary themes of social science and history—the interplay between structure and agency as well as change and continuity—remained at the core of the dissertation.

As this dissertation demonstrates, the study of youth politics and youth activism can provide important insights into the processes of deconstructing and reconstructing an authoritarian regime in post-Soviet Belarus and Russia. Following László Kürti (2002) and Karen Valentin (2007), I see youth as a generational category that is both political and politicized due to its symbolic value and its intrinsic orientation towards the future. Not only does state youth policy symbolically put forth a portrayal of an ideal citizen envisioned by the political establishment at that moment in time (Edelman 1964), but the aim of youth policy around the world is to further young people’s acceptance and reproduction of the existing or desired political order (see Pohl et al. 2020, 1). By analyzing the negotiations over youth policy and youth activism, we can improve our understanding of how an existing political order is negotiated in the past, present, and future (see Koselleck 2002).

I also maintain that it is fruitful to study the evolution of state-affiliated youth activism in Russia and Belarus comparatively. Indeed, this dissertation

finds that despite the similar historical starting point and the transnational flow of ideas, the trajectories of state youth policy and the Komsomol's legacy organizations diverge in important ways (section 5.1). This is not to say that commonalities do not exist: in fact, policymakers in both Belarus and Russia consider youth a "problematic resource" that has the potential to either revitalize and further consolidate the authoritarian political system or put the regime's longevity at risk (section 5.2), and both Belarusian and Russian youth apply their agency to engage and disengage with the platforms of government-affiliated youth activism and official youth policy at large (section 5.3). Meanwhile, young citizens of the two countries also employ a diversity of strategies to engage with and disengage from the state-affiliated youth activism (section 5.3).

The complex picture of government-affiliated youth activism put forward in this dissertation was generated by applying methodological, theoretical, and empirical triangulation—a prominent approach in social sciences in general and area studies in particular (Denzin 1978). Theoretically, the dissertation strikes a balance between the infamous transition paradigm (or, perhaps more accordingly, the paradigm on post-authoritarian democratization) and the literature on authoritarian politics and authoritarian consolidation (Ambrosio 2014; Carothers 2002). The analytical concepts developed in the dissertation, pro-presidential youth organization (Publication I) and government-affiliated youth activism, build on the literature on government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), seen as an increasingly prominent feature of non-democratic political systems (Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019; Naím 2007; Cumming 2009).

Ontologically, the dissertation builds on the critical realist worldview (Archer et al. 1998), which assumes that while a "real" world exists independently, social reality is constructed by human minds and all knowledge is situated (Gorski 2013). What followed from this stance, as well as from the heuristic case study design adopted for the study, was an abductive approach to data and theory. In other words, the aim was not to test existing theories, but rather to explore the late Soviet and post-Soviet history of the Komsomol in the selected sites (Russia and Belarus) and examine present-day youth policy in these locations from the perspective of theoretical awareness. As a result, I began the data collection process with themes stemming from the puzzles recounted at the beginning of this chapter rather than set research questions. Specific research questions, presented in section 1.3, were formulated only later in the research process and revised during the data collection.

After conducting preliminary data collection online by, for example, utilizing the media database "Integrum," and mapping official youth policy documents, I conducted fieldwork in both Belarus and Russia. During the fieldwork stage, I started by working on primary sources in the archives and libraries, after which I conducted interviews with relevant experts in Russian,

sampled via the snowballing method. In addition, I conducted participant observation on government-affiliated youth activism platforms (*Rosmolodezh*²-organized youth forums in Russia and the Belarusian Republican Youth Union in Belarus), during which time I generated research material in the form of a reflective field diary. I complimented these ethnographic insights with some participant interviews, conducted off-site. The complete collection of primary data consists of media reports, published and unpublished material about (and by) the organizations and institutions under study, state youth policy documents, non-elite and elite interviews (some of which could be classified as oral history), as well as field notes written by myself during the participant observation phase of the study.

Although secondary literature sources guided the data collection and analytical processes, I intuitively explored new puzzles that emerged from the research material. The article format of this dissertation was an additional factor that influenced how I analyzed and presented my findings: once I had identified a gap in the literature and come up with the idea for the research article to address it, I applied thematic analysis to reorganize and code the relevant research material according to the research themes that had guided my inquiry in the given article. Moreover, the feedback I received during the peer-review process for each article prompted me to introduce changes that sometimes resulted in a thorough reorganization and reanalysis of the research material.

The dissertation's chronological starting point is 1989, which John B. Dunlop (1995) has identified as a "watershed year" in the history of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In May–June 1989, the first Congress of the People's Deputies of the USSR was elected, fueling a wave of assertiveness by various union republics towards Moscow. Moreover, the year is important from the perspective of state–youth relations, as it marks the end of the Komsomol's formal monopoly in the state youth policy sphere. In June 1989, a new state committee of youth affairs was established under the auspices of the reformed Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Changes were taking place also inside the youth league, as Komsomol actors began preparing for the structural reforms of the upcoming 21st Komsomol Congress in April 1990. Although I collected and analyzed research material from the 2000s, too, the main corpus of analysis in the dissertation focuses on the 1990s and on contemporary Russia and Belarus (2013–2018). I believe that the article format of the dissertation, the desired depth of analysis, and the relative wealth of existing literature on government-affiliated youth movements in Russia (Lassila 2014; Mijnsen 2014; Hemment 2015) and, to a lesser extent, Belarus (Manaev 2011; Nikolayenko 2015) in the early 2000s justify the limited focus devoted to the period 2002–2013.

By mapping the transformation of the Komsomol, a Soviet institution, on the meso level and pointing to its post-Soviet legacies, the dissertation contributes to the political history of the demise of the Soviet Union. Moreover, by pointing to the variety of interpretations of the one "monster

event” (Dosse 2015) both at the time and later, as well as to the interplay between the acceleration and deceleration of related events, it also engages with contemporary historiographical debates on the temporal dynamics and aftermath of such events (Jung and Karla 2021; Tamm 2015). My results show that despite common assumptions, the Komsomol, like many other Soviet institutions, outlived the collapse of communism and was reinvented as a non-governmental organization. This transformation took place in both Belarus and Russia. Yet, authoritarian consolidation of the political system affected the Komsomol’s legacy organizations differently: in Russia, the former Komsomol became a loyal partner of the state, while in Belarus it merged with a newly established pro-Lukashenka youth league (section 5.1). The analysis on the changing political landscape of Russia and Belarus in the 1990s is juxtaposed to an exploration of state-affiliated youth activism in the 2010s. The results demonstrate that government-endorsed platforms for youth activism have emerged as contested spaces of engagement and disengagement (section 5.3). As a result of different political and societal developments taking place in the 1990s and 2000s and different agentic choices, Belarus and Russia have exhibited different kinds of spaces for state-affiliated youth activism, which is why there is also some divergence in the engagement and disengagement strategies employed by young people (section 5.3). At the same time, decision makers in both countries perceive youth as a “problematic resource” and hope to route youth activism into government-managed channels, which is a testament not only to their shared Soviet past but also to the shared authoritarian present (section 5.2). In sum, these findings point to the multi-layered nature of political ruptures and the continuities that follow them.

The summary of the dissertation is structured as follows. In the first chapter, I provide an overview of the existing literature on changing state–youth relations in the context of late Soviet and post-Soviet democratization and authoritarian consolidation and introduce the research questions and objectives of this dissertation. In the second chapter, I present the theoretical framework of the dissertation, building on multidisciplinary area studies and history. In chapter two, I also introduce the two pairs of “meta concepts” that frame the dissertation’s analysis, continuity and change and structure and agency. I discuss the dissertation’s application of historical institutionalist literature, situate the work in the paradigmatic dichotomy of democratic transition and authoritarian consolidation, and provide an overview of the literature on youth activism under authoritarian regimes. The third chapter discusses the research ethics, methodological choices of the dissertation (comparativism, triangulation, and the case study methodology), and the collection and thematic analysis of the research material. Chapter four provides an overview of the dissertation articles, while chapter five discusses their findings and main arguments in further detail. I finish with some concluding thoughts in chapter six.

1.1 YOUTH AND POLITICS IN A TIME OF DEMOCRATIZATION: THE LATE SOVIET ERA AND BEYOND

Youth policy is typically defined as a principle of action by state organs targeting young people in a modern society (Furlong 2012, 21). While the aims and means of youth policy depend on the specific political, socio-economic, and temporal context, youth policy is always either explicitly or implicitly concerned with the future. As Douglas Blum observes: “all societies see their youth as holding the hope of the future, and they naturally seek to mold young people to become responsible guardians of the nation” (Blum 2006, 96). The aim of this molding process is done to ensure young people’s acceptance and reproduction of the political order deemed most desirable by policymakers (Pohl et al. 2020, 1). Shifts in the policymakers’ political, social, and economic preferences, their assumptions about young people, as well as questions regarding state capacity affect not only the overall course of state policy with respect to young people but also the policy instruments applied to “steer” young people in the desired direction.

This section provides an overview of the changes in the sphere of Soviet and post-Soviet youth policy in the period of liberalization and democratization, whereas the following section will assess the evolution of state–youth relations in the period of authoritarian (re)consolidation in Belarus and Russia. In this dissertation, I follow Graeme Gill’s (1995) differentiation between the concepts of liberalization and democratization, with liberalization referring to the decentralization of power combined with the limited opening of public space and democratization involving a shift in the change “from an authoritarian political structure to one in which sovereignty is vested in and exercised by the people” (Gill 1995, 315). In both Russia and Belarus, *perestroika* marked the beginning of liberalization, followed by democratization in the early 1990s. The process of democratization, as we now know, did not reach fruition in either Russia or Belarus.

The present and following section demonstrate how the end of the Soviet Union as well as the rejection of communism were reflected in the youth sphere, while section 5.1, which summarizes the findings and arguments of this dissertation, explains the evolution of the Komsomol as the primary institutional actor in the Soviet youth sphere as a result of these changes. Further, sections 5.2 and 5.3 elaborate on how authoritarian consolidation affected the sphere of youth activism from the perspective of both the decision makers and the young people engaged in state-sanctioned modes of activism.

In the Soviet Union, the task of implementing—and to an extent, designing—a government policy targeting young people belonged to the All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League (Rus. *Vsesoyuznii leniniskii*

kommunisticheskii soyuz molodezhi, abbreviated VLKSM), also known as the Komsomol (Rus. *Kommunisticheskii soyuz molodezhi*). The Komsomol began operations as a relatively autonomous vanguard youth association that over the course of the 1920s and 1930s became a mass membership organization for youth directly administered by the Communist Party (Kasza 1995; Bernstein 2017; Neumann 2011). After the Second World War, the Komsomol developed into a platform for diverse forms of youth engagement and disengagement, but it was also “hollowed out” as a result of the hypernormalization of the “authoritative discourse” of the Soviet party state (Fürst 2010; Tsipursky 2016; Yurchak 2006). Since the Komsomol was an integral part of the institutional framework of the party state, developments taking place in the Soviet political system were almost automatically reflected in the Komsomol. By studying changes within the Komsomol from the late *perestroika* period onward, this dissertation contributes to scholarly understanding of the end and the aftermath of the Soviet system.

The Komsomol had a number of functions in the Soviet system. To apply Gregory Kasza’s (1995) conceptualization, it was a case in point of an administered mass organization (AMO), a state-directed mass membership association designed to mobilize for war and to implement socioeconomic policies. The Soviet Union was one of the first states to construct a network of AMOs, initially viewed as a tool of civilian mobilization in the aftermath of the First World War (Kasza 1995, 15–22). However, the Bolshevik overthrow of the old capitalist order in favor of the new communist system meant that the Soviet government was not only interested in mobilizing youth for military conscription or labor but was in addition driven by the necessity to construct a “new Soviet man,” one that would ensure the consolidation and reproduction of the new social order in the context of Cold War era ideological competition. Originally designed in 1935 to create a cohort of youth that was “sober, orderly, physically strong and politically loyal to Stalin’s regime” (Bernstein 2013, ii), providing a proper “communist upbringing” became the primary duty of the Komsomol. In practice, the Komsomol applied a broad range of tools to fulfil this task, ranging from formal political activities like meetings, parades, and elections to cultural, social, musical, and sporting events (Sokolov 2002, 430–501; Tsipursky 2016; Yurchak 2006).

The preference for a unitary mass membership organization for youth as a platform for implementing state youth policy was dictated by the Leninist model for state and society. From early on, the Bolshevik leadership embraced the idea that there ought to be a comprehensive network of mass organizations dedicated to serving the goals of the party state (Evans 2005). Such a model ensured state control over the public sphere and enabled the mobilization of citizens for political and collective social tasks defined by the party, while also in theory serving as an outlet for the interest of citizens in having sufficient representation (*cf.* Linz 2000; Evans 2005). However, for reasons related to the Komsomol’s structure and operational logic, the

organization never lived up to the ideal of being a “transmission belt” not only for interpreting policy to the masses but also allowing citizens to influence state policy (Riordan 1989; Solnick 1999; Brovkin 1998, 107–32), nor was it able to transform itself into such an organization during *perestroika* (Pilkington 1994; section 5.1).

The structural shortcomings of the Soviet model for implementing state youth policy through the Komsomol were evident for decades, but it took Mikhail Gorbachev’s reform program known as *perestroika* (“restructuring”) to transform the institutional matrix of state youth policy. *Perestroika* was far from a linear process in terms of its speed and scope (see, e.g., Brown 2011). By 1989, the starting point for this dissertation, the process of introducing elements of liberal democracy into the Soviet authoritarian (or, to be more precise, post-totalitarian (Linz 2000, 245–61)) system had accelerated, resulting in a process of democratization (Brown 2001; Gill 1995). The relaxation of public censorship in the name of *glasnost* (“openness”) led to an extensive, ongoing, and increasingly critical discussion of social and political problems in the Soviet Union, past and present (Kotkin 2008, 68). *Glasnost* was a severe blow to the Komsomol because it accelerated the process of the Komsomol being discredited. In addition, shifting power from the Komsomol’s higher-level committees to lower-level ones did not improve the league’s accountability to its disengaged rank-and-file members, but instead contributed to the Komsomol’s reorientation towards the emerging sphere of private business (Kryshtanovskaya and White 1996; Solnick 1999; Gustafson 1999; Kryshtanovskaya 2002).

In addition, democratization in the name of *perestroika* dismantled the Komsomol’s monopoly in the sphere of youth organizations and youth policy. Losing control over the sphere of associational life accelerated the emergence of so-called “informals” (*neformaly*), defined by Urban *et al.* as all those who became active in the associations independent of the Soviet party state’s direct sponsorship, while noting that youthfulness was a prominent characteristic of the “informals” (Urban, Igrunov, and Mitrokhin 1997, 95). By 1988, participation in “informal” groups had become extremely common: approximately 60 percent of youth (aged 17–30) reportedly had considered becoming members of informal groups, attracted to the groups primarily for leisure purposes (Pilkington 1994, 89). In the sphere of youth policymaking, the decoupling of the party state in the last years of the Soviet Union was a nail in the coffin of the Komsomol’s monopoly. Strengthening the Supreme Soviets of the USSR and of the union republics paved the way for the establishment of three new state youth policy institutions that emerged in the period 1989–1991: committees for youth affairs at different levels of government, a government program to provide financial support for youth initiatives, and a new law on state youth policy, the “Law on the Fundamental Principles of State Youth Policy in the USSR” (Rus. “*Ob obshchikh nachalakh gosudarstvennoi molodezhnoi politiki v SSSR*”). By categorizing the Komsomol as a party rather than a state institution, the government

alleviated the youth league of its bureaucratic youth policy functions, further pushing it to find a new role for itself. This general process, which affected all Komsomol organizations across the USSR, is highlighted in publications I and III of this dissertation and further analyzed in section 5.1.

By casting the story of the Komsomol against the backdrop of the dismantling of the CPSU and the Soviet Union, the existing literature treats the All-Union Komsomol's decision to "self-liquidate" in September 1991 as a "natural" death of the Komsomol. Indeed, the All-Union Komsomol did cease to exist in the aftermath of the failed coup d'état of August 1991. However, shifting the level of analysis from the collapsing Soviet Union and the CPSU to the emerging state institutions of the union republics, which is one of the key contributions of this dissertation, reveals an altogether different story of the Komsomol's presumable collapse.

The liberalization and democratization of the Soviet system was combined with a process of decoupling the party state. The eradication of party supervision over state organs combined with the empowering of state institutions resulted in the exchange of a unitary structure for a federalized one. What is more, the loss of legitimacy of the communist ideology and the subversion of the system of a planned economy prompted political elites in the union republics to start behaving like masters of their own sovereign states (Kotkin 2008, 77–81). As the balance of power was tilting from the state institutions of the Union to those of the union republics, a "centrifugal tendency"—the process of seeking sovereignty within the Soviet system—started first in the peripheral union republics, especially those that had strong nationalist movements like the three Baltic States and the Caucasus, and then within the "core" republics, first and foremost within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). The struggle of the various republics and regions against the center was the political leitmotif of the last years of perestroika, struggles that, as discussed in section 5.1, were mirrored in the developments within the Komsomol.

Although the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus would emerge as independent states only in 1991, the process of state building in the two republics was galvanized by the democratization process of the second half of the 1980s, when the two states were still firmly a part of the USSR. In terms of state institutions, the RSFSR and the other union republics, including the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, differed from one another considerably. The RSFSR, as the institutional core of the USSR, differed from the other republics because it lacked party and state structures of its own. It contained no ministries, no Russian Academy of Sciences, and—most strikingly—no Russian Communist Party, even though in 1990 more than half of all Communist Party members resided within the RSFSR. The process of establishing Russian ministries and social institutions started around 1989 as a response to the plans to increase Russia's sovereignty within the USSR (Sakwa 2008, 16). In Belarus, the attributes of independent statehood had been in place for decades, but throughout the *perestroika* era

the republic's leadership acted quite slowly, if not outright reluctantly, to assert its sovereignty from the union centre (Wilson 2011, 142–54). Tracing the process of state building in Russia and Belarus, two republics that were, in principle, committed to preserving a reformed Soviet state in the period prior to their independence, from the perspective of the Komsomol yields important insights into the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the evolution of state–youth relations in the newly independent states of Russia and Belarus continued along the course set during the late *perestroika* era. The youth affairs committees never developed into the kinds of powerful veto players in public policy that Igor' Ilyinskiy, one of the architects of the Soviet state youth policy of the late 1980s, had envisioned (Il'inskii 2016, 8–10). In the immediate post-Soviet era, both Belarus and Russia witnessed declining state interest in youth and youth policy. The governments of both countries were preoccupied with the enormous tasks of political and economic transformation, and youth were left in the margins of policymaking. As Ilinskiy and Lukov conclude in the case of Russia, “[t]he government did not understand why some kind of policy towards the youth would be needed” (Ilinskiy and Lukov 2008, 12). This dissertation demonstrates that the statement applied also in the case of Belarus.

The lack of state interest in youth affairs was empowering to some actors. Before Belarus and Russia embarked on the road to authoritarian consolidation, non-governmental organizations—youth movements included—could operate more freely (Henderson 2011; Lenzi 2002). Thanks to the availability of foreign assistance, the number of Russian NGOs rose rapidly throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, despite the lack of enthusiasm by most citizens to participate in the work of social and political associations (McIntosh Sundstrom and Henry 2005). In Belarus, the sphere of civil society began to develop along similar lines, albeit freedom from state regulation lasted for only a few years. New regulations and restrictions were introduced by the Lukashenka government incrementally from 1994 onwards (Gilbert 2020; Lenzi 2002). Throughout the 1990s, however, there was still space for independent youth activism in Belarus, and Soviet legacy organizations and new youth movements that aspired to participate in the process of democratic consolidation discovered unprecedented avenues for collaboration with Western civil society organizations as well as some domestic actors (Matsevilo 2002; Zinchenko 2016). In both Belarus and Russia, tendencies towards authoritarianization rather than democratization were apparent already during the rule of Prime Minister Viacheslav Kebich in Belarus and President Yeltsin in Russia (Wilson 2011, 154–56; Gill 2006), but as democratization was not expected to be linear, the mainstream belief was still that the countries were “transitioning” towards liberal democracy rather than “regressing” to a state of authoritarian rule. It seems plausible to

argue that at the time of “hybrid” regimeness, the trajectories of democratization and authoritarianization were intertwined and equally present.

The existing literature paints a somewhat conflicting picture of young people and youth affairs in Belarus and Russia in the early 1990s. On the one hand, there is a consensus that young people became the victims of the collapsing state and the disarray that followed, given their marginalized position in society and the disappearance of mechanisms of social support. The late *perestroika* era paradigm of contemporary youth as “the lost generation” plagued by problems relating to drug addiction, alcoholism, and juvenile crime continued well into the 1990s (Pilkington 1994, 162–93; Omel’chenko 2004). Indeed, the crime rate and the use of drugs and alcohol skyrocketed among young people at the time, with heroin featuring as a widely available, frequently used “recreational” drug (Pilkington 2006; Sokolov 2002, 537). In her research, Sally W. Stoecker (2001; see also Fujimura, Stoecker, and Sudakova 2005) has provided a heartbreaking account of the plight of homeless children in Russia, while Williams, Chuprov, and Zubok (2003) have provided a detailed analysis of young people’s marginalization in the 1990s. In the case of Belarus, Titarenko (1999) notes that young people were hit hard by the collapse of the Soviet state, resulting in increasing levels of poverty, unemployment, and juvenile crime.

Although the collapse of the communist system had a dramatic impact on the well-being of young people in Russia and Belarus, it also provided new structures of opportunities. Studies conducted over the course of the 1990s found that young people were generally in favor of the introduction of a market economy and the new opportunities presented by capitalism (McFaul 2003). The disappearance of government censorship enabled the development of a free press (Rosenkrans 2001). Travelling and forging connections with foreigners became possible (Zinchenko 2016). In both Russia and Belarus, national symbols and languages were reinstated. Finally, very few people demonstrated against the disappearance of obligatory voluntary participation in the formerly party-controlled and state-subsidized and administered mass organizations, such as the Komsomol, which found themselves in the margins of associational life (Sokolov 2002, 575–79; Evans 2005, 48).

1.2 CONSOLIDATING AUTHORITARIANISM, CONSOLIDATING YOUTH

Given that youth policy depends on the political, socio-economic, and temporal context of a country, it is not surprising *per se* that the official approach to young people in both Belarus and Russia changed as the

government's political course pivoted from democratization towards authoritarian consolidation.¹ In Belarus, this shift took place under Alyaksandr Lukashenka's first term as president (1994–2000), and in Russia during Vladimir Putin's first two presidential terms (2000–2008), although the institutional groundwork for the authoritarian turn was laid down already by their predecessors (Wilson 2011; Kotz and Weir 2007). The gradual authoritarianization process overlapped with a shift towards a more engaged form of youth policy, which was fueled by two aspirations: first, to alleviate the social problems in the youth sphere, which were believed to endanger the nation's prosperity at present and in the future, and second, to ensure young people's acceptance of the new authoritarian regime. In other words, policymakers were reacting both to concerns over young people's well-being prevalent in society at the time and to the distress caused them by young people's participation in anti-government demonstrations at home and abroad (Hement 2015; Horvath 2013; Hall 2017).

Due to the symbolic value and the intrinsic orientation of young people towards the future, youth can be seen as a generational category that is both political and politicized (Kürti 2002; Valentin 2007; Krawatzek 2018). Moreover, governments of modern states distinguish between desired and undesired activism, understood in the context of this dissertation broadly as "any type of individual or collective action performed with the purpose of creating political or social change" (Sullivan 2009, 6), and they implement policies to support the former and undermine the latter. A fundamental difference between democratic and non-democratic states, however, resides in a state's attitude towards independent associations. In authoritarian states, the government views independent non-governmental organizations with suspicion because they constitute an alternative power concentration that could potentially threaten the regime. Although authoritarian regimes rarely collapse as the result of a popular uprising (Svolik 2012; Frantz 2018), the experience of "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet world spurred the securitization of NGOs and led the Belarusian and Russian governments to increase state control over non-governmental organizations. The willingness to enact legislation restricting the work of NGOs depended on how the authorities perceived the NGOs and their degree of politicization, the stance of the U.S. Government towards the regime, as well as the costs likely imposed by passing such legislation (Gilbert 2020).

In Belarus, the assertive shift towards authoritarian consolidation took place when Lukashenka was elected president. The four-point referendum of 1995 authorized the president to dissolve the parliament, while the seven-

¹In the framework of this dissertation, I do not distinguish between "levels" of authoritarianism. Instead, I have opted to focus on the general direction of regime evolution over time, while agreeing that both Russia and Belarus could be classified as "hybrid" regimes for a period of time in the 1990s and 2000s.

point referendum of 1996 sealed an extensive constitutional reform that concentrated power in the hands of the president. Mass protests took place in the country before and after the referenda (Bennett 2011, 27–62). Lukashenka did not explicitly claim that his opponents were deliberately mobilizing young people against him, but he did see youth as a potential base of support either for himself or for his adversaries. As chapter 5 explains, a new mass membership youth league, the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union (BPYU), was formed in 1997 to boost young people’s support for the regime and carry out the “standard” functions of an administered mass organization of youth.

In Russia, authoritarian consolidation occurred concurrently via two stages in the reorganization of the sphere of youth associations. First, the Presidential Administration established government-organized youth movements, *Walking together* followed by *Nashi* (2000–2012), which aimed to ensure the mobilizational capacity of youth for both political and social aims. Although neither organization aimed for mass membership, they still became quite large: at its peak, during the 2007–8 election cycle, *Nashi* claimed over 300,000 members divided into 50 branches across Russia. Its repertoire ranged from mass events to media stunts and grassroots charity, always framed within the discourse of patriotism. Every summer, *Nashi* gathered together thousands of activists in educational camps at Lake Seliger, which were reformulated as educational youth forums after *Nashi*’s gradual demise in the early 2010s (Mijnssen 2014; Lassila 2014; Hemment 2012; Stanovaya 2013). After the establishment of the Federal Youth Affairs Agency (Rus. *Federal’nye agentstvo po delam molodezhi*, FADM) *Rosmolodezh’* in 2008, the Russian government has gradually come to prefer the model of limited pluralism for “patriotic” youth associations,² promoting “compliant” forms of activism over unitary mass movements (Libman and Kozlov 2017; Stanovaya 2013; Cheskin and March 2015).

One of the signs of the shift towards authoritarian rather than democratic consolidation in both Russia and Belarus was the introduction of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) into the sphere of civil society. GONGOs, defined as associations established and managed by the government, have become increasingly dominant in contemporary authoritarian states, especially in China. The reason why GONGOs have become popular around the world is that in contrast to independent NGOs, they constitute lower political risks for the ruling elite (Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019). Furthermore, in comparison to traditional NGOs, GONGOs are “more easily integrated into a government’s corporatist structure, less likely to serve as a threat to government’s power, less prone to hurt their reputation, and more able to promote a certain agenda” (Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019, 271).

² For a discussion on the role of patriotism in the Russian youth sphere in the early 2000s, see Omel’chenko and Pilkington (2012).

In both Russia and Belarus, the construction of GONGOs has taken place as part of a broader process of reconstructing the sphere of civil society. In addition to GONGOs, there are also government-influenced NGOs (GiNGOs)—autonomous NGOs that have such close links with the government that their independence can be questioned (Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019, 280). While Lukashenka’s model for “civil society” is based on the existence of a few administered mass organizations, the Russian government has sought to construct a system that enables organizations that are supportive of the current authoritarian system to tap into state support and develop partnerships with state actors, while at the same time restricting the playing field for organizations that are interpreted as working “against” the government (Javeline and Lindemann-Komarova 2010). As chapter 5 of this dissertation elaborates, both GONGOs and GiNGOs operate as platforms that enable, foster, and steer government-endorsed youth activism in contemporary Russia and Belarus. In Belarus, the BRYU primarily handles such operations, serving as a case in point of how a GONGO operates, while in Russia many actors and platforms contribute to the government-set policy objectives of constructing a politically “safe” civil society and ensuring the upbringing of politically loyal and socially responsible young people.

In addition to studies that shed light on the operations of government-affiliated youth organizations from the perspective of authoritarian governments (on Turkey, see Yabancı 2019; on Russia, see Horvath 2011; on Central Asian countries, see the discussion on Karimov’s Uzbekistan by McGlinchey 2009), some works seek to make sense of such organizations from the viewpoint of their young participants. The prevalent assumption regarding participation in formal settings, defined by Lüküslü et al. (2016, 68) as settings that are “structured by predefined roles, rules and routines of access and use, and initiated and led or at least accompanied and supported by adults,” is that young people are only drawn to such organizations by the binary expectation of material or non-material rewards or a fear of reprisal. Following this line of argument, some studies highlight young people’s frustration at being mobilized for various forms of activism, set for them from above, which they find “formalistic” and “meaningless” (Spire 2018). However, other studies point to the experience of agency despite the lack of organizational independence (Atwal 2009; Hemment 2015; Krivonos 2016). One of the contributions of this dissertation, discussed in section 5.3, is that it provides a more nuanced perspective on activism practiced through formal platforms of youth participation in an authoritarian political setting.

1.3 OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study analyzes the evolution of government-affiliated youth activism in the context of Soviet, Russian, and Belarusian political history. While the

overall exploratory objective of the study—to gain an understanding of the changes in the sphere of government-affiliated youth activism during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union—was clear from the beginning, the qualitative nature of the research project resulted in the evolution of the specific research questions (see, e.g., Creswell 2007 [1997], 107–14). The research process for this dissertation was in no way a linear process. I constructed new questions during the data collection, analytical, and writing phases of it, as well as while reviewing the literature. The first overarching research question resulted from my initial puzzlement regarding the assumed link between the Komsomol and contemporary government-affiliated youth activism platforms, as mentioned above. After some reworking, the question was formulated as follows:

1. How did the Komsomol evolve in Belarus and Russia from the *perestroika* era up until the present day? What explains these historical trajectories, and what do they tell us about the collapse of the Soviet Union?

The question was, in fact, borne out of a controversy that I discovered early on during my fieldwork. The existing literature on the Komsomol portrays the end of the youth league as unavoidable and certain (see, e.g., Sokolov 2002; Pilkington 1994; Solnick 1999). However, the Belarusian Republican Youth League fails to mention the collapse of the Komsomol on its official historical timeline, instead pointing out that in December 1991, the rules of the Komsomol of the Belarusian SSR were changed and the organization was renamed the Youth Union of Belarus (BRYU 2021). In a similar vein, the Russian Union of Youth also overlooks the dissolution of the All-Union Komsomol while noting the establishment of the Komsomol of the Russian SSR and it being renamed the Russian Union of Youth (RUY 2022). After having worked in the archives on documents from the union republic-level Komsomol organizations, I found that the Komsomol did indeed not cease to exist either in Belarus or in Russia. Instead, as this dissertation demonstrates, the local Komsomol organizations evolved into independent non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, the shift from democratization to authoritarian consolidation in the latter half of the 1990s affected the Komsomol's legacy organizations in both Belarus and Russia, though the two organizations responded differently to the consolidation process in each country. This paved the way for different historical trajectories, namely the forced merger into a pro-presidential mass membership youth organization in Belarus and the elevation of the organization to the position of a partner of the government in the sphere of patriotic upbringing in Russia. These trajectories are analyzed in detail in publications I and II.

While the comparative design of the Ph.D. project was clear to me after my preparatory field trip to Belarus in the spring of 2015, the separation of the two temporal windows of the dissertation—one during the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the 1990s and the other in the present day—emerged during my fieldwork. To better account for and differentiate between the dynamics at various analytical levels, the meso-level story of the Komsomol's evolution has been coupled with questions regarding the development of state youth policy (macro level) and the dynamics of the contemporary government-affiliated youth activism at the micro level of individuals. First, I sought to explain the role of this kind of activism from the perspective of authoritarian politics:

2. In contemporary Russia and Belarus, how and why does the state promote government-affiliated youth activism?

The question, discussed and answered in all four publications of this dissertation, draws from the literature on authoritarian consolidation and historical institutionalism. While already at the beginning of the research process I observed that a unitary mass membership youth league existed in Belarus but not in Russia, I wanted to know what could explain the difference. The aim was also to gain an understanding of the assumptions, fears, and expectations of the Russian and Belarusian governments regarding their young citizens and how the governments sought to translate such an understanding into various kinds of policies targeting young people. The term “government-affiliated youth activism,” one of the answers to research question 1, was applied as an analytical concept in response to this question and the third question posed in this dissertation, seeking to provide a bottom-up perspective on the forms of activism promoted by the government:

3. In contemporary Russia and Belarus, how and why are young people involved in government-affiliated youth activism?

Including a micro perspective on government-endorsed forms of youth activism was one of the original objectives of the Ph.D. project. My interest in these forms of activism, often overlooked in the existing literature, stems from my encounters with *Nashi* activists back in 2011–2012. I was curious to explore what motivated young Belarusians and Russians to participate in official youth policy undertakings in the 2010s and how their different modes of engagement could be explained.

These questions reflect the variety of theoretical frameworks and methods that were applied during the research process. On the analytical level, I assessed government-affiliated youth activism at the macro, meso, and micro

levels, with “macro” broadly implying the perspective of state policies, “meso” the level of formal and informal collectives, including associations, and “micro” the level of individuals. While the concepts of change and continuity and structure and agency were not woven into the research questions, they were utilized to structure the findings and arguments of this dissertation amidst the construct of theoretical and methodological pluralism.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical starting point for this dissertation is that politics is situated in time (Pierson 2004). Analyzing the development of state youth policy and the actors in that field from the late Soviet era up until the present day not only provides a unique perspective on the end of the Soviet Union and the contemporary history of Russia and Belarus, but also makes it possible to remain sensitive to the intertwined elements of change and continuity in state youth policy in general. As a contribution to the discipline of political history, this dissertation frames the changes in the state–youth relationship in the structural environment of a democratizing and an authoritarianizing state. However, the prevalence of interdisciplinarity in area studies and the plurality of approaches to the study of history in general and (“new”) political history in particular has made it possible to apply a variety of theoretical frameworks in the four journal articles included in this dissertation (Fulbrook 2003; Pedersen 2002). In this section, I provide an overview of both the overarching theoretical framework informing this dissertation—multidisciplinarity via history and area studies—as well as the two pairs of analytical meta-concepts of continuity and change and structure and agency. In addition, I situate the dissertation between the conflicting paradigms of transistology and authoritarian resilience as well as in relation to the relevant literature on youth activism in an authoritarian context.

2.1 PLURALISM BY DEFAULT? THE THEORETICAL BACKBONE OF HISTORY AND AREA STUDIES

All historical writing is inevitably theoretical, because all historians operate within a framework of theoretical assumptions and strategies (Koselleck 2002, 2–19; Fulbrook 2003). Yet, the multiplicity of theoretical approaches to historical investigation and the tendency of many historians to avoid explicit reflections on theory continues to fuel a sense of confusion over the role of theory in history (Fulbrook 2003). I took the methodology class offered in the discipline of political history not once but *twice* at the beginning of my doctoral studies to better understand the role of theory in historiography. Only later did I conclude that my critical realist approach to history was indeed compatible with an infinite number of theories so long as the “supra-pragmatic ground rules” (Fulbrook 2003, 187–88), such as an honesty of inquiry, were followed. I follow Mary Fulbrook in seeing history as theoretically flexible because the discipline focuses on concrete subject matter—the past—and is not overly constrained by a given set of theories and methodologies (Fulbrook 2003, 7).

Area studies shares history's focus on subject matter—a certain geographically or culturally defined area—more than precise theories or methodologies. Yet, I believe that two factors differentiate area studies from history. First, a focus on temporality does not dominate area studies as it does history, although it is strongly present in the study of the post-communist region. Second, in terms of theory, area studies are explicit in their endorsement of inter- and multidisciplinary, drawing on insights from different disciplines, particularly in the fields of humanities and social sciences. For this reason, area studies as a field of inquiry has been explicitly committed from the beginning to applying different theoretical and methodological tools to generate knowledge. It is no coincidence that many area scholars adopt an inductive or abductive approach to research, which implies that the decision about what theory or theories to invoke can be made after the data collection and initial interpretative process. Although area studies have been criticized for their presumed limited contributions to scholarship and their equally marginal track record in solving “public concerns” (Lambert 1991), interdisciplinarity—characteristic of area studies—remains one of the most prominent trends in contemporary universities around the world (Jacobs and Fricke 2009; Frodeman 2017 [2010]). In this dissertation, I follow Choi and Pak's (2006) distinction between multidisciplinary as the application of “different (hence ‘multi’) disciplines [to] work[...] on a problem in parallel or sequentially, and without challenging their disciplinary boundaries” and interdisciplinarity as “reciprocal interaction between (hence ‘inter’) disciplines, necessitating a blurring of disciplinary boundaries, in order to generate new common methodologies, perspectives, knowledge, or even new disciplines” (Choi and Pak 2006, 359).

Following my critical realist ontological standpoint, the epistemological starting point of this dissertation is that knowledge about past and present social processes can be generated by applying multiple theoretical and methodological approaches and represented as multiple interpretations, and that embracing interdisciplinarity can generate a better understanding (see von Wright 1971) of complex social processes occurring in the real world. This does not mean that all accounts are equally valid “perspectives,” as if nothing could really ever be known about the “past as such” (see Fulbrook 2003, 3–9). In contrast, an awareness of the applicability of many different theories allows scholars to think comparatively about the explanatory power of different theoretical frameworks. Moreover, the potential to frame one's research in various disciplinary traditions in the spirit of *multidisciplinary* and to effect interaction between them in an *interdisciplinary* fashion, as I have done in this dissertation, only confirms the active role of the researcher in “shaping what stories they choose to ‘make’ of the material which is at their disposal” (Fulbrook 2003, 156) during the data collection, analytical, and writing process. In this dissertation, the application of different theories is further driven by the variety of research questions from a disciplinary

standpoint: while the first research question is one that would primarily puzzle historians, the second one could be asked by a political scientist and the third by a sociologist. As the dissertation's publications demonstrate, this work adheres to interdisciplinarity by constructing arguments that combine disciplinary logics rather than apply them separately.

The theoretically and methodologically flexible foundation of this dissertation mean that each of the dissertation articles features a unique combination of theories. Yet, two pairs of analytical meta-concepts—"continuity and change" and "structure and agency"—as well as the tension between the paradigms of democratization and authoritarianization, are featured in all four articles of this dissertation and function as its backbone. I explicate below the application of the various dichotomies and their conceptual derivatives, rooted as they are in the traditions of history and Soviet and post-Soviet area studies, within the framework of this dissertation.

2.2 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE, STRUCTURE AND AGENCY, AND HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Continuity and change can be seen as the bread and butter of both history and post-Soviet area studies. As for the discipline of history, Peter Burke (1979, 7) has argued that "historians are professionally concerned with change; but to understand why change occurs it is necessary to study the obstacles to change, resistance to change, factors promoting stability or continuity," further noting that the fascination with change is what explains decisions to focus on assumed "turning points" in history (Burke 1979, 1). Due to three "monster events" that "shook the whole nation" (Dosse 2015, 31) in Russian history—the October Revolution, the Second World War and the break-up of Soviet Union—it is no wonder that the concepts of continuity and change have featured prominently in the sphere of Soviet and post-Soviet studies, with some scholars highlighting the prevalence of continuity and "legacies" of the past over systemic rupture (see, e.g., Kotkin and Beissinger 2014) and others pointing to dynamic change over periods of assumed continuity (Kalinovsky and Fainberg 2017).

This dissertation is a study of change and continuity in the sphere of state-youth institutions as opposed to systemic rupture in the shift from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era. As chapter 5 details, it provides new perspectives on how change occurred within the Komsomol in the late Soviet and post-Soviet era, and it also highlights the continuities of Soviet youth policy in contemporary Russia and Belarus. The study has been informed by Fernand Braudel's (1982) conception of plural temporality, which presupposes that the rapid marginalization of the administered mass organization of youth—the Komsomol under the auspices of the CPSU—and

the re-emergence of a similar youth league in post-Soviet Belarus could coincide with the slow and nonlinear transformation of a state approach towards youth, and it contributes to current debates on temporality beyond the (post-)Soviet context. While it does not explicitly engage with debates on what caused the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it does, however, seek to assess the end of the Soviet Union and its aftermath by analyzing continuities and discontinuities after the “death” of the USSR, crossing the chronological barrier of 1991 (see Zeller 2017). Although the dissertation process began with my being puzzled by Soviet legacies operational in the post-Soviet present, the adopting of an abductive approach to the research process eventually drew my attention to the temporal “epicenter” of systemic transformation before and after 1991.

To explore the relationship between change and continuity in further detail, this dissertation utilizes and seeks to bridge a number of concepts derived from historiographical debates on temporality and the existing body of historical institutionalist literature. Both historians and historical institutionalists focus on “turning points” (Burke 1979, 1), dubbed “critical junctures” in the historical institutionalism literature (cf. Capoccia 2016; Soifer 2012; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Berens Collier and Collier, 2002 [1991], 27–39). However, various temporal dynamics underpin the so-called “watershed moments” and the political and social changes they represent. As Karla and Jung (2021) observe, event-centered historiography is experiencing a renaissance, with scholars seeking to peel back the temporal layers of events and provide new insights into their “constitution, [...] effects, and the controversies surrounding [them]” (Jung and Karla 2021, 76). Following my interpretation of the Soviet dissolution as a “monster event” (Dosse 2015), chapters 5 and 6 embed the contribution of this dissertation in existing debates on temporality by employing the concepts of event and acceleration, thus marking the dissertation’s departure from solely linear representations of temporality (cf. Koselleck 2002; Esposito 2021).

On the other hand, questions about the relations between “structure” and “agency” (sometimes framed as the tension between “society” and “individual”) inform one of the core debates in the social sciences, but the attempt to answer such questions also has a long history among historians. At times, historians have given more explanatory power to structures when accounting for causation, while in other periods many have emphasized the agentic power of the so-called “great men” to shape politics. While most historians do not place their analysis in the framework of structure and agency, others have explicitly sought to theorize about the role of structures and individuals in the course of history (Pomper 1996; Fulbrook 2003, 122–34). This dissertation has its ontological foundation in the middle ground between the structure and agency nexus. Following Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory, it sees individual agency, that is, self-directed action (Johnson 2003), as influenced, constrained, and enabled by structure—“political and economic organization, institutional arrangements, collective

‘mentalities’, social circumstances” (Fulbrook 2003, 123). Agency is a process that is informed by the past, orientated towards the future, and exercised in the present. Structures, on the other hand, are both sustained by and altered through the exercise of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 963–64). The interplay between structure and agency within the context of this dissertation is discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

In this dissertation, the two pairs of theoretical meta-concepts—change versus continuity and structure versus agency—are primarily applied and developed using the tools provided by historical institutionalism. Historical institutionalism is a multifarious approach that has yielded many theoretical concepts fruitful for the study of organizational development, not least because of its sensitivity to the interplay of structure, agency, and temporality. The basic premise underpinning historical institutionalism is that institutions are relatively stable structures prone to “path dependence,” produced by positive feedback mechanisms (Fioretos, Falletti, and Sheingate 2016). The concept of path dependence was originally formalized by economists seeking to explain behavior that was irrational from an economic standpoint. Since then, the term has become extremely popular among historians and social scientists alike. No universal definition exists for the widely used concept of path dependency, but the definitions can be divided into broad and narrow interpretations of it. The broad definition simply posits that events at an earlier point in time will affect the possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring later (Sewell 1996, 262–63).

In the case of former communist countries, this basic notion has been translated into general remarks about the presence of a “communist legacy” (or, in the case of the Former Soviet Union, a “Soviet” legacy). The issue with the broad definition is that its analytical functionality is limited: while all scholars may well agree that the past matters, the application of the concept in its broader sense reveals nothing about why, when, and how the past matters. In the context of this dissertation, it is not entirely inaccurate to claim that the Soviet exercise of state youth policy and the existence of administered mass organizations of youth have influenced state youth policy in post-Soviet Russia and Belarus. However, to better specify why and how the past matters, this dissertation applies a narrower definition of path dependency coupled with the concept of critical junctures.

A narrow way of understanding path dependency is usually conveyed by the concept “positive feedback,” seen as a mechanism that generates path-dependent processes. Scholars applying the term stress the existence of multiple possible outcomes as well as the increasing cost of reversal once a path has been chosen, typically evoking the metaphor of a branching tree rather than a clear path (Pierson 2000; Arthur 1994; Levi 1997). The approach is well suited to the analysis conducted for this dissertation due to its comparative nature, discussed in detail in the following chapter. Belarus

and Russia share a common Soviet legacy, but it has affected the development of government-affiliated youth activism in the post-Soviet period quite differently in the two countries. Moreover, this dissertation argues that the persistence of legacies depends not only on a certain structural momentum but also on individual and organizational agency when enacting them. Returning to the historiographical debates on temporality, legacies can be conceptualized as temporal structures whose representation and relevance change over time.

The historical institutionalist approach is often criticized for its inability to explain institutional and organizational change (Peters, 2012 [1998]). It is true that scholars applying the approach tend to be interested in institutional continuities rather than in changes, and hence, downplay agency. Perhaps the asymmetry is the result of the ontological assumptions of scholars. For example, Paul Pierson argues that political institutions are especially difficult to change because they are designed to be stable (Pierson 2000). In the sphere of Central and East European area studies, scholars apply the concept of communist legacies precisely to explain historical continuities beyond the regime divide (Kotkin and Beissinger 2014; LaPorte and Lussier 2011; Behrends 2017; Wittenberg 2015).

Of course, institutions and organizations *do* change, and the historical institutional literature has developed concepts to analyze processes of transformation. This dissertation builds on the historical institutionalist perspective on critical junctures to analyze change, conceived though as being intertwined with continuities over time. It follows the approach adopted by Capoccia and Kelemen (2007), who theorized that “shocks,” which come in all shapes and sizes, create “critical junctures,” defined as times of uncertainty when an organization’s development can move to a new track. It is important to note that critical junctures do not automatically produce change, but rather they open a window of opportunity for change. In his model for analyzing causality during critical junctures, Hillel David Soifer argues for distinguishing between permissive and productive conditions. He defines permissive conditions as the “necessary conditions that mark the loosening of constraints on agency or contingency and thus provide the temporal bounds on critical junctures,” while productive conditions “act within the context of these permissive conditions to produce divergence” (Soifer 2012, 1572).

Although Soifer’s model is explicitly applied in only one of the publications included in this dissertation, it is relevant to the work as a whole because it captures the synergy of structure and agency, related factors required for the production of change during critical junctures. Through the lens of permissive and productive conditions, chapter 5 suggests that certain aspects of the multifaceted interplay between change and continuity in Soviet state–youth relations can be analyzed in detail. From a historiographical

perspective, both critical junctures and legacies can indeed be conceptualized as temporal structures whose representation and relevance changes over time.

2.3 WHERE ARE THEY GOING? RUSSIA AND BELARUS BETWEEN DEMOCRATIZATION AND AUTHORITARIANIZATION

In a milestone essay, Thomas Carothers (2002) questioned the value of what he called the “transition paradigm” by identifying five core assumptions of the democratization literature and confronting them with his observations about the political trajectories of the countries assumedly “transitioning” from authoritarianism to a liberal democratic form of government. Jason Brownlee (2007) has been equally critical of the assumed third wave of democracy, arguing that the late twentieth century should instead be seen as “a period of plebiscitarian politics,” during which time the measures of political liberalization practiced by most authoritarian leaders “backfired on some rulers but did not threaten others” (Brownlee 2007, 31). While few scholars studying the (former) Soviet Union nowadays self-identify as proponents of “transistology,” the belief that authoritarian regimes would gradually and “naturally” transition to a democratic form of government, the spirit of transistology is still sustained by the regularity of popular protests against authoritarian incumbents in the region, influencing how a number of scholars interpret politics past and present. Yet, a consensus has emerged that theories of authoritarianism have superior power in explaining politics in the former Soviet Union (minus the Baltic states, whose “transition to democracy” has not been undone). In fact, a significant number of studies on “electoral” authoritarian politics, authoritarian consolidation, and authoritarian resilience in the 2010s draw on empirical data from post-communist cases, including Russia and Belarus (Way 2012; Gel’man 2015; Ambrosio 2014; Levitsky and Way 2010; Bedford 2017; Silitski 2003). Drawing from the conceptual groundwork laid by Philippe Schmitter (1995) and Christian Göbel (2011), Thomas Ambrosio defines authoritarian consolidation as “the process by which authoritarianism is solidified and entrenched within a political system to the extent that expectations for democratic regime change in the short-to-medium term are consistently pessimistic” (Ambrosio 2014, 473). Authoritarian resilience, for its part, refers to regime survival and the structural and institutional factors that enable it (Brownlee 2007; Maerz 2020; Hinnebusch 2006), while authoritarianism is understood in this dissertation broadly as a political system where government selection does not occur via free and fair elections (see, e.g., Frantz 2018, 6).

When I began working on this dissertation in 2015, most scholars analyzing the political evolution of Russia and Belarus in the post-Soviet era

explicitly framed their work based on notions of (neo)authoritarianism rather than (stalled) democratization. However, the literature on authoritarianism does not in fact automatically exclude transitological assumptions like, for instance, the normative and functional superiority of democracy over authoritarianism (Howard and Walters 2014b, 2014a). The contributions of this dissertation reflect the current paradigmatic shift in the field regarding authoritarian consolidation. However, by being sensitive to temporal context it also takes a step back from both “rival” paradigms, democratization and authoritarianization, and critically reflects on the normative and theoretically rigid assumptions attached to each of them (see Cavatorta 2015). The brief period of democratization (I use the term precisely because the political, social, and economic transformations of the early 1990s went beyond just political liberalization) and the subsequent mode of authoritarianization are analyzed through the lens of the Komsomol (legacy) organizations in the Russian and Belarusian (Soviet) republics. From the perspective of these associations, the state system of governance was in flux for the entire period covered in this dissertation, either evolving into a more democratic form or a more authoritarian form, with different movement taking place in different areas.³

2.4 YOUTH RESPONSES TO AUTHORITARIANISM

In addition to publications I and II which highlight the effects of the change in the political system over time, this dissertation also provides a snapshot of contemporary youth activism in a post-Soviet state with a consolidated personalistic authoritarian regime (Publication III and Publication IV). Here, my primary interest was to contribute to the literature on authoritarian resilience by trying to make sense of the practices and motivations of young people engaging in government-affiliated activism in contemporary Russia and Belarus. Graeme Gill (2015, 19) has poignantly pointed out that “if the [authoritarian] regime can create structures that will capture social pressures for political involvement, and thereby direct them into safe, even regime-supporting channels, it has gone a long way towards guaranteeing its

³ There is a wealth of political science literature that applies and develops continuous typologies of authoritarian regimes that identify “levels” of liberal democracy and authoritarianism. This dissertation participates in these discussions by tracking the effects of the democratization and authoritarianization in the two regimes specifically in the sphere of state youth politics, but it does not focus in depth on the differences between “hybrid,” “competitive authoritarian,” or “consolidated authoritarian” regimes. This limitation can be, at least to an extent, explained by the temporal context of the dissertation: from at least the mid-2010s onwards, both Russia and Belarus were ruled by consolidated authoritarian regimes. Moreover, the dissertation does not touch upon the debates regarding “old” and “new” authoritarianism (see Way 2010).

longevity.” One of the starting points for this dissertation was that it is only possible to assess the success of such structures by looking what is taking place inside them.

Young people’s participation in the institutionalized and formal organizations operating in democracies has attracted much scholarly attention. The motivation for such participation has been explained by various factors, ranging from the example set by parents and peers (see, e.g., Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001) to causes relating to the individual and their “egoistic” or “altruistic” motivations (see, e.g., Beck 2001; McFarland and Thomas 2006; Ballard 2014). In contrast, works discussing young people’s participation in government-endorsed forms of activism in authoritarian states lack such nuance. As I point out in publication III, many accounts can be “reduced to a rational choice theory inspired binary model of two factors: carrot and stick, reward and punishment” (Publication III, 266). Young people are presumably involved in state-affiliated forms of youth activism for rational reasons: they might not realistically have a choice about joining; there are considerable rewards from active participation, especially for one’s career; or they have just been brainwashed by government propaganda (Kasza 1995; Doyon 2017; Spires 2018). In this dissertation, I have taken a step back from these assumptions—however correct they might be—and observed what patterns can be identified in the qualitative data instead of by just “testing” existing theories.

As a result of this theoretical position, the dissertation engages with the literature on (young) people’s experiences with and responses to youth policy as practiced by an authoritarian state (see, e.g., Hemment 2015; Valentin 2007; Lüküslü 2016). In publication III, I employ Alexei Yurchak’s (2006) concept of “ritualized acts” to explain young Belarusians’ indifference to their participation within the BRYU and point to the stigma (Goffman 1963) associated with activism. In publication IV, I apply the concept of “re-signification” (Bezevic et al. 2020) to investigate how young people apply different strategies to bridge the divide between their individual interests and the required format for government-affiliated youth activism. In this way, the dissertation is linked to prior studies that recognize the ability of actors in Russian civil society to adapt to the authoritarian political setting (Bogdanova, Cook, and Kulmala 2018; Kulmala and Tarasenko 2016). In general, as discussed in detail in section 5.3, I conceptualize young people’s participation as a process of navigation and negotiation that highlights their agency in “compliant activism” (Libman and Kozlov 2017) and “consentful” contestation (Straughn 2005; Cheskin and March 2015) and the potential for empowerment in that process. Empowerment in this dissertation is conceptualized as a process whereby young people gain the knowledge, power, self-efficacy, and agency to bring about change in their own lives, in their communities, and in society at large (McMahon et al. 2020; Tsekoura 2016; Russell et al. 2009). Empowerment cannot occur without agency, but empowerment does not automatically result from agency.

3 METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND DATA

The methodological and data-related choices of this dissertation operationalize its interdisciplinary theoretical underpinnings, as discussed in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I explain in more detail questions pertaining to research ethics as well as the methodological choices and data collection, analytical, and results write-up processes. Following Mills (2014), I distinguish between methods as the techniques applied during the research process and methodologies as the “glasses” that the researcher wears while making decisions about what methods to use and how. If the theoretical framework determines the choice of methodology, then the methodology has an impact on the methods employed.

3.1 THE COMPARATIVE APPROACH

This dissertation adopts a comparative strategy, which has its roots in two observations made at the very beginning of the research process. First, the Komsomol (legacy) organizations in Russia and Belarus followed different historical trajectories in the post-Soviet era. To put it bluntly, one of them still exists and the other does not. Second, youth GONGOs operate in both contemporary Belarus and Russia, but they look different: Belarus has a unitary administered mass organization, while Russia hosts a multitude of smaller organizations that all contribute to a shared government-endorsed patriotic upbringing agenda (Silvan 2019). Following John Stuart Mill’s classic method of agreement and difference, I was puzzled by these similarities and differences and wanted to understand their underlying causes. Furthermore, these observations point not only to the dissertation’s case selection of Russia and Belarus, discussed in detail below, but also to the republic-level Komsomol organizations as one of the units of analysis.

In the framework of this dissertation, comparativism is applied as a broad and general method rather than as a narrow and specific technique (Lijphart 1971, 683). While the comparative approach has been extremely popular in area studies for decades (and has understandably only gained in prominence after the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (see, e.g., Gel’man 2008)), most historians have traditionally worked within national boundaries (Cohen 2004), risking to develop arguments that suffer from methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller 2003). While heated debates on the pros and cons of comparativism remain commonplace, a tacit consensus has seemingly emerged that the comparative method can be fruitful for explaining causation. In fact, Charles Lees (2006) argues that many single-country scholars implicitly rely on comparativist strategies by analyzing changes over time (within a single space). This dissertation does

both, demonstrating that youth policy and the responses to it in Russia and Belarus differ in important ways and that both countries have also changed over time in similar and yet rather different ways.

This work adheres to the classic assumption of qualitative research that social processes are complex and unique. Yet, it also maintains that adopting a comparativist approach was extremely fruitful for answering the research questions of this doctoral dissertation. First, comparativism functioned as a heuristic tool that led me to new ways of posing question (see Petrusiewicz 2004). This advantage became especially clear during my fieldwork. After having studied the transformation of the Belarusian Komsomol and its legacy organization, the Belarusian Youth Union, I began asking somewhat different questions when trying to make sense of the development of the Komsomol's Russian legacy organization, the Russian Union of Youth. Second, by extending the scope of the dissertation from a case study of a single country to the comparative analysis of a historical political process, I believe I could analyze the interplay of structure, agency, and contingency more fruitfully than if I had conducted only a single case study (see An and Kulmala 2021). Third, the strong transnational links between Russia and Belarus (and their Komsomol (legacy) organizations, I would discover) were recognized thanks to the comparative design and served as an antidote to methodological nationalism. As the following section points out, the selection of cases and the availability of sources propelled a full-fledged comparative analysis rather than merely the parallel representation of developments on two sides of the Russian-Belarusian border, even if all four publications present single-country studies. As illustrated in table 1 at the beginning of chapter 4, as a whole the dissertation employs a twofold comparison, examining variations in the two case countries and within each case country over time.

Of course, the comparative approach does have its downside, too: although I do drill down into the rich context of the phenomenon, it would be wrong to claim that what I gained in breadth did not affect the depth at all. For example, in studying the Russian Komsomol – Russian Union of Youth (LKSM RSFSR–RSM), I limited my analysis to material relating to the central committee, thus choosing to draw minimal attention to regional developments. Fortunately, others have specifically examined the transformation (or, in some cases, collapse) of the LKSM RSFSR–RSM from both a local and regional perspective (Ivanenkov and Kuszhanova 2018; Sidorenko and Shuvalov 2016).

Just as comparative historians apply methodological tools adopted from the field of social sciences, it is perhaps unsurprising that comparative history and historical institutionalism are mutually intertwined. In fact, James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer have noted that while “all comparative historical works fit comfortably within the field of historical institutionalism,” only those historical institutionalist works that are “explicitly engaged in systematic comparison” fall within the field of comparative historical analysis (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003, 11).

Indeed, while this dissertation is arguably a work of comparative history, each of its four publications present findings from a single case. This way of presenting my findings has, first and foremost, to do with practical issues related to writing an article-based dissertation. However, it also reflects the difficulty of constructing an overarching argument that would bring together the findings from two different countries and two temporal windows.

With the second temporal window being located in the present, I have conducted not just comparative historical research but comparative ethnography as well. As Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Smith (2019) argue, comparative ethnography can be a fruitful approach in political science and comparative politics because it can sharpen the theoretical and conceptual models applied and help develop more widely applicable political insights. The unit of analysis in publications III and IV is government-affiliated youth activism in Belarus and Russia. Since Belarus and Russia have different platforms that enable government-affiliated activism—a unitary mass membership youth union in one case and multiple state-supported youth movements in the other—I shifted my analysis away from specific organizations (pivotal for the analysis in publications I and II). In the framework of this dissertation, I focus in detail on the similarities and differences in government-affiliated youth activism in Belarus and Russia both from the macro perspective of the government and from the micro perspective of young people whose activism resides in the meso-level platforms endorsed by the authoritarian government.

3.2 TRIANGULATION AND CASE STUDY AS METHODOLOGIES

Lees observes that many scholars working on comparative studies opt to apply triangulation to improve the validity of their research. Furthermore, he argues that adapting the method (sic.) of a case study is usually the easiest way to strike a balance between the complexity of qualitative data valued by single-country scholars and the increased value that comes with comparative research (Lees 2006, 1101). Triangulation is a strategy employed to enhance the validity of qualitative research. This dissertation applies three out of the four types of triangulation⁴ initially identified by Norman Denzin (1978): theory triangulation for applying multiple theoretical strategies, methodological triangulation for applying multiple different ways of collecting data, and data triangulation for combining research material from different people, times, and spaces. First, I employed theoretical triangulation by trying to make sense of my data with the help of different

⁴ I did not apply the fourth type, investigator triangulation, primarily because the dissertation was my individual undertaking

theories. Due to the theoretical pluralism prevalent in both history and area studies, this was for the most part a rather automatic decision. Although theoretical triangulation to an extent informed each publication (for example, I specifically decided not to apply the historical institutionalist framework in publication II, instead relating my analysis of the Russian Komsomol to prior assessments of the shift of power from Soviet institutions to republic-level ones as well as studies of civil society organizations), publication III explicitly reflects on its overall contributions to my research:

the rational choice theory-inspired binary model of two factors: carrot and stick, reward and punishment, the positive and the negative incentive [...] could indeed be applied to analyze BRYU members' motivations, [but] the fact that young people's indifference toward BRYU membership was observable in my source material and the aforementioned survey leads me to suggest that young people's (dis)engagement might be better explained by another theoretical concept: that of Alexei Yurchak's "ritualized acts."

(Publication III, 266)

Theoretical triangulation also helped me develop new concepts for the dissertation, “pro-presidential mass membership organization” and “government-affiliated youth activism,” as I found that none of the existing concepts fully encapsulated the essence of the social phenomena being studied. Some scholars have argued that methodological and data triangulation lend themselves to a certain amount of confusion, particularly since methodological triangulation can take place either within or between methods (Fusch, Fusch, and Ness 2018). This dissertation applies triangulation within methods rather than across them by combining methods that only generate qualitative data. The methods that it employs, discussed in detail at the end of this chapter, consist of ethnography (interviews and participant observation), elite and non-elite interviews, and document analysis (historical and contemporary) combined with the case study method. Finally, the data has been triangulated by collecting accounts of the same event from different sources. During the research process, this type of triangulation at times closely resembled the source criticism practiced by historians, as I studied both the archive material and conducted oral history interviews to obtain a richer picture of the development of the Komsomol organizations. As for studying contemporary youth forums in Russia and the activities of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union in Belarus, I combined document analysis with participant observation and interviews with both “non-elite” participants and “elites.” On one hand, the choice to apply these three types of triangulation was a deliberate one, rooted in the theoretical framework of the dissertation; on the other, the choice was dictated by the availability and perceived fruitfulness of the source material as well as

practical considerations, like the limited amount of time I could spend doing fieldwork in Russia and Belarus.

The case study methodology was chosen to better apply triangulation in the broadest sense of the approach while still aiming to gain a detailed understanding of government-affiliated youth activism in two countries. The case study methodology offers a pragmatic and flexible approach to research, which has surely contributed to its popularity among scholars. In the context of this dissertation, the case study is employed as a methodology rather than as a method. What it means in practice is that I have explored the “bounded systems” or “units of analysis”—the republic-level Komsomol organizations of Belarus and Russia as well as the social phenomenon of government-affiliated youth activism currently practiced in Russia and Belarus—from various perspectives. Flexibility in terms of the level of analysis is yet another characteristic of the dissertation. As chapter 5 demonstrates, it contributes to existing discussions on the macro level by analyzing the youth policy of the Russian and Belarusian governments over time, while also exploring how and why young people engage with the policy on the micro level. In addition, a meso-level story about the development of youth policy—one that draws from both macro and micro levels of society—can be traced in publications I and II, both of which analyze the evolution of former Komsomol organizations.

3.3 CASE SELECTION

The selection of cases was a lengthy process that began long before I was formally enrolled in the Ph.D. program and had started working on the present dissertation. As the previous chapters highlight, case selection proceeded hand in hand with the process of designing the dissertation’s research. I focused on Russian pro-governmental youth activism during my undergraduate studies, and I became intrigued by the Belarusian AMO model of government-endorsed youth activism when drafting my research proposal for the Ph.D. program at the University of Helsinki. At the beginning of the research phase, I defined the universe of cases as consisting of non-democratic post-Soviet states with government-affiliated youth movements. Yet, I also suggest that the patterns of state–youth interaction, summarized in sections 5.2 and 5.3, could be applied to authoritarian settings beyond the former Soviet Union due to the universal portrayal of young people as a resource and a problem for the modern state, patriotic upbringing as a catch-all solution to youth policy, and the prevalence of multiple motivations for (youth) activism around the world.

From the array of post-Soviet universe of cases, I selected Belarus and Russia for my comparative case study for a number of reasons. First, I considered the practical aspects of the research process. Given my desire to conduct participant observation and interviews and study archival material

that would underpin my full-fledged, within-case study, I could only work in countries where I could access the data myself. I am fluent in Russian and can also work with Belarusian language material thanks to my knowledge of the Polish and Slovak languages, and I knew from colleagues that it would be possible to access archival material in Russia and Belarus. While it would have been fruitful to conduct a case study on Ukraine (either instead of Russia or Belarus or as a third case), I deemed it suboptimal from a practical standpoint given my limited time and resources. It is a geographical direction where the dissertation could, however, develop in the future. At the very least, Ukraine could function as an insightful shadow case “to shed light on the generality of claims most centrally evaluated in the core case[s]” (Soifer 2020, 11). The Ukrainian Komsomol faced multiple attacks by independent youth groups in the last years of its existence (Pilkington 1994, 164), and in September 1991 it was reorganized as the Unions of Youth Organizations of Ukraine (Ukr. *Spilky molodizhnykh orhanizatsiy Ukrayiny*) (Vasiliev 2009). Nonetheless, Diuk (2012, 45) observes that the new post-Soviet governments established numerous organizations “to preserve some state support and control over youth,” further noting that some of these associations were “successors of old Soviet institutions” while others were entirely new. Another suitable shadow case would be that of the Uzbek Komsomol, which was revived as the pro-presidential *Kamalot* in 2001 and restructured as the Youth Union of Uzbekistan in 2017, following the leadership succession from Islam Karimov to Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Norov and Sunnatov 2020). As for contemporary authoritarian state–youth relations beyond the post-Soviet space, I hypothesize that this dissertation would benefit from shadow case studies of youth policy under Turkey’s Justice and Development Party government (see, e.g., Lüküslü 2016) or even the contemporary Vietnamese Communist Youth Union (Valentin 2007).

Second, my interest in authoritarianism in the post-Soviet space and beyond was also a factor that contributed to the selection of Belarus and Russia over other countries. Unlike Ukraine, both Belarus and Russia have until now undergone a relatively consistent authoritarian consolidation after the brief period of democratization in the early 1990s. They are also relatively comparable in terms of their Soviet past—both were Soviet republics of a Slavic titular nation. However, if the basic premises of Mill’s classic method of difference is to compare two instances that have the most context variables in common, it is obvious that Russia and Belarus were not indisputably comparable due to their differences in geographical size, government structure, history, and culture. Yet, given the complex world of social interactions, I insist that absolute comparability without a significant level of abstraction is simply impossible. Furthermore, given the dissertation’s analytical focus on the republic-level Komsomol organizations and contemporary patterns of government-affiliated youth activism, I argue that the comparison is fruitful. In fact, one of the implicit theoretical arguments advanced in this dissertation is that comparison can be an extremely

insightful tool for analysis despite discrepancies so long as the researcher is transparent and reflective about the limitations of their findings.

There were moments when I considered dropping one of the country cases or time frames altogether, but in the end the article format enabled a flexibility of focus, and the added value of a temporally and geographically comparative design that is sensitive to transnational and subnational dynamics has justified the lengthy research process.

3.4 RESEARCH ETHICS

Ethical issues and concerns are an inseparable part of research, present during all phases of the research process, from initial planning to writing up and disseminating the newly generated knowledge. Each phase of research gives rise to new ethical questions that must be acknowledged and reflected upon. This brief section highlights some of the most prominent themes relating to ethics that I encountered during the research process.

Scholars have argued that ethical issues are discussed more explicitly and vigorously in the social sciences than in history (Scates and Macintyre 2006). The lack of debate regarding research ethics, or rather, the implicit focus on virtue ethics over deontology or consequentialism can be explained by the historiographical tradition. In the past, historians worked primarily on archival sources. Their aim—and ethical obligation—was to construct objective representations of the distant past. When their research concerned people, the individuals they studied had usually passed away decades if not centuries ago. It is therefore understandable that the ethical principles regarding the rights of research participants, prominent in the language of contemporary guidelines for how to ethically conduct research, are not considered explicitly applicable in the case of historical research. This is also why historians are generally not obliged to seek formal approval from a relevant ethics committee prior to conducting research (Fogel et al. 2010). The only issue that concerns historians specifically in the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2019, 57) is the assertion that researchers must aim for “respectful expression” when writing about private individuals who have passed away, bearing in mind the right to privacy of the deceased’s relatives and close friends.

In the field of contemporary history, however, ethical questions regarding the rights of research participants echo those voiced by social scientists. This was certainly the case with this dissertation project, since it employed a methodological toolkit prominent among social scientists with a qualitative approach. In my research, I have followed the guiding ethics principles for social science research constructed by the British Academy of Social Sciences (“Five Ethical Principles for Social Science Research” 2016). I chose to follow these principles because I believe that they succeed in capturing ethical issues during the entire research process in a clear and understandable way.

In the framework of this dissertation, the first ethical issues emerged during the research planning stage. The Academy's guidelines argue that "[a]ll social science should be conducted with integrity throughout, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose." In the spirit of the dissertation's interdisciplinary character and the importance of triangulation, I considered the different methodological approaches that could be applied to answer the research questions that I had posed. I concluded that for the purpose of studying the development of Komsomol organizations in the late 1980s and 1990s, triangulated archival research, media analysis, and semi-structured elite interviews were the most suitable methods of data collection, whereas to answer the question regarding the platforms of contemporary government-affiliated youth organizations, document and media analysis coupled with participant observation and elite and non-elite interviews was the most suitable approach. The research materials collected using these methods certainly have their limitations: the validity of Soviet-era records is infamously debatable, but, needless to say, source criticism still needs to be applied to all available organizational and media sources as well as to the research material generated in the form of interviews or ethnographic field notes. In the end, I believe I was able to compensate for these limitations by triangulating my sources and methods and applying source criticism and reflexivity (Denzin 1978; Kipping, Wadhvani, and Bucheli 2014; Venkatesh 2013).

The fundamental principle of ethical conduct, according to which researchers ought to maximize benefit and minimize harm for participants, was also a reoccurring issue during the research process. Belarus and Russia are authoritarian states with serious shortcomings with respect to the rule of law. In this context, conducting research on a political (or potentially politicized) matter poses additional risks to both the researcher and to those participating in the research. When balancing the risks and the benefits of field research in the spirit of consequential ethical reasoning, I concluded that the benefits resulting from collecting data personally were greater than the potential harms that such an effort would entail for myself or others. To offset the risks to the well-being of myself and the research participants, my strategy was to obtain formal and informal authorization from key local stakeholders (in practice, it meant clearly stating the aim of my visit to the countries in the visa application, acquiring a local university affiliation, and accessing participants through official "gatekeepers"), making my research plans as transparent as possible, and arranging meetings in safe locations. Furthermore, even when non-elite participants agreed to be referred by name in the resulting publications, I sometimes opted to anonymize the research data after collection if I felt it would likely cause them harm. After making a careful risk assessment and accounting for their personal preferences, the names of all elite interviewees, on the other hand, were not anonymized. My case-by-case approach to anonymization follows the Academy's basic

principle that all social science research should respect the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values, and dignity of individuals.

During the data collection process, discussed in detail in the following sections of this chapter, numerous ethical issues emerged. Ensuring informed consent, yet another fundamental ethical principle, can be notoriously problematic during participant observation. The covert and overt roles guiding researchers in participant observation studies are often seen as binary opposites, with overt research being viewed as fundamentally more ethical than covert research. However, as Calvey (2008) argues, covert practices often remain unreported in overt accounts. Building on this insight, McKenzie (2009) convincingly maintains that the covert and overt roles should be seen as part of a continuum rather than as opposites. Whereas before each interview I discussed with the participant the scope and aims of the research project and their rights as informants, this practice proved impossible when conducting participant observation at mass public events designed for hundreds or thousands of activists. The “gatekeepers” who had granted my access to the events were, of course, aware of my status as a researcher, but they did not automatically share this information with everyone involved. The individuals participating at the same events as I did only found out about my role as a researcher if I engaged in a conversation with them. These fellow participants were aware of the fact that I was keeping a Finnish-language field diary in which I described and analyzed what I saw while engaging in participant observation. To engage with the ethical challenge of not being able to seek informed consent from every single individual that I observed, I transcribed my observations in a way that makes it next to impossible to identify the individuals involved. When reflecting on the covert elements of my open participant observation, I also assessed the data collection from a consequentialist perspective and concluded that the insights provided by the research material far outweighed the potential harm they might cause the participants or myself as the researcher, mostly in the form of emotional labor, which justifies the use of the material in the analysis and narrative.

Ethical issues encountered during the analysis and write-up phase of the dissertation had to do with the kind of representations that I as a researcher constructed from the research material. As a qualitative researcher, I conducted a close reading of the research material and made sure to triangulate it, but the product of the research is still inevitably the result of my subjective interpretation of (past) reality. From the very beginning of the research process, my personal background steered my scholarly attention towards those themes that I found interesting. Revealingly, one of the anonymous reviewers of publication IV found that my analysis of contemporary Russian youth forums contained “too much politics.” In the write-up phase, I ordered and narrated the findings using a framework that both I and my colleagues, based on the peer-review process, found analytically fruitful. The decisions made at these “ethical crossroads” had

tremendous implications for how I presented the dissertation's findings, and it is in line with the ethical code of conduct to recognize and reflect upon this influence.

A final ethical issue that merits a mention has to do with the published research. One of the Academy's guiding principles notes that researchers should "act with regard to their social responsibilities in conducting and disseminating their research." Since my dissertation research was supported by government funding, it was not only my moral duty but also my responsibility to disseminate my findings to the public. I did so by giving public talks, writing academic and non-academic articles in different languages (including in Russian), as well as ensuring open access to my academic publications, thereby conforming with university policy.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Reflecting the qualitative multidisciplinary approach of this dissertation, the collection of data was a lengthy and non-linear process, during which time I was guided by the principles of saturation (understood here as a stage when there is enough adequate data to formulate a valid understanding of the cases being studied) and pragmatism (i.e., the practicalities framing the research possibilities, including access). Most of the data for the dissertation was collected during field trips to Belarus and Russia between 2016 and 2018. During the preparatory phase, in 2016, I spent one month in Minsk, Hrodna, and Mahileu, in Belarus, and two weeks in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tver', and Ryazan', in Russia. After these initial weeks spent in the field, I revisited and narrowed down my research questions. I collected all the data myself.

In spring of 2017, I conducted fieldwork for three months in Belarus, during which time I was working as a visiting researcher in the Russian History Department at Belarusian State University. Though I was based in Minsk, I spent several weeks in the cities of Hrodna, Mahileu, and Homiel'. Access was a major signifier of how I traveled between the cities. I had easier access to both the archival data and activities of the Belarusian Republic Youth Union in Hrodna and Mahileu, so I ended up spending more time in those cities than in Homiel'. While it would have been interesting to also conduct research in Brest and Vitsiebsk, my visa only allowed me to stay in Belarus up to 90 days per 180 days, and thus, I opted to spend more time in the above-mentioned four sites, making it possible not only to dig deeper into the archives but also to develop sufficient rapport with the participants in my study, although it would have of course been beneficial to stay in field for longer. In autumn of 2017, I returned to Belarus for two more weeks. In Russia, I spent the three-month period of my fieldwork as a visiting researcher in the Institute of Education at Moscow's Higher School of Economics in spring 2018. I chose to stay in Moscow because both the relevant archive material and most of the elite interviewees could be found in

that city. In addition, I attended four youth forums that took place around Russia: *Altai. Tochki rosta* (ATR) in Belokurikha, Altai krai, in July 2016; the World Festival of Youth and Students (WFYS) in Dagestan and Sochi in October 2017; Russia – Land of Opportunities (RSM) in Moscow in March 2018; and *Territoriya smyslov* – “Territory of Ideas” (TS) in July 2018. I would have had the opportunity to attend one more prominent federal youth forum, Tavrida, in August 2018, but I decided to cancel my participation because I felt I had already reached the point of saturation. The fact that I was six months pregnant, and that the forum was taking place in the recently annexed Crimea, were additional ethical reasons that contributed to my decision to stay at home.

In addition to the field trips, I was also able to collect some of the data in Finland thanks to the University of Helsinki’s access to Belarusian and Russian mass media sources through the “Integrum” database and the fact that many official youth policy documents issued in both Russia and Belarus are available online.

When presenting the research findings, I often refer to the “historical” and “ethnographic” parts of dissertation, even if the disciplinary boundaries were in fact blurred as a result of the work’s interdisciplinary character. The historical analysis of the Komsomol (legacy) organizations draws from unpublished archive material, media articles, published primary sources, such as the organizations’ own publications, official state records, and pieces of legislation, as well as semi-structured elite interviews with organization insiders. The data collected for the analysis of contemporary state-affiliated youth activism, for its part, builds on research data collected by applying ethnographic methods (semi-structured non-elite interviews with activists and participant observation) coupled with semi-structured elite interviews with individuals employed in the youth policy sector, media articles, and official documents. Qualitative content analysis was applied manually to this diverse set of material to better identify and interpret themes linking the data to the existing literature on the topic. The rest of this chapter discusses the data and its analysis in two parts, first regarding the “existing materials” (i.e., the data that was produced by someone else), and second, the “self-produced materials” generated by me as the researcher. Although no binary distinction can be made between the two types of data (e.g., archive material produced by someone else was then “picked up,” interpreted, and (re)presented by me and, before that, a number of people working in the organizations who sent the material to the archive as well as those who received it and filed it), I believe it makes sense to discuss them separately since the methodological issues related to interviewing and document analysis are different regardless of their integrated application in the overall framework of the dissertation. An overview of the different kinds of data analyzed in each dissertation article is presented in table 1 below.

Table 1 *Research materials and their application*

	Publication	Research questions	Materials used
I	From Komsomol to the Republican Youth Union: Building a Pro-Presidential Mass Youth Organisation in Post-Soviet Belarus	How did the Komsomol evolve in Belarus from the perestroika era up until the present day? What explains these historical trajectories? In contemporary Belarus, how does the state promote government-affiliated youth activism, and why?	Archive material from Belarusian archives, media articles, published primary sources, state records and pieces of legislation, elite (oral history) interviews
II	From State to Society: The Komsomol in Yeltsin's Russia	How did the Komsomol evolve in Russia from the perestroika era up until the present day? What explains these historical trajectories? In contemporary Russia, how does the state promote government-affiliated youth activism, and why?	Archive material from RGASPI, media articles, publications of the VLKSM, LKSB RSFSR, and RUY, government records and pieces of legislation, elite (oral history) interviews
III	(Dis)Engaging Youth in Contemporary Belarus Through a Pro-Presidential Youth League	In contemporary Belarus, how does the state promote government-affiliated youth activism, and why? How do young people engage in it, and why?	Interviews with BRYU members, members of other youth organizations, and BRYU employees, field notes from participant observation, media articles, BRYU's publications, youth policy documents
IV	Russian Youth Forums: Sites of Managed Youth Empowerment?	In contemporary Russia, how does the state promote government-affiliated youth activism, and why? How do young people engage in it, and why?	Interviews with Rosmolodezh' employees and other experts involved in designing and organizing the youth forums, interviews with forum participants, field notes from participant observation, media articles, youth policy documents

3.6 EXISTING MATERIALS: SOURCES FROM MULTIPLE LOCATIONS

A list of the archives where I conducted my fieldwork is provided in table 2 below. In Belarus, I worked in six different archives. At all six sites, I requested and was permitted access to documents from the four Komsomol-related organizations operating in Belarus in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s: the Leninist Communist Youth League of Belarus (LKSMB, –1991), the Youth Union of Belarus (SMB – BSM, 1991–2002) the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union (BPYU, 1997–2002), and the contemporary Belarusian Republican

Youth Union (BRSM, 2002 onwards). I also read and analyzed material from before 1989, but after (re)defining the dissertation’s starting point, the material was excluded from analysis.

Table 2 *Archives where the research for this dissertation was conducted*

Name of the archive	Location
Belarusian State Archives of Films, Photographs and Sound Recordings (BGAKFFD)	Dzerzhinsk, Minsk region, Belarus
National Archives of the Republic of Belarus (NARB)	Minsk, Belarus
Russian Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI)	Moscow, Russia
State Archives of Public Organizations of Homiel' Region (GAOOG)	Homiel', Belarus
State Archives of Public Organizations of Hrodna Region (GAOOG _r)	Hrodna, Belarus
State Archives of Public Organizations of Minsk Region (GAOOM _n)	Minsk, Belarus
State Archives of Public Organizations of Mahileu Region (GAOOM _{og})	Mahileu, Belarus

In Russia, I worked only in the Russian Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), while in Belarus the relatively limited amount of material meant that I had the time to analyze material from all organizational levels, ranging from a primary organization to the central committee. In Russia, the abundance of material meant that I limited my analysis to the documentation available in the file of the Central Committee of the Russian Union of Youth (RUY). In addition to RUY material (available from 1989 up until 2006), I traced the establishment of the Leninist Communist Youth League of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (LKSM RSFSR) in the material of the All-Union Komsomol (VLKSM).

None of the archival material in Belarus or Russia was available in a digitized format, nor was it possible for me to take photographs. As a result, my primary method of recording and analyzing the material was taking notes on my computer. While it made the process slow, it also enabled me to reflect on the material already during the data collection process.

From a methodological standpoint, taking notes in the archives meant that I was in fact engaged in selecting and processing sources that seemed “fruitful” to me. Following Jorma Kalela (2012, 31–33), I conceptualize fruitful sources as sources that yield valuable information about the (broad) themes and (ever-changing) questions that guided my inquiry and could thus be utilized as evidence. Moreover, the idea about the “fruitfulness” of sources is not only limited to the data originating in the archives. In publication III, I reflect on the utilizability of material generated in interviews with BRYU representatives and during participant observation:

Given the study’s aims and objectives, I found the interviews I conducted somewhat limited in their utility, as the respondents sought to give what they thought were the “right answers” for them to be offering as the

organization's representatives. During participant observation, in contrast, I was free to watch how young people interacted with each other and (dis)engaged with the official program. This, I thought, yielded more valuable information about the motivations behind their participation.

(Publication III, 265)

In addition, one of the findings of this dissertation, explicitly voiced in publication II, is that the sources yielded fruitful information that challenges earlier representations of the rapid endgame of the VLKSM as well as the youth league's afterlife following the self-liquidation of the VLKSM.

In addition to the primary sources accessed in the archives, I collected and analyzed media articles and published primary sources, such as the above-mentioned organizational publications, official state documents, and pieces of legislation. Some of this material was accessible online: official state documents and various pieces of legislation, such as the "Foundations of state youth policy of the Russian Federation for the period until 2025" (2014) and "On state support to the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union" (1997), information presented by the organizations themselves, as well as a vast number of articles published by the Russian and Belarusian media that I could access via the "Integrum" database (On the academic use of "Integrum," see Kopotev, Mustajoki, and Bonch-Osmolovskaya 2021). Some primary sources, especially publications by and about youth organizations from the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as newspapers that regularly wrote about the organizations studied in the framework of this dissertation in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., *Znamya yunosti* in Belarus and *Komsomol'skaya pravda* in Russia), were accessed in the libraries, primarily the National Library of the Republic of Belarus, the Russian State Library "Leninka," and the State Public Historical Library of Russia. For example, only print versions of the public reports of the BRYU congresses have been published, and they could only be publicly accessed in some libraries.

Collecting and analyzing the existing sources was a reflexive, nonlinear and triangulated process, and each article included in this dissertation is the product of a somewhat unique research process. For publication I, for example, I first collected and analyzed media accounts of the BYU, BPYU, and BRYU via "Integrum." Since I was in Belarus, I then worked in the archives and the libraries and conducted oral history interviews with organization insiders. Afterwards, I returned to the initial data collected via "Integrum" and searched for additional sources based on new questions that had emerged from the sources collected and generated during fieldwork, from further readings of the existing literature, or from colleagues and anonymous reviewers during the writing phase.

3.7 CO- AND SELF-PRODUCED MATERIALS: INTERVIEWS AND FIELD NOTES

In addition to the existing materials, the dissertation builds on a variety of data that I generated during the research process. I have applied methodological triangulation as part of the qualitative method by coupling the analysis of documents with ethnography (interviews and participant observation) as well as elite and oral history interviews. All the interviews (listed in the appendices) were sampled using the snowballing method, chosen because both the “elites” and “non-elites” that I sought to interview are difficult to reach by other means. In addition, as I explicitly argue in publication IV, “the existing methodological research suggests that in Russia access to qualitative interview respondents is generally complicated due to a widespread suspicion towards foreign researchers and the hierarchical culture of organizations.”

Ethnography is a research strategy based on the conviction that to best capture the social meanings of people’s behavior, the researcher ought to collect data in a relatively unstructured manner in naturally occurring settings. In practice, this means that “[t]he ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 2). In this dissertation, ethnography was the primary strategy employed to answer the third research question: “In contemporary Russia and Belarus, how and why do young people engage in government-affiliated youth activism?” The question did not emerge out of nowhere. Not only was I interested in young Belarusians’ and Russians’ experiences when participating in official youth policy undertakings, but I had already applied ethnography to explore a similar kind of phenomenon while completing an M.A. in Central and East European Studies. Furthermore, the belief that the literature on government-organized youth activism was lacking a micro perspective was one of the original hypotheses of my Ph.D. project. In addition, I was convinced that as a researcher, I could address this gap in existing knowledge due to my language skills and habitus, which made it possible for me to access at least some sites of government-affiliated youth activism and build a rapport with the individuals acting in such spaces.

In both Russia and Belarus, I combined participant observation with interviews. In Belarus, I was able to conduct participant observation at the level of “everyday” events among two BRYU university cells, one in Minsk and other in Hrodna, as well two BRYU *oblast*’ committees, where I was allowed to “hang out.” Access to both sites was granted to me by influential gatekeepers through contacts at the universities. In terms of time spent at these locations, my work falls far short of the traditional ideal of spending considerable amounts of time doing fieldwork, first and foremost as a result

of practical requirements. Instead, I engaged in a “compressed mode” of ethnography that involved short periods of intense ethnographic research, when I would “soak up every tiny detail in case it might be of some particular significance in later analysis” (Jeffrey and Troman 2004, 538). Indeed, I meticulously recorded lengthy observations and thoughts in my field diary almost on a daily basis. Some of these observations were later utilized as research material for analysis. For example, my field diary entry from March 28, 2017, includes both source material and ethnographic reflections in a stream-of-consciousness writing style:

Why did I have to leave? To attend the most exciting event of the year: BRSM BGU’s vyborny-otchetnaya konferentsiya. It was scheduled to take place 3-5 p.m. at the Faculty of Journalism. There were supposed to be 100 delegates and 120 (?) invited guests. Of course, there were nowhere near that many people, and the organizers asked us guests to move in front of the hall. The atmosphere in the room was festive: “Vybyrai molodezh’,” one of the patriotic pop songs was playing, people were chatting in a lively manner. Boys were wearing suits and girls something equally official. [...] As a result of both two points above, I had a feeling that at least in this case, genuine discussion is taking place behind closed doors. The delegates clearly think so – that’s why they limit their participation to the absolute minimum (or less). Also, decision-making powers are probably shared with other stakeholders, such as the university’s vospitanie department, the Oktyabskiy raikom (?), and the Minsk gorkom. These actors commented on the work of the organization regarding a lack of energy and membership fees.

Unlike in Belarus, where participant observation took place within the organizational structure of the BRYU, in Russia I opted to explore contemporary government-affiliated youth activism by conducting a case study of the government-organized summer forums. In Russia, the sphere of government-affiliated youth activism is currently populated by a plurality of movements and NGOs, ranging from the youth wings of political parties supportive of the regime (e.g., the “Young Guard” of United Russia and the “Leninist Communist Youth Union of the Russian Federation”) to movements designed for certain sub-groups of youth (e.g., “Volunteers of Victory,” “Russian Union of Rural Youth,” and “All-Russian Student Union”). Since I was interested in state–youth interaction in general, I decided to examine the government-organized youth forums precisely because they are platforms to which activists from all the different organizations are invited. Moreover, the nature of the forums as brief non-recurring events fit my compressed time mode quite well. Finally, although foreigners are not usually eligible to attend the forums, I was able to negotiate access to four of them, organized at different locations and assigned different levels of importance.

Participant observation data in the form of ethnographic field notes was to an extent coupled with “non-elite” interviews with “fellow” participants. In Belarus, I interviewed altogether 15 people, primarily during my first field trip in 2016, when I was still formulating my research questions. Seven of the interviewees were BRYU members with a different status within the organization, and eight were non-members. All the interviews were semi-structured in nature, and especially with non-members only a fraction of the interview was spent talking about the BRYU (albeit the little that *was* said was often quite fruitful for my analysis). In Russia, I only interviewed three youth forum participants, as I felt that I had already reached a point of saturation based on my own experiences at the forums and the numerous informal conversations I had had with my fellow participants as part of the participant observation. The interviews in both Russia and Belarus were conducted and selectively transcribed in Russian and translated into English by me. They usually lasted for 1.5 hours each and took place either in a café or in a park. I used pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees and other participants in the study.

In addition to the “non-elite” interviews, I also conducted “elite” interviews.⁵ In this dissertation, the “elites” that I interviewed were not necessarily in a position of power and elevated social status in comparison to the average citizen in society; instead, they were interviewed as experts with insider knowledge on a given topic rather than as participants who had lived experience with the phenomena under study. Especially in Belarus, the division between “elite” and “non-elite” members of the BRYU would be better placed on a continuum rather than in separate categories, with salaried employees of the primary organizations falling somewhere between the two extremes. In Russia, however, the difference between non-elite interviewees as participants in the youth forums and elite interviewees who were employed by the federal youth agency *Rosmolodezh'* to design and implement the forums was clear. In addition, I could also categorize the oral history interviews conducted with individuals who were members of the Komsomol and the central organs of its legacy organizations during *perestroika* and the 1990s as elite interviews due to the dominant position adopted by the interviewee. Those interviewees posed gatekeeping questions designed to test my level of knowledge and applied both verbal and non-verbal cues to establish the asymmetry between me as a “novice” and them as “experts,” for example by criticizing the way I had formulated a question (see Stephens 2007). I suspect that the relatively low status of doctoral students (Rus. *aspirant*) in the academic hierarchy, my young age, my gender, and my non-native Russian language skills were additional factors that contributed to how the elite interviewees positioned themselves during our encounters.

⁵ I have consciously presented both terms in inverted commas to denote my skepticism towards the practice of drawing a line between individuals with an average or higher status in society.

Yet, this is not to suggest that the sense of power disequilibrium between me and my interviewees was necessarily a hindrance: as a foreign novice researcher, they could be prompted to explain to me “obvious” or “commonsensical” things about state–youth interactions, whether during the Soviet era or at present. My reflections on the nature of knowledge co-produced in oral history interviews in publication II could therefore be extended to all the interviews that I conducted:

Memories of the past, narrated for the researcher in the present, are “colored” not just by the present temporal context and the distance to the time they are recalling, but also by the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Each interview is unique and unreplicable.

Lynn Abrams distinguishes between three models of oral history used by researchers: the “reminiscence and community model,” which aims to uncover information before it is lost; the “evidential model,” which utilizes oral history as source material to support or challenge the collector’s argument; and the “theoretical model,” where the theoretical output of the oral history interviews is primary to its content (Abrams 2010, 15). In this dissertation, I have used oral history “evidentially” as a method of data triangulation that provides an additional perspective to the story of the Komsomol’s demise in the late Soviet era and its later transformation. Yet, the adoption of such an approach does not mean that the interactions I had with interviewees only about mechanically collecting facts. Quite the contrary, I was extremely intrigued by the way the interviewees engaged in self-narration, constructing coherent stories featuring dramatic features of their personal lives intertwined with the story of the late Soviet and post-Soviet state, the Komsomol, and the legacy organizations (see Abrams 2010, 35–46). Typical of oral history interviews, they drew upon broader public memory of the turbulent period in Russian and Belarusian history before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as on narratives about the Komsomol in that period. One of these interviews lasted for four hours and was marked by exceptional reflectivity and emotionality. All in all, conducting interviews and participant observation in Russia and Belarus was an emotionally laborious process due to the combination of time pressure, the need to negotiate and renegotiate access to people and source material, and the necessity to establish a rapport during the encounters with people—all while ensuring that research ethics were respected during the process.

The interviews lasted about 90 minutes each. All except one of them, which was conducted with employees of the Russian Union of Youth, were recorded and selectively transcribed by me. The method of selective transcription meant that I first wrote lengthy summaries of every interview. Later, after I had reorganized the data that was to be analyzed within the

framework of a given publication, I transcribed word for word those parts of the interviews that were included in the thematic analysis of a given article.

3.8 FROM CLOSE READING TO THEMATIC ANALYSIS: ANALYSING DATA IN PLURAL

The interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation influenced the way the diverse source material, discussed above, was analyzed and presented in the publications that comprise the dissertation. Broadly speaking, in all four articles I applied some version of thematic analysis⁶ to identify patterns in the data and then discussed the observed patterns against the backdrop of relevant prior studies. I chose to apply thematic analysis because I believed that it would allow me to reduce the amount of material and distill the results in a theoretically grounded way while displaying the richness of the data. Moreover, thematic analysis was a suitable method of data analysis for this dissertation due to its flexibility and compatibility with a wide range of theories and the dissertation's critical realist ontology (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis was also well suited to the dissertation's abductive approach to research, meaning that I constantly needed to move back and forth between different theories and the empirical source material, trying to achieve an ideal "fit" between the two. Following the typology proposed by Braun et al. (2018), I applied a "codebook approach" to thematic analysis since the data collection process was driven by the loose themes that I had determined in advance based on a reading of the relevant literature and my research interests, but I remained flexible about being side-tracked from the initial themes of interest if and when I identified patterns in the data that seemed more fruitful for analysis. For example, I initially wanted to study how different aspects of authoritarian modernization (Gel'man 2016) were present at the Russian government-organized youth forums I had attended, but during the research process I instead ended up framing my analysis of state youth policy measures in the conceptual binary of youth-as-a-problem and youth-as-a-resource (Denstad 2009; Pilkington 1994).

Different disciplinary traditions also affected the way source material was analyzed for each publication included in the dissertation, given that it was an interdisciplinary undertaking committed to theoretical triangulation from the very start. Publication II is a classic case of historical analysis. I engaged critically with the source material available to me to look for answers to puzzling questions (both questions that I had been asking from the start and questions that emerged while I was going through the material), search for connections and patterns, and, essentially, understand why people in the past believed and spoke the way they did and what implications such

⁶ In this dissertation, the terms thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis are used interchangeably.

perspectives had for the fate of the Komsomol in the Russian territory (see Fulbrook 2003, 195). A similar approach was applied in publication I, in which my aim was to “make sense” of the emergence of a pro-presidential youth league in Lukashenka’s Belarus and the interplay of structural and agency-related factors that enabled it.

The analysis presented in publications III and IV, on the other hand, follows the disciplinary traditions of social science, and in them I apply thematic analysis more systematically than in publications I and II. I started by reorganizing and coding the data that I had reasoned was most fruitful for answering the research questions posed in the respective article. Unlike with reflexive thematic analysis and other kinds of thematic analysis, where researchers work adopt a bottom-up approach and the themes are determined *after* coding, I already had a broad idea of the themes I wanted to cover *before* coding (Braun et al. 2018). In both publications, I was concerned with the goals and implementation of state youth policy and young people’s responses to it. At first, I used Atlas.ti software to code and categorize the data, but I found the software difficult to use and thus ended up doing the analysis manually, using the highlighter and comment function in Microsoft Word. The analysis that I conducted for each dissertation publication resulted in its own codebook, which I compiled while reading and re-reading the empirical material and the relevant literature. After coding, I manually grouped the codes into discursive categories organized around some core concept or idea (Braun, Clarke, and Rance 2014). For example, in publication III, the way in which young Belarusians engaged and disengaged with the BRYU was constructed as a core concept. In the end, the categories were (re)situated with respect to the relevant literature to provide answers to the specific research questions posed in the article. Instead of working on all four articles at the same time, I analyzed the data for each of them separately and wrote the articles one after the other. I believe that this strategy helped me manage the dissertation project, forced me to reflect on its key findings from early on, and left enough time for the lengthy peer-review process, which resulted in extensive rewriting of the articles.

4 PUBLICATIONS

The dissertation is based on the research presented in four journal articles. Each of the research articles builds on a different set of source material, applies a different conceptual framework, and thus, also contributes to somewhat different scholarly discussions. Yet, each of them examines institutions that serve—or used to serve—as platforms for government-affiliated youth activism in the context of a post-Soviet hybrid or authoritarian state. When read in combination with one another, the four articles provide a unique interdisciplinary perspective on the post-Soviet transformation and its aftermath by examining the sweeping socio-political changes from a multi-level perspective. They thus contribute to discussions not just on the collapse of the Soviet Union and state-building efforts in the former Soviet republics, but also on the politics of youth and authoritarianism in general.

This chapter provides a summary of the four publications and their results. Table 1 below illustrates the analytical connections between the publications. After providing an overview of the publications, the following chapter discusses their findings in the context of the broader body of literature.

Table 1 *The temporal-geographical matrix of the dissertation publications*

	Transformation of the Komsomol	Contemporary state-affiliated youth activism
Belarus	I. The development of the Belarusian Komsomol (LKSM, SMB, BYU) and the pro-Lukashenka organizations BPYU and BRYU (1989–2002)	III. Contemporary Belarusian state-affiliated youth activism: the case of the BRYU
Russia	II. The establishment and development of the Russian Komsomol (LKSM RSFSR)—Russian Union of Youth (RUY) (1989–2018)	IV. Russian government-organized youth forums as a youth policy instrument

Publication I, “From Komsomol to the Republican Youth Union: Building a Pro-Presidential Mass Youth Organisation in Post-Soviet Belarus,” published in the journal *Europe-Asia Studies*, analyzes the development of Belarusian government-affiliated youth organizations from the late 1980s until 2002. It addresses two of the three research questions that the dissertation set out to answer by investigating the transformation of the

Belarusian Komsomol organization in the *perestroika* era and analyzing the establishment of new government-organized youth organisations during Alyaksandr Lukashenka's first presidential term (1994–2001).

The story of the transformation of the Komsomol organization into the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), the contemporary government-affiliated mass membership youth organization, tends to be narrated as a simple and straightforward process by political actors and researchers in both Belarus and elsewhere. In contrast to these representations, the article argues that the process of recreating a universal youth organization was a complex task that took Lukashenka's government years to complete. The argument is based on the historical analysis of triangulated research material consisting of previously unpublished documents accessed in five Belarusian archives, contemporary newspaper articles, and interviews conducted with former youth organization activists in Belarus in 2016 and 2017. The article suggests that timing, structural factors, and the measures taken by different actors for and against the return to a Soviet-style state corporatist model of state–youth relations all contributed to just when and how the BRYU emerged and the organizational shape it took. Furthermore, the article maintains that the transformation from Komsomol into “Lukamol” (the BRYU's stigmatizing nickname referring to “*Lukashenka's Komsomol*”) reflected the gradual consolidation of Lukashenka's authoritarian rule during his first term as president.

The article applies a historical institutional toolkit to examine the transformation of the Belarusian Komsomol into an independent non-governmental organization and the emergence of new pro-government youth organizations. As early as 1996, Lukashenka sought to coopt and unify existing youth groups—first and foremost, the juridical Komsomol's successor organization, the Belarusian Youth Union (BYU)—behind him as part of his general aim to consolidate power. At this critical junction, the BYU opted to remain independent and apolitical, whereas a young political activist named Usievalad Yancheuski (Rus. Vsevolod Yanchevskii) explicitly stated his interest in building a pro-presidential youth movement that would assume the task of ensuring the young people receive a “patriotic upbringing.” A few months later, the BPYU was established, and the government endorsed it by granting it considerable administrative and financial support. What followed was a period of competition between the BYU and the BPYU. Although the BYU had refused to align itself politically with Lukashenka, it was still eager to collaborate with state institutions in the sphere of youth policy. This was initially possible but, following a legal dispute over *Komsomol* real estate inherited by BYU and the organization's increased cooperation with opposition-affiliated youth groups, Lukashenka's government eventually pushed through a coerced merger of the BYU and the BPYU in 2002. The article concludes by arguing that the unified Belarusian

Republican Youth Union emerged simultaneously with Lukashenka's now consolidated authoritarian regime.

The article contributes to existing literature on the Komsomol's collapse and on the origins of the contemporary Belarusian mass membership youth organization, the BRYU. Previous research has largely overlooked the survival and transformation of the union republic-level Komsomol organizations into independent non-governmental organizations, focusing instead on the dissolution of the all-Soviet Komsomol and local Komsomol committees. The article tells the story of the Komsomol's collapse from the meso level, which adds nuance to the dominant representation of the Komsomol and its staff primarily as entrepreneurial careerists.

From a theoretical standpoint, the article engages with academic discussions on organizational change and Soviet legacies. By applying Hillel David Soifer's framework of critical junctures, it demonstrates how the combination of permissive (structural) and productive (agency-related) conditions enable and produce organizational change. Moreover, it highlights that it is actors' *perceptions* of the permissive conditions that encourages them to either drive change or resist it. In the turbulent time of a critical juncture, these decisions pave the way to future path dependencies. Soviet legacies, for their part, become activated in the process through individuals' (conscious or unconscious) awareness of Soviet-era practices, which affects the way in which different policy choices are weighed. The article argues that President Lukashenka's personal experience with the political institutions of the Soviet Union inspired him to establish a unified mass membership youth league in post-Soviet Belarus.

Publication II, "From State to Society: The Komsomol in Yeltsin's Russia," analyzes the establishment and transformation of the Komsomol organization of the Russian union republic, the counterpart of the Belarusian Youth Union in the Russian territory. The article is forthcoming (2022) in the journal *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*.

This contribution provides answers to the first research question, related to the evolution of the Komsomol in the post-Soviet era. It argues that the establishment of the Russian Komsomol organization in 1989 was the result of structural changes taking place during the *perestroika* era in Soviet institutions, including the Komsomol. The article further asserts that the creation of the organization accelerated the downfall of the higher level Komsomol organization of the Soviet Union (VLKSM). What is more, one of the reasons that the Russian Komsomol survived even as the Communist Party was banned was that during the failed August Coup 1991, its leadership mobilized in support of Boris Yeltsin. In the early 1990s, the (now renamed) Russian Union of Youth transformed itself into an independent non-governmental advocacy group whose activities did not significantly differ from those of other non-governmental organizations operating in Russia at

the time. However, the reemergence of patriotic upbringing rhetoric around 1996 prompted it to take on the role of a loyal partner to the government in the sphere of civil society, a role that it has continued to assume to the present day. The article argues that the history of the Komsomol and its collapse is incomplete without a chapter on the Russian Komsomol—the Russian Union of Youth.

From a theoretical standpoint, I chose not to explicitly apply the historical institutionalist framework to the source material, but instead opted to rely on the standard methods of historical research when collecting and analyzing the research material and presenting the findings. Moreover, given that the research was conducted in Russia after Belarus, the insights of comparative historical research as a heuristic tool were applied during the process. My awareness of the Belarusian Komsomol's transformation process influenced the research questions, which for their part guided the data collection process. The snowballing of suitable interviewees did not start from scratch but represented a continuation of work already begun while on the other side of Russia's western border precisely because the leadership of the Belarusian and Russian Komsomol legacy organizations were well acquainted with one another. As in publication I, the analysis draws from various sources: archival material, contemporary press articles, and expert interviews with Komsomol–RUY leaders. The story of the Russian Komsomol's transformation is situated within the broader temporal context of *perestroika*, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the construction of a sovereign and independent Russia, the “triple transition” of post-communism, and the gradual shift towards authoritarianization that took place before and after the constitutional crisis of 1993.

Publication III shifts the temporal focus from the past to the present. Titled “(Dis)engaging youth in Contemporary Belarus Through a Pro-Presidential Youth League,” this article was published in *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*. It contributes to research questions regarding the rationale for, roots of, and experiences of government-affiliated youth activism in present-day Belarus. It maintains that young Belarusians are flexible in both engaging with and disengaging from the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the country's government-organized mass membership youth league, and its official repertoire by a variety of means. The article suggests that young Belarusians' mixed engagement with the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) coupled with widespread indifference towards it can be explained from the perspective of Alexei Yurchak's concept of ritualized acts better than from the standard perspective of reward and punishment. While it is somewhat surprising that a theoretical framework constructed in the context of the late Soviet Union is applicable in contemporary Belarus, the article finds that

young people's lifelong experience of Lukashenka's regime has created an analogous environment for state-sanctioned youth activism.

The analysis presented in publication III is based on different kinds of sources than those assessed in publications I and II, and its contributions are primarily in the fields of political science and sociology. For this part of the dissertation, participant observation was conducted inside two separate university cells of the BRYU in 2016 and 2017. The data was complimented with semi-structured interviews with the organization's members and non-members. During the thematic analysis phase, the data was coded, and categories and themes were constructed from the data. Publication III presents findings that are connected to young people's participation in and (dis)engagement with the youth league. For analytical purposes, the article divides the findings for each membership category of the BRYU, since I identified notable differences in modes and motivations for engagement among members with different statuses in the organization. Passive rank-and-file members and non-members participated differently and narrated their participation differently than BRYU activists, and there are also differences between voluntary BRYU activists and BRYU employees. What is interesting is that members of all categories encountered in the framework of this research project expressed either implicitly or explicitly an awareness of the BRYU's stigma and have their own ways of responding to it.

Publication III contributes to discussions on government-organized non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) in authoritarian states. It does so by providing the grassroots perspective that is often missing in outsider analyses of such organizations. The article provides answers to research questions two and three. It demonstrates that Belarusian authorities aim systematically to coopt young people's desire for activism and steer it to the BRYU in the hopes of thus ensuring the regime's survival, but that the government prefers visible mobilization over ideological determination. Young people respond to such attempts by opting to join the BRYU formally but applying various methods of disengagement, for example by resignifying their engagement with the organization base on their personal needs and desires.

Publication IV addresses government-affiliated youth activism in the 2010s in Russia. While in the case of Belarus a unitary mass membership government-organized youth organization exists, in Russia there are various different platforms for state-sanctioned youth activism. Instead of focusing on organizations, the article "Russian Youth Forums: Sites of Managed Youth Empowerment," published in *YOUNG: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, explores the topic of state-sanctioned youth activism through a case study of government-organized youth camps, which have become major sites for state-youth interactions in the 2010s. These typically weeklong summer camps are organized in most of Russia's various regions, attracting hundreds

of thousands of participants. Although the forums have diverse foci, all of them are organized by the Federal Department of Youth Affairs *Rosmolodezh'* and are aimed at young people with an "active civic stance." As a result of standardization, the forums also follow a similar format.

In parallel with publication III, this article provides answers to research questions two and three, analyzing the forms and meanings of contemporary government-affiliated youth activism from the perspective of both state youth policy officials and those participating in the forums. It puts forwards two arguments. First, it argues that policymakers see young people as a "problematic resource" requiring a patriotic upbringing in order to contribute to Russia's socio-economic development along its current authoritarian course rather than jeopardize it. Second, in approaching the youth forums from the young participants' perspective, the article maintains that regardless of the restrictive nature of the youth forums as platforms of formal participation, they can also drive youth empowerment because they are sites where young people acquire and apply agency to navigate and negotiate the formal "rules of the game" and re-signify the forums to respond to their own interests. The triangulated research material consisting of participation observation and interview data together with the content analysis method is similar to the approach taken in publication III. However, the publication is also linked to publication II because the contemporary Russian Union of Youth is one of the organizations that sends its activists to the government-organized youth camps examined in the article.

The findings put forward in publication IV contribute to the existing literature on youth policy in authoritarian states and young people's activism via formal platforms of participation. In the post-Soviet and Russian context, it builds on and follows up on research conducted among rank-and-file members of the infamous youth movement *Nashi*, as the contemporary youth forums emerged out of the annual *Nashi* training camps. The knowledge presented in the article provides much needed insight into government interactions with a new generation of young people who have been born and raised not just in Putin's Russia but also in the digital age. It suggests that young people can become irritated with the state's patriotic upbringing efforts and that they have high expectations regarding their rights at the forums in particular and in society in general. One of the theoretical takeaways from the article is that it makes sense to apply a broad definition of youth activism in the authoritarian political context to better understand how compliant forms of activism can change and challenge existing social and political institutions in subtle ways.

5 ARGUMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This chapter introduces the central arguments made in this dissertation and what they contribute to different bodies of literature. It contains three sections, each of which summarizes my argument and its contribution to one research question in the dissertation. First, I discuss the new knowledge presented in the dissertation on the late Soviet and post-Soviet transformation of union republic-level Komsomol organizations and the Soviet collapse at large. After that, I explain the dissertation's contribution to the literature on the youth policy of authoritarian states from both the government's and young people's points of view. All three sections discuss these contributions within the framework of structure and agency and change and continuity, the two pairs of meta-concepts that theoretically underpin the dissertation, at the three levels of analysis (macro, meso, and micro). This focus brings the findings of the four articles included in this dissertation to a new analytical level and paves the way for a somewhat broader argument about the collapse of communism and the nature of Soviet legacies thirty years after the dissolution of the USSR and the end of state socialism put forward in the concluding remarks.

5.1 THE POST-COMMUNIST KOMSOMOL IN RUSSIA AND BELARUS

The story of the Komsomol's evolution in Russia and Belarus could be interpreted as a temporally multifaceted and spatially intertwined story of change and continuity during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first descriptive research question posed in this dissertation— “How did the Komsomol evolve in Belarus and Russia from the *perestroika* era up until the present day?” —was contextualized within broader studies in the field and gave rise to theoretical follow-up inquiries, such as “what does it tell us about the collapse of the Soviet Union?” With a focus on organizations, this part of the dissertation's analysis was conducted primarily on the meso level, although the explanation draws also from the macro and micro levels.

In publications I and II, I map the Komsomol's development throughout the period of systemic change and account for similarities and differences in their historical trajectories. I argue that in both Belarus and Russia, union republic-level Komsomol organizations—the Leninist Communist Youth Union of Belarus (LKSMB) and the Leninist Communist Youth Union of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (LKSM RSFSR)—succeeded in adapting to the changes in the political, economic, and social environment of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet state by transforming themselves into independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs). At the same time,

however, the Komsomol's legacy remained operative within both organizations and influenced the way in which they sought to establish new roles for themselves after the collapse of the Soviet party state. While meeting the criteria of NGOs in terms of their organizational strategy and objectives (see McIntosh Sundstrom 2006, 14–18), both the Belarusian Youth Union and Russian Union of Youth were also Soviet legacy organizations in the full meaning of the word: this dissertation has demonstrated that while the organizations underwent qualitative changes, a certain resistance to change also existed within the organizations, stemming from their Komsomol origins. The findings of this dissertation, presented in publications I and II, suggest that both organizations struggled to transform themselves from organizations *for* youth into organizations *of* youth, preferring to lobby for youth interests (as they perceived them) in the corridors of power rather than seek a closer connection to and representation of their rank-and-file members. This common reform strategy, though not discussed in detail in the publications, was by no means accidental; to an extent, it was result of the trans- and subnational dynamics of information flows. Those who steered the development of Komsomol (legacy) organizations in Belarus and Russia were aware of experiences on the other side of the border, in the (post-)Soviet space and beyond, but they also had limited knowledge of the dynamics impacting local and regional committees, especially in Russia.

As noted in chapter 2, the dissertation's findings and arguments contribute to current debates on the events and temporal processes impacting the Soviet dissolution. While some have interpreted the Soviet collapse as a “a momentous event in world history” (Sewell 1996, 861) or as a “monster event” (Dosse 2015), its temporal boundaries are controversial and depend on one's vantage point. While this dissertation confirms Karla's (2021) argument that the “core” of such events cannot be challenged, interpretations of their significance still differ based on one's viewpoint. For example, Russia's declaration of sovereignty on June 12, 1992, can be interpreted as a decisive moment for two events, the dissolution of the USSR and the establishment of independent Russian statehood, just as the establishment of the LKSM RSFSR was a decisive moment in two slightly less earth-shattering events: the VLKSM's death and the birth of the Russian Union of Youth.

Furthermore, it would be an understatement to maintain that what occurred on the fringes of the Soviet collapse is still being debated. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the period of analysis covered in the four articles starts in 1989, which Dunlop (1995) calls the “watershed year” in the history of the collapse of the Soviet Union. For Dunlop, the watershed quality of the year was generated by the establishment of the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union, an event that in turn stimulated rapid political changes the importance of which can scarcely be exaggerated. In his account, Gill (1995) points to a qualitative shift that took place in 1989, as

Gorbachev's reforms developed from mere liberalization to "actual democratization" and reached a point where there was no turning back. Returning to the dissertation's meso level, 1989 was surely a watershed year for the LKSM RSFSR, given that it was established at that time, but not necessarily for the LKSMB, given that reforms at this stage were still limited, reflecting the political inertia in the republic at large (Wilson 2011, 142–43).

If the "watershed year" of 1989 was the point of no return for the collapse of Soviet communism (but not for the dissolution of the Soviet *state*, which was arguably on December 8, 1991, when the Belovezha Accords were signed), the beginning of the event took place earlier—if not in 1970 (Kotkin 2008), then perhaps in 1985. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to power in 1985 marked a critical juncture, defined in this dissertation as a moment in time in which the decisions of powerful actors are causally decisive for the selection of one path of institutional development over other possible paths (Capoccia 2016). To better analyze the causal logic behind this and other critical junctures covered in the dissertation, it is fruitful to invoke Soifer's framework, which identifies the interplay of permissive and productive conditions in times of change, introduced in chapter 2 of this introduction. Permissive conditions are defined as the "necessary conditions that mark the loosening of constraints on agency or contingency and thus provide the temporal bounds on critical junctures," whereas productive conditions "act within the context of these permissive conditions to produce divergence" (Soifer 2012). Sensitivity to these two sets of conditions allows one to omit what statisticians call the false positive and false negative types of errors. In the context of critical junctures, a "false positive" would mean assuming the presence of a critical juncture when it was not there, most likely due to a lack of permissive conditions. A "false negative," on the other hand, would be characteristic of a situation where permissive conditions exist but no change occurs due to the lack of productive conditions.

The macro-level policies of *glasnost*' and democratization, introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, were permissive conditions that enabled change in the Soviet system as a whole and in the Komsomol in particular, being one Soviet institution among many. As this dissertation argues, they generated room for productive conditions within the Komsomol that did lead to divergence. Moreover, various aspects of change looked different and came about at different times within the organization. The case also highlights the intertwining of structure and agency; although critical junctures mark shifts in structural conditions that open a window of opportunity for agency, they do not simply appear out of nowhere but instead result from actors' agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). As this dissertation demonstrates, Gorbachev's democratization was experienced differently and at a different pace in different Soviet institutions, and what is more, it was experienced differently within one particular Soviet institution—the Komsomol. In comparison to the Communist Party, the Komsomol was a harbinger of

change, but some republic-level committees within the Komsomol were more reform-oriented than others, given each republic's unique socio-political and economic situation. The Estonian Komsomol organization was in the frontline of seeking power and autonomy from the VLKSM (Solnick 1999, 117), while the Belarusian Komsomol was among those organizations quite comfortable in their subordinate position vis-à-vis the VLKSM up until 1990, when experienced Komsomol *apparatchiks* on the micro level simply left the organization *en masse* rather than seek to re-invigorate it (like those driving the establishment of the LKSM RSFSR did). Komsomol officials in the Russian territory, as I demonstrate in publication II, were both late and early in setting up their own branch of the youth league: long overdue if analyzed from the perspective of the Komsomol, but still ahead of the curve if examined alongside party and state institutions in the RSFSR. The multiple experiences of *perestroika* bring new nuances to the story of the Komsomol's collapse (see, e.g., Sokolov 2002; Pilkington 1994; Solnick 1999) and to the political history of the end of the Soviet Union at large.

What is more, examining the collapse of the Soviet Union from the Komsomol's spatially broad (if not all-encompassing) meso perspective contributes to the debates on acceleration (Vieira 2011; Rosa 2013; Scheurman 2004) in the context of an authoritarian state transitioning from a planned to a market economy. According to Rosa (2013, 195–209; 2005), there is a mismatch between an accelerating society (propelled by capitalism, cultural ideals of modernity, and the process of functional differentiation) and a centralized state that is plagued by deceleration. This mismatch produces desynchronization between the state and civil society and yields political decision-making that is reactionary rather than proactive, especially in liberal democracies, where political decision-making is slow (even if some branches are more acceleratory than others (Scheurman 2004)). First, this dissertation provides insights into how the different Komsomol actors navigated their way through the desynchronization between state and civil society that became apparent by the beginning of Gorbachev's reforms, suggesting that the distinction between "state" and "civil society" is too simplistic. Second, it observes the government's shifting role from a "decelerator" into an "accelerator" and back (Rosa 2013), and it points to both the deceleratory and acceleratory policies being implemented within one state institution (the Komsomol)—while the youth league was accelerating the transition to capitalism, it was merely reacting to bottom-up pressures to transform from an administered mass organization into an organization more responsive to the needs of its rank-and-file members. Third, the dissertation confirms Vieira's (2011) argument regarding political actors' active role in framing, expressing, and negotiating acceleration. Returning to the issue of flexible fringes of an event (Karla 2021), publications I and II track the Komsomol actors' rhetorical pivot from talking about "crisis" to referring to a situation that was "uncontrollable" or "chaotic" if not outright on the verge of "collapse," before shifting to talk of

“stabilization,” thus suggesting contemporaries’ perceptions of the beginning and end points of the “collapse” of one Soviet institution.

Before the failed August Coup of 1991, Komsomol organizations in Belarus and Russia had been forced to renegotiate their relationship with party and state organizations as well as other youth associations. While both the Russian and Belarusian Komsomol organizations had a hard time synchronizing their activities with the new committees of youth affairs, they indicated different attitudes towards the communist parties of their respective republics. The Russian Komsomol opted to align itself with the “radical democrats” of Boris Yel’tsin and against the conservative-dominated Russian Communist Party, established in June 1990, while the Belarusian Komsomol remained on good terms with the Communist Party of Belarus despite a nominal break with it. As a result, the Russian Komsomol’s property did not come under threat of being nationalized in the aftermath of the failed August putsch of 1991, whereas the Belarusian Supreme Council *did* initially include the LKSMB in its decree on de-partyization. Moreover, the Russian and Belarusian Komsomol organizations displayed different attitudes towards the all-Union Komsomol, the VLKSM. At first, both sought to gain “full” autonomy within the federal structure of the Komsomol, but after the failed coup of August 1991, the LKSM RSFSR became more resolute in accelerating the demise of its superior and taking over the function of managing intra-union(-to-be) cooperation with those Komsomol (legacy) organizations that aspired to continue collaboration in the future, whereas the LKSMB was a bystander observing the VLKSM’s demise. These differences and similarities cannot be explained by structural macro-level conditions alone. Instead, Komsomol officials in Belarus and Russia had the agency to influence outcomes that had far-fetching consequences. For example, by employing a contrafactual lens to examine the conflict between the Belarusian Komsomol and the Belarusian Supreme Council, it could be argued that had the leadership of the Belarusian Komsomol not managed to convince Stanislau Shushkevich that the organization had broken all ties with the Communist Party, the de-partyization decree would have remained in force and the Komsomol’s property nationalized.

In 1990, both the Russian and the Belarusian Komsomol decided to transform themselves into non-governmental organizations acting in the interests of youth in general rather than become associations only for communist youth or merge with the state committees of youth affairs. The decision to transform themselves into social organizations—in line with the VLKSM’s rebranding effort at its 21st Congress in April 1990—afforded the two organizations large potential constituencies and plenty of room for forging alliances. In some places, Komsomol committees did manage to collaborate with the “informals,” as had been Gorbachev’s desire. For example, the Mahileu city committee of the Komsomol collaborated with the environmental organization *Zelenye* and organized an expedition with the regional branch of *Martyrolah Belarusi*, a new society founded to

commemorate the victims of Stalin's repressions (Savchenko 2009, 156). The expedition discovered the grave of Dmitry Zhilunovich, the first head of a Soviet government in Belarus who allegedly committed suicide in 1937.⁷

From 1990 onwards, organizational change took place in both the Belarusian and the Russian Komsomol organizations, as demonstrated by the gradual "layering" of their organizational repertoires (Mahoney and Thelen 2010, 16–17). The August Coup of 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union did not generate a qualitative shift in the organizations' evolution, unlike what scholars might well have hypothesized given the event's perceived importance to the Soviet collapse; moreover, up until the mid-1990s both organizations were learning to play the new role of non-governmental organizations that they had adopted. They were learning to organize their activities as programs, to apply for funding from domestic and international actors, to appear valuable to their constituencies, and to interact with other associations and state institutions. With radically reduced memberships, they appeared as marginal actors in society (see Pilkington 1994, 177; Baranova 1992), but at least they had survived the political turbulence, suggesting that from their vantage point, the newfound stability marked the end of the "monster event" of Soviet collapse.

The macro-level shift in the government's approach to young people that took place in both Russia and Belarus changed these dynamics. In Belarus, the newly elected President Lukashenka noted that young people and youth groups had been involved in the street protests staged against the seven-point referendum in 1996. To ensure young people's support, he approached the leadership of the Belarusian Youth Union with a request for collaboration. The BYU declined Lukashenka's request, but it still sought to continue cooperating with state institutions in the sphere of youth policy, for example by engaging in the "patriotic upbringing" of youth. However, the creation of a new, explicitly pro-presidential youth organization, the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union (BPYU), and its evolution into an administered mass organization during the authoritarianization of the Belarusian political system during Lukashenka's first presidential term eventually forced the BYU to give in to government pressure and merge with the BPYU to form the BRYU, Belarus's contemporary mass youth organization. In Russia, however, the RUY's analogous interest in acting as a partner with the state in implementing patriotic upbringing measures while also remaining an autonomous actor in the sphere of civil society resulted in the organization's rise to prominence. As I argue in publication II, the agentic decision to embrace the role of a "consentful" civil society actor enabled the RUY to prosper in Russia in the 2010s. The RUY can voice criticism of state policies, especially in the youth sphere, but it always does so in a

⁷ "Protokol 26-oi mogilevskoi oblastnoi komsomol'skoi konferentsii," January 26, 1990, accessed at *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv obshchestvennykh organizatsii Mogilevskoi oblasti*, fond 54, opis' 42, delo 30, list 92.

“constructive” spirit, stressing its position of loyalty to the current regime (*cf.* Kulmala 2016).

The transnational contacts between the Komsomol’s legacy organizations were formally institutionalized in 2000 when the BYU and the RUY together established the Russian-Belarusian Youth Union (Rus. *Rossiisko-belorusskii soyuz molodezhi*), allegedly in an attempt to save the BYU from a forced merger with the BPYU.⁸ The association’s existence was at the time justified by the need to enhance youth interaction within the union state (the BRYU later inherited the BYU’s membership in the association), but in practice it just formally took over the cultural events that the RUY and the BYU had been jointly organizing together for years. The data analyzed within the framework of this dissertation suggests that the association never existed as an independent force, but it has returned to the news headlines after the 2020 Belarusian revolution. In July 2021, the BRYU’s leader, Dzmitryi Varanyuk, claimed that the “unique union of public associations” would be “rebooted and activated” to develop the interactions of young people within the union state and beyond (Varanyuk, quoted in RUY 2021). Only time will tell whether the Russian-Belarusian Youth Union will become an autonomous organization in its own right, whether it will become an extension of either one of its members, or whether it will remain a virtual entity.

5.2 STATE YOUTH POLICY IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA AND BELARUS: ENDORSING “PATRIOTIC” YOUTH ACTIVISM

How and why do the Belarusian and Russian governments promote government-affiliated youth activism? The second research question masks part of the answer to an earlier research question regarding the role of government-organized NGOs, introduced in section 1.2, in the youth policy practiced in post-Soviet Russia and Belarus. As discussed in the first chapter of this introduction, youth policy is conceptualized in this dissertation as a principle of action by state organs explicitly targeting young people (Furlong 2012, 21). I have noted that while the aims and means of youth policy are politically, socially, and temporally situated, youth policy is always either explicitly or implicitly concerned with ensuring young people’s acceptance and reproducing a political order deemed most desirable by the policymakers (Pohl et al. 2020, 1). Whatever elements of change and continuity are present in a government’s political priorities on the macro level are therefore reflected in its youth policy, which makes youth policy a fruitful lens for understanding negotiations regarding the existing political order, especially

⁸ Interview with Alla Danilova, first secretary of the BYU (2001–2002), Minsk, May 23, 2017.

in moments of regime crisis (Krawatzek 2018). In both Belarus and Russia, the evolution of the political system has been reflected in the youth policies pursued by the governments of the two states in the last three decades. As this section details, patriotic education of youth was (re)discovered at a moment when the respective governments felt threatened by developments in the youth sphere, whether caused by the prevalence of substance abuse or young people's (potential) political mobilization against the government. In another instance, the role of nationalism within the political order was negotiated through discourses on youth and youth policy in both Belarus and Russia. Young people who were labelled ethnic nationalists were framed as troublemakers, while those demonstrating civic nationalist views were applauded as "genuine" patriots. One Rosmolodezh' employee spoke at length about the necessity to ensure interactions between young people from different parts of the federation to counter national security threats related to xenophobia and racism:

Russia is a very multinational country. And without the communication with young people, its unity is under threat. Because prejudices, different stereotypes about other peoples, regions, and republics are still very strong. [...] When people from the Caucasus, Siberia, the Urals, the South of Russia all hang out together [at forums] and feel the unity, and everyone communicates in Russian, goes to the same classes, and discusses the same topics, then some kind of all-Russian identity emerges.⁹

All four publications of this dissertation contribute to existing knowledge on the way in which the Russian and Belarusian governments perceive young people and—stemming from these perceptions—what policy measures they have designed, at different points of time, to target young people. As this section suggests, this knowledge could travel to other post-Soviet authoritarian settings, authoritarian countries beyond the former Soviet Union, or even to modern liberal democracies.

In this dissertation, I maintain that in both Belarus and Russia young people are perceived as a "problematic resource." This argument is developed in detail in publication IV, but the findings related to state youth policy presented in research articles I, II, and III suggest that the argument could also be extended to apply to the Belarusian case and to the time when youth policy was first put on the agenda of the two governments in the mid-1990s, which in itself stands as a testament to the transnational flow of ideas.

The perception of youth as a problematic resource has its roots in the (late) Soviet era. Before *perestroika*, Soviet discourse on youth was dominated by the perception young people's resourcefulness: popular narratives depicted young people as the constructors of communism and as

⁹ Interview with Vadim, a mid-level Rosmolodezh' employee, Moscow, May 28, 2018.

those who would lead the country to a better future (Omel'chenko 2004). By the time of *perestroika*, however, the idea that young people constituted an important resource was intertwined with a discourse highlighting youth as problematic. Young people came to be portrayed first and foremost as victims of Western influence, subsequently as a threat to the Soviet project, and later, as those who suffered the most during the collapse of the Soviet Union (Krawatzek 2017; Pilkington 1994).

What is curious about the narrative of youth as a “problematic resource” is that it can also be interpreted as a manifestation of a more universal understanding of young people in modern societies, given the former prevalence of the youth-as-a-problem discourse and the mainstreaming in the West of a new paradigm that views young people first and foremost as a resource for society at present and in the future (Denstad 2009). As the American youth work expert Bonnie Benard (1990, 6) concluded more than thirty years ago, “whether we view youth as problems or as resources determines not only our expectations for our youth and our actions towards them, but also the type of programs we [...] design to address youth issues.”

Before discussing the youth policy designed and implemented by the post-Soviet Russian and Belarusian governments, it is necessary to define the term “state-affiliated youth activism,” which is central to research question 2. State-affiliated youth activism is a key concept developed and employed throughout the dissertation. I define it as voluntary collective action aimed at effecting social change, undertaken by young people acting through structures that are closely connected with institutions of the state. It is a broad concept that encompasses different mechanisms of interaction between the state on the macro level, young people on the micro level, and some type of government-endorsed organization (e.g., a formal and registered youth association) on the meso level. Just what qualifies as “close connections” is certainly subject to debate. What I mean here is the kind of co-optive connection that somehow challenges the independence of the meso-level structure enabling activism and transforms it into a channel through which the government’s view about desirable (and undesirable) activism can be transmitted to the individuals active in various organizations. Take for example the Russian Union of Youth, the protagonist of Publication II. As I explain in the article, the RUY is an autonomous NGO because it is financially independent and its activities are determined by the association’s leadership. At the same time, its close cooperation with state institutions has generated leverage for the government to influence internal policies of the RUY and expectations about just how the RUY will demonstrate its constructive role in the future.¹⁰ The structural position of trust is in such an instance not just restrictive but also enabling, as the RUY can capitalize on its close links with state structures and receive both material and non-material

¹⁰ For a somewhat similar differentiation between NGO autonomy and independence, see the typology of Chinese NGOs and semi-NGOs in Schwartz (2004).

support from the government. For example, the RUY observes elections in collaboration with the public chambers, which are not free of government control (Owen and Bindman 2019; Richter 2009). Since the RUY is considered a loyal actor in the public space, its role in observing elections has been endorsed by the government in material terms; in 2014, the RUY received a federal grant worth 9 million rubles for an electoral observer training project entitled “For clean elections” (Tumanov 2014). As the title of the project suggests, the RUY has a pre-determined incentive to legitimize elections rather than detect electoral fraud. Generally speaking, state-affiliated activism is “compliant”; following Alexander Libman and Vladimir Kozlov’s (2017, 195) definition, it does not involve “criticisms of the key elements of the regime (e.g., the way political leadership is formed).”

The macro-level authoritarian structure in both Russia and Belarus shapes the meso-level organizational agency of the RUY and the BRYU, thereby contributing to the reproduction of macro-level authoritarianism over time. This is not to say that the resilience of authoritarian regimes in Russia and Belarus depends upon state-affiliated activism—after all, the BRYU failed to mobilize its rank-and-file members to demonstrate their support and allegiance to Lukashenka amidst the 2020 revolution (Silvan, *forthcoming*). However, the dissertation’s findings suggest that creating the appearance of a civil society and certain mechanisms of participatory authoritarianism has indeed succeeded in channeling civic agency into spheres that have for the time being strengthened rather than challenged the authoritarian regime (Owen 2020).

To return to the question about the generalizability of this dissertation’s findings beyond Russia and Belarus, it ought to be pointed out that state-affiliated youth activism is a phenomenon that is prevalent in both democratic and non-democratic states. Close collaboration with state institutions in a democratic political context also generates expectations regarding just what kinds of activities the organizational structure enabling youth activism will and will not promote (Hopman, de Winter, and Koops 2014). However, studying state-affiliated youth activism in the non-democratic context is valuable because it provides insights into how authoritarian governments manage the sphere of civil society, and as a result, the structure of activism on the micro level. As has been established in the extensive studies investigating the relationship between authoritarianism and civil society organizations, authoritarian leaders view independent citizens’ associations as a threat due to their uncontrolled mobilization capacity, which is why they endorse platforms that are closely linked with the state and can thus be managed, at least to an extent (Koesel and Bunce 2013; Crotty, Hall, and Ljubownikow 2014; Flikke 2016; Huang 2018). The platforms can be applied for a variety of purposes, ranging from public policy implementation to the marginalization of independent associations. For example, associations like the BRYU and the RUY play a pivotal role in enacting the government’s patriotic education program in tandem with state

educational institutes. The systematic funding of organizations that are affiliated with the state increases their visibility at the macro level in a way that marginalizes independent organizations. For instance, one former BPYU activist recalled that in his home village, the BPYU was the only structure enabling civic activism, which is why he was attracted to it. After moving to Minsk, he ultimately “defected” to one of the independent youth groups.¹¹ Yet it is not hard to imagine an alternative story of him remaining within the ranks of the association he had initially joined, given the official narrative condemning independent youth movements and the webs of friendship within the *aktiv*. Another mechanism of civil society management relates to what one of the *Rosmolodezh'* interviewees called the multiplication effect: an individual who proves herself/himself in state-affiliated activism is supported in spreading the knowledge and information further.¹² Needless to say, independent activists face an altogether different response from government representatives.

As I noted in the introduction, in the Soviet party-state young people had only a single platform for engaging in government-affiliated social and political activism: the Komsomol. During Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the monopoly of the Komsomol crumbled, which accelerated the development of formal and informal youth movements that were not affiliated with the state or the party. As has been discussed in detail in the previous sub-section, as power shifted from the All-Union Komsomol to union republic-level Komsomol organisations and the ties between Komsomol organizations and party and state institutions were cut (at least formally), the Belarusian and Russian Komsomol organizations became independent of party and state supervision. As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, government-affiliated youth activism was pushed aside by the government. As Soifer (2012) puts it, the structural conditions permitting the prevalence of administered mass organizations were undone; at this critical juncture, change could be propelled via a specific combination of productive conditions.

As this dissertation demonstrates, state-affiliated youth activism as an element of state youth policy was reinvented by the government as part of the “authoritarian turn,” first in Belarus and then in Russia. In Belarus, the infrastructure for contemporary state-affiliated youth activism remains monist: following what was supposed to be an improvement on the Soviet-era Komsomol, the government constructed a unitary mass membership youth union. As this dissertation argues, the process of creating such an organization was not an easy task for the Lukashenka government; it took five years to complete, from the establishment of the BPYU in 1997 until the

¹¹ Interview with Maksim, Minsk, May 1, 2017.

¹² Interview with Vadim.

merger of the BYU and BPYU to form the BRYU in 2002.¹³ Providing more nuance to the concept of state-affiliated youth activism, publication I demonstrates that between 1997 and 2002 the BYU was eager to cooperate with state institutions but rejected a proposal to become subordinated to the Lukashenka government. While there is no evidence to suggest that the BYU's cooperation with state institutions jeopardized its organizational independence (see, e.g., Velichko 2001), it could be argued that until 2002 the BYU was an organization engaged in promoting a type of state-affiliated youth activism that was *not* pro-presidential. In comparison, the RUY at the time was *both* pro-presidential and engaged in state-affiliated youth activism, yet it still remained autonomous (primary due to government disinterest). For example, in 2003 some of its regional associations were reportedly funding part of their activities thanks to grants from the Soros Foundation and the International Research & Exchanges Board (Novikov 2003). A pro-presidential orientation and affiliation with the state in a non-democratic political setting does not therefore automatically mean that an organization—especially one that was as diverse as the RUY at the time—promotes a pro-authoritarian youth policy.¹⁴

Indeed, in Russia state-affiliated youth activism only became a notable trend during Putin's presidency, especially after the domestic "NGO boom" beginning in 2005 (Hement 2012). As publication II suggests, the RUY's cooperation with the Yeltsin government was propelled by a renewed emphasis on ensuring a patriotic upbringing from the mid-1990s onwards. However, as a reflection of the Yeltsin administration's attitude of "benign neglect" towards civil society organizations (Henderson 2011), collaboration with state institutions was limited and the type of youth activism enabled by the RUY was not explicitly endorsed by the government. The productive conditions for state-affiliated youth activism were put into place because the RUY was eager to contribute to the patriotic education of youth in cooperation with the government, but the structural environment was not permissive of the phenomenon. This changed soon after Putin ascended to the presidency. As argued by Sarah Henderson, the new president offered

new opportunities [that] meant that the NGOs would have to walk a fine line between cooperation and cooptation, but after a decade of fighting for access to government, this was an improvement over standing on the sidelines while officialdom made policy without their input. (Henderson 2011, 23)

¹³ This is not to say that Lukashenka followed a systematic plan to build an AMO for youth. Instead, as Publication I details, the outcome was the result of different decisions made by him and others.

¹⁴ Yet it is equally true that one *can* be successful in international fundraising aimed at spreading democratic ideas, while in practice endorsing a policy that supports an authoritarian system of governance.

New restrictions were introduced for the NGO sector, but at the same time state interest in civil society organizations provided them with more space for agency (Bogdanova, Cook, and Kulmala 2018). This shift in interest had an empowering effect for associations like the RUY, which the government perceived as “consentful,” “constructive,” and financially self-sustained while not being too dependent on overseas financing. At the same time, however, the RUY faced competition from the new government-organized youth movements. In a way, the RUY’s situation was thus comparable to that of the BYU from 1997 to 2002, after the establishment of the BPYU and prior to the establishment of the BRYU.

Unlike in post-2002 Belarus, in Russia the infrastructure for contemporary state-affiliated youth activism has been pluralist throughout the 2000s. Instead of aiming to construct one unitary youth league, like in Belarus, the Russian government has supported many structures that promote state-affiliated youth activism. In the context of Belarusian pro-Russian associations, Artyom Shraibman (interviewed in Ekho Moskvyy 2021) has conceptualized this approach as a system of “start-ups”: Russian authorities support several potentially competing initiatives and see which one is strong enough to survive. This is not to say that authorities have not made changes to the style and intensity of state support for organizations functioning as platforms for state-affiliated youth activism. In the early 2000s, *Nashi* was the biggest actor in the given sphere, but even then it coexisted and competed with other associations, such as the Young Guard of United Russia, *Rossiia molodaya*, and the RUY. Nowadays, the sphere of state-affiliated youth activism is occupied by countless state-supported associations and movements whose agendas are aligned with the goal of ensuring a patriotic upbringing for young people. The government endorses certain kinds of activism rather than selected associations, which is reflected in its selection of youth policy instruments. Contemporary youth forums, analyzed within the framework of this dissertation and particularly in publication IV, are designed for individuals engaging in state-affiliated youth activism rather than for the activists of specific organizations, as was the case with *Nashi*’s Seliger (see also Hemment 2015). In Belarus, as discussed in publication III, a certain amount of pluralism does exist within the BRYU, if not within the sphere of state-affiliated youth organizations in general.¹⁵ The limited tolerance for pluralism is informed by officials’ assumptions that

¹⁵ While arguing that the Belarusian state-affiliated youth activism infrastructure is monist, I do not dismiss the presence of other structures of power. For example, the government has not shut down the UNESCO clubs, which engage in some youth work. Rather, my argument about monism stems from the fact that the BRYU receives the majority of state youth policy funding and that it is the only youth organization whose activities are actively endorsed by the government (see also Rudnik 2017).

young people have different interests and preferences (see, e.g., Lukashenka, quoted in *Tut.by* 2020; Machekin 2018).

If the endorsement of organizational pluralism is a sign of change, then the desire to channel youth activism in the direction of formal platforms for youth participation could be interpreted as a Soviet legacy in operation. Following Kotkin and Beissinger (2014, 11), this dissertation has conceptualized such a legacy as a “durable causal relationship between earlier institutions and practices and those of the present in the wake of a macrohistorical rupture.” To be more precise, the desire to channel youth participation in the direction of officially endorsed platforms, or, in the case of Lukashenka, a single officially endorsed platform, is a result of a cultural type of legacy. “Cultural schemata,” according to Kotkin and Beissinger (2014, 15), are “embedded ways of thinking and behaving that originate from socialization experiences under the prior political order but persist long beyond the macropolitical rupture.”¹⁶ In publication I, I suggest that Lukashenka’s own personal convictions was one of the factors driving the construction of a unitary pro-presidential mass membership youth organization, although the agency exhibited by the young and entrepreneurial Usievalad Yancheuski was decisive in how the president’s desire materialized in practice. Moreover, as the following section argues, the curious thing about the cultural schemata type of legacy is that, like any kind of norm, it can be passed on to members of a successive generation that had no personal experience with the past political order. As a result, a past legacy becomes transformed into present politics. Viewed through the lens of permissive and productive conditions (Soifer 2012), the notion of a Soviet legacy can be pinned down and operationalized in even greater detail. In the case of the RUY, the organization’s Komsomol legacy combined with the return of the patriotic upbringing rhetoric in the corridors of power from the mid-1990s onwards enabled the RUY to re-affirm its former identity as a partner of the state in the sphere of patriotic education, which produced a change in the organization’s relationship with the government in the form of cooptation. In 2003, the RUY’s representatives reportedly argued that it is reasonable that the association’s leadership is older than its rank-and file members, given that young people do not understand how politics works and could undermine the RUY’s official line due to their inherent radicalism (Novikov 2003).

This dissertation observes that in contemporary Russia and Belarus, it is impossible to talk about state youth policy without mentioning patriotic education (Omel’chenko and Pilkington 2012; Sanina 2017; Nikolayenko 2015). It is no wonder that the Belarusian youth GONGO established in 1997

¹⁶ This definition is in line with Koselleck’s (2002, 2018) argument regarding the multi-layered nature of temporal structures, including political ruptures.

was named the Patriotic Youth Union of Belarus and that its main task was to form “a sense of citizenship and patriotism among youth” as well as educate “those spiritual and moral values that are based on the traditions of the Belarusian nation” (Publication I, 1319). In Russia, patriotic education began appearing in youth policy jargon in the mid-1990s and rose to prominence in the 2000s. Although the policy was promoted by the state, its rise to prominence cannot be explained without drawing attention to how zealously it was embraced by teachers and other “agents of continuity,” who were eager to implement it due to their own positive experiences with a Soviet-era patriotic upbringing (Sanina 2017; Rapoport 2009).

In both Russia and Belarus, patriotic education is a vague and broad policy believed to resolve all issues that the government has observed in the youth sphere. As this dissertation demonstrates, policymakers in both countries perceive that patriotism has both an ideological and a mobilizational side to it: patriotic persons not only love their motherland and are proud to live there, but are also devoted to working hard for the collective good of the country (for a more nuanced take on patriotism in contemporary Russia, see Goode 2016; Omel’chenko and Pilkington 2012). Moreover, as a reflection of the statist outlook on the organization of state and society, official narratives present government and state institutions in both Russia and Belarus as the only legitimate actors that can decide in which direction the country ought to be heading, thus acting as the primary policy agenda setters in the country. Lukashenka himself has defined patriotic people as those who are “loyal to the state and people” (Lukashenka, quoted in BelTA 2020).

In this dissertation, and especially in publications III and IV, I argue that policymakers in both Belarus and Russia see patriotism as a desirable quality because it ensures political stability and socio-economic development on the current authoritarian path towards building an authoritarian polity (Gill 2015). Patriotic education is a mechanism for ensuring that young people are a “resource” rather than a “problem.” Moreover, the endorsement of state-affiliated youth activism rather than “passivism”—the prevalent trend in authoritarian states that lack an all-encompassing ideology (Linz 2000)—is explained by the idea that the two sides of patriotism (the sentiment and the actions aimed at collective national well-being) are believed to be mutually reinforcing. When implemented accordingly, a patriotic education is believed to produce generations of new citizens who not only accept the current authoritarian system of government but also actively contribute to its sustainable reproduction. This finding contributes to a further understanding of youth policy exercised by an authoritarian state, since the endorsing of young people’s activism in state-affiliated structures is not only taking place in the post-Soviet world but also in contemporary China (Spires 2018), Turkey (Lüküslü 2016), and Egypt (Sika 2019, 687–88), for example.

In contributing to the growing scholarly body of literature on GONGOs, as outlined in the introduction, this dissertation conceptualizes both GONGOs

and GiNGOs as meso-level platforms that structurally enable, foster, and steer micro-level, government-endorsed youth activism in contemporary Russia and Belarus. In Belarus, the function is primarily served by the BRYU, which is a case in point of a GONGO, while in Russia many actors and platforms contribute to the government-set policy objectives of constructing a politically “safe” civil society and ensuring the upbringing of politically loyal and socially responsible young people. If the early 2000s witnessed the rise and fall of *Nashi*, a GONGO, the contemporary trend seems to favor GiNGOs over GONGOs, although GONGOs like *Yunarmia* or the Russian Union of Rural Youth (Rus. *Rossiiskii soyuz sel'skoi molodezhi*) are also present. Moreover, as I argue in publication I, it is worth distinguishing between GONGOs and organizations that are either pro-government or pro-president in nature. In contrast to *Nashi*, a movement set up by Vladislav Surkov within the presidential administration of President Putin, Yancheuski's Direct Action was not initiated by a government insider, despite its pro-presidential agenda, and it did not qualify as a GONGO until it was restructured as the BPYU. What is more, the BYU was an independent NGO that was interested in functioning as a platform for state-affiliated youth activism, but it was not supportive of nor subordinate to the Lukashenka government, while the RUY, which enables state-affiliated activism, is pro-presidential since it has systematically supported Yel'tsin, Putin, and Medvedev, but it has not become subordinate to the government. In essence, there is more diversity to civic and political activism endorsed or tolerated in authoritarian political settings than the current concepts of GONGO and GiNGO (Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019) can capture.

5.3 YOUTH RESPONSES: AGENCY TO ENGAGE AND DISENGAGE

The third research question addressed in this dissertation asked how and why young people engage in government-affiliated youth activism. This section shifts the discussion on state-affiliated youth activism from the macro perspective of government and state youth policy representatives to the micro-level viewpoints of young people themselves. I analyze young people's responses to government-affiliated youth activism by operationalizing the conceptual pair of “engaging” and “disengaging.” The *Cambridge Dictionary* (2021) defines engage as “to become involved, or have contact, with someone or something.” While labelling a whole variety of activities as “engagement” or “disengagement” might create confusion, I maintain that the chosen terminology succeeds in reflecting the diversity and intertwined nature of young people's responses to government-affiliated youth activism, which is indeed the main argument made in this dissertation. For example, a young person is arguably engaging in government-affiliated youth activism when joining the BRYU, but the same person can disengage with it by ceasing to

participate in its activities. Appropriating the BRYU to advance one's career is another example of being engaged in the association while in fact disengaging from it (Publication III). In the Russian example, participation in a *Rosmolodezh'*-organized youth forum is a way of engaging in state-affiliated youth activism, but if a person's participation is motivated primarily by the desire to go on a state-sponsored holiday, then she or he is in fact *disengaging* from that very activism (Publication IV).

As discussed in the two previous sections, the structural space for youth activism in post-Soviet Russia and Belarus was never static. During the period of democratization in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years, the level of government-imposed operations in the youth sphere was diminishing, whereas the "authoritarian turn" introduced new constraints for political and civil activism in general and youth activism in particular. Yet, this dissertation suggests that the limited space for activism is not a zero-sum game that necessarily thwarts young people's agency. Instead, as with all structures (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), it enables and frames the space for such activism and is in turn reproduced and changed by it. As I explicitly argue in publication IV, young people who are seen by the Russian government as "resourceful"—and thus reliable—attend government-organized youth forums where they are explicitly taught how to enhance their agency in the youth sphere and empower themselves (Publication IV, 12). While the governments of both Belarus and Russia have a vision of the type of "patriotic" young people they want involved in such activities, both governments have been responsive to young people's needs and desires so long as they have not been perceived as surpassing the realm of "consentful" contestation (Straughn 2005; Cheskin and March 2015; on post-Soviet Russia, see Krawatzek 2018, 113–28).

The findings of this dissertation confirm that state-affiliated youth activism in contemporary Russia and Belarus differs substantively from the kind of activism practiced by those involved with the Komsomol in the Soviet era, while suggesting that the change has been incremental rather than abrupt. Research on the Komsomol has found that the youth league was ideologically being "hollowed out" during the decades prior to the collapse of communism (Bernstein 2017; Fürst 2010; Solnick 1999) and that state-affiliated activism was characterized by increasing pluralism within the monolithic structure of the VLKSM (Tsipursky 2016; Pilkington 1994). It is therefore perhaps not that surprising that state-affiliated youth activism has remained pluralistic in contemporary Belarus, regardless of the BRYU's structure as a Soviet-style administered mass organization (Kasza 1995): space exists within the BRYU for those who want to volunteer at orphanages, taste the life of a militiaman, organize a beauty pageant, engage in current political debates, or commemorate the victims of Stalinist repressions. I see this pluralism as not so much resulting from the weakness of the state ideology (Bekus 2010) as reflecting the diversity that has followed societal modernization (Moshes and Nizhnikau 2019), combined with Lukashenka's

and the BRYU's joint desire to engage with a maximum number of young people.

It is the government's desire to cater to young people's diverse interests in a system where youth activism is directed towards a limited number of platforms, which explains not only the varieties of activism taking place under the auspices of the monolithic BRYU, but also *Nashi's* transformation into a loose network of movements (Omel'chenko 2019; Krivonos 2015) as well as the prevalence of a multitude of "patriotic" youth organizations in contemporary Russia. What is more, the governments of Russia and Belarus are in fact responding to a global trend. As a result of societal modernization, young people across the world are becoming less and less interested in formal associational engagement (see, e.g., Farthing 2010; Harris, Wyn, and Younes 2010; Gaiser, De Rijke, and Spannring 2010). If governments insist on erecting and maintaining formal organizational structures for youth activism while still hoping that young people will voluntarily participate in such organizations, it is only logical that grassroots diversity is accepted and even endorsed. Yet, as has been demonstrated in this dissertation and elsewhere (Spires 2018; Kasza 1995), this diversity is limited, in turn contributing to the associations failing to meet government expectations.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that any accounts that seek to draw a comparison between the Soviet Komsomol and the present-day organizations enabling government-affiliated youth activism must not overlook the issue of change over time, in this context the modernization of state and society. Contemporary Russian and Belarusian youth have a lifelong (if not identical) experience of open borders, a market economy, and a free flow of information both domestically and internationally, facilitated by technological advances. The fact that Western scholars like myself can conduct ethnographic research on state-affiliated youth activism and engage in conversations about this kind of "state-sponsored" civic involvement with our participants (see also Hemment 2015) serves as a testament to the structural openness of the youth sphere.

Regardless of the profound changes to the overarching structure enabling state-affiliated youth activism in the post-Soviet era, this dissertation points to some notable continuities. Even one of my core arguments—that young Russians and Belarusians apply various strategies to both engage with and disengage from the state-affiliated youth activism, even as they continue to formally participate in state organizations and platforms—can be interpreted as a Komsomol legacy. Before and after the Second World War, the Komsomol developed into an administered mass organization (Bernstein 2017; Kasza 1995). Soviet people at the time learned to participate in ideological rituals and events without paying attention to their literal meaning, reflecting the hypernormalization of an ideological discourse, which in turn generated a gap between the "constative" and "performative" meanings underpinning such a discourse (Yurchak 2006). This dissertation argues that in Belarus, joining the BRYU has become an ideological ritual

similar to joining the Komsomol in the late Soviet era and participating in the organization's "voluntary-obligatory" activities.¹⁷ As I write in publication III,

Lukashenka's Belarus cannot be considered an 'eternal state' similar to Yurchak's respondents' late Soviet Union. Yet the two decades of relatively stable authoritarian rule under Lukashenka have led to a situation in which young Belarusians have no experience of a society without state-organized mass membership organizations like the BRYU.

(Publication III, 272)

In this type of structural environment, formal participation becomes a necessity rather than an option. Moreover, since the BRYU's primary goal as a state youth policy implementor is to increase quantitative rather than qualitative participation, its policy has been to enroll a maximum number of young people rather than enroll young people that are genuinely committed to the BRYU's agenda and fully engaged in its activities. At the time when I did my fieldwork, it was paradoxically more normalized to join the BRYU rather than not to join it. In Russia, participation in state-affiliated youth activism is less widespread and demarcated but still prominent. In September 2020, the head of *Rosmolodezh'*, Alexander Bugayev, boasted to President Putin that up to 1.5 million young people had participated in the forums organized that year (Bugayev, quoted in *Kremlin.ru* 2020). The focus on quantity over quality is justified by the presupposition that it is impossible to "work on" young people and subject them to patriotic education unless they have been reached first.

As discussed in publications III and IV, the desire of both governments to maximize outreach (Rus. *okhvat*) efforts targeting youth in turn prompts young people to apply various strategies of engagement (resignification, negotiation) and disengagement, which I argue are ways for them to apply their agency. The existing literature on the Komsomol suggests that these strategies are not new, but rather that they have been applied by members of the youth league for decades (Tsipursky 2016; Fürst 2010; Neumann 2011; Yurchak 2006; Solnick 1999; Pilkington 1994). The governments' desire to ensure maximum "reach" with respect to youth and the belief that any activism practiced on government-endorsed platforms is better than activism practiced under the auspices of independent organizations explains why decision-makers and organizations tolerate (or even endorse) the strategies of disengagement employed by the engaged.

The dissertation argues that there is no single reason why young people in contemporary Russia and Belarus engage in government-affiliated youth activism. Structurally, the authoritarian political system marginalizes and discredits independent activism, which makes participation in government-

¹⁷ In the aftermath of the 2020 revolution, it is possible that membership in the BRYU has gained new political and ideological meaning (Nizhnikau and Silvan, *forthcoming*).

affiliated activism safer and normalized. Engaging in government-affiliated activism also has its downside, as it introduces restrictions to individual agency and can engender stigma, but it is also a sphere where individuals can tap into notable material and non-material resources while state actors tolerate and even endorse the application of individual agency. Engaging in government-affiliated activism can also become so normalized and/or depoliticized in the eyes of the individual that it is perceived as just one part of a wider life strategy, for instance performing well in one's studies or spending time with one's friends. As discussed below, navigating the current authoritarian system is a skill one can learn by learning the "rules of the game" (Publication III; Publication IV). In some instances, the structures created or coopted by the authoritarian government can respond to the needs and desires of individuals wishing to engage in activism (Publication III; Publication IV; on Nashi, see, e.g., Hemment 2015; Krivonos 2016).

In recognizing the plethora of motivations driving young Russians and Belarusians to engage in state-affiliated youth activism, this dissertation argues for a more nuanced portrayal of activists engaging in government-endorsed platforms and causes. First, young people engaging in "consentful contestation" (Straughn 2005; Cheskin and March 2015) or "compliant activism" (Libman and Kozlov 2017) tend not to be recognized as activists at all. However, I maintain that, within the context of an authoritarian or post-totalitarian state like Russia or Belarus, activism ought to be understood broadly as "any type of collective action performed with the purpose of creating political or social change" (Sullivan 2009, 6). Although the definition may well be rejected by those who stress the independence and genuinely voluntary engagement of activists, I maintain that applying a narrow definition instead of a broad one might prompt us to overlook behavior that aims to create change in subtle ways. This is not to say that we should interpret compliant practices as a kind of "hidden resistance" (Tilly 1991), given that compliant activism has been found to strengthen authoritarian rule rather than challenge it (Libman and Kozlov 2017; Owen 2020). Yet, knowing that "consentful contestation" can turn into "dissentful contestation" surprisingly quickly (see, e.g., Clarke 2014), it is important not to disregard compliant activism altogether nor prematurely frame it in normative terms, labeling it either as cynical careerism or as the outcome of government brainwashing. As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, it is precisely the interplay of individual motivations on the micro level combined with an individual experiences of structural macro-level factors that determine whether and in what way young people engage in state-affiliated youth activism. In contemporary Belarus, young people's dominant strategy is to engage formally by joining the BRYU and then apply various modes of disengagement from within the organization (e.g., avoid paying one's dues, only participating in the organization's events if one is pressured to or rewarded for it, resignifying the reason for one's participation), whereas in Russia fewer people engage in formal terms and they adopt somewhat

different modes of disengagement, for example sporadic or one-off involvement in addition to widespread resignification, which can take many different forms.

The interplay between both structure and agency and change and continuity is especially visible in how young people navigate their way through the “rules of the game” of contemporary Russian and Belarusian youth policy. The “rules of the game,” the combination of formal and informal, socially shared but unwritten rules, structure social and political agency, while actors apply their agency to change and reproduce the existing “rules of the game,” both formal and informal (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). As a legacy of the Soviet era, informality has continued to play a significant role in post-Soviet Russia and Belarus (Aliyev 2015). In this dissertation, and specifically in publication IV, I suggest that the young people engaging in state-affiliated youth activism are aware of both the formal and informal expectations directed at them (see Bogdanova, Cook, and Kulmala 2018). I argue that young people in both Russia and Belarus are quite aware of the emphasis placed on a patriotic upbringing in the government’s youth policy agenda—a formal rule—and they know how to frame their activities accordingly, as desired by the youth policymakers. At the same time, however, they have the agency to either consciously or unconsciously challenge the current policy emphasizing a patriotic upbringing by “hollowing it out” and transforming it into a ritualized act in which the performative and constative dimensions of state-endorsed patriotism are out of sync (see Yurchak 2006).

Finally, this dissertation highlights potential micro-level pathways to empowerment through government-affiliated youth activism. As I write in publication IV, empowerment in this dissertation is conceptualized as a process whereby young people gain the knowledge, power, self-efficacy, and agency to bring about change in their own lives, in their communities, and in society at large (McMahon et al. 2020; Tsekoura 2016; Russell et al. 2009). There can be no empowerment without agency, but empowerment does not follow automatically from the application of agency. Yet this dissertation demonstrates that despite the inherent structural limitations that government-affiliated activism imposes on young people, official recognition of the “resourcefulness” of young people engaging in these forms of activism is empowering to them. Even if this power sharing is rooted in tokenism, it is still “real” in the sense that young people can use it to effect change in their communities and society at large. They design and oversee projects that are implemented with support from the government, and they are the ones included in policy-making processes. A recent study by Dmitry Rudenkin (2020, 207) found that “pro-governmental” youth activists reported having recently engaged in a variety of activities ranging from volunteering (80.8% of respondents) and charity work (39.7%) to working in youth associations and youth parliaments (65.6%). These numbers suggest that the platforms enabling government-affiliated activism might well function as “schools of

democracy” and not only as sources of authoritarian resilience (Owen 2020; Gill 2015), although further research is needed to specify the nature and mechanisms empowering activists and driving societal change. For example, my own experience of participating in a BRYU-organized *subbotnik* to collect litter was disempowering rather than empowering,¹⁸ whereas the account of one BRYU activist about walking around the city in a Red Army uniform¹⁹ did sound like an empowering experience indeed, given that he recounted the story at length and with apparent pride.

Though no comparable figures are available for Belarus, when considering the BRYU’s monopolistic position and the government’s desire to endorse at least the tokenistic involvement of young people in societal and political affairs, it is reasonable to assume that a similar pattern could be observed there as well. In essence, an inherent tension exists in the youth policy exercised by an authoritarian state due to its attempt to simultaneously activate and control young people.

¹⁸ Author’s field notes, Minsk, April 22, 2017.

¹⁹ Author’s interview with a BRYU activist, Hrodna, May 11, 2016.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

People make the organization. Nobody joins for the sake of ideology. Yes, really. But still, there must be ideology because we are a pro-government public organization. That is why we must somehow ... but ... we do it, ok, fair enough, in order to go about our own business.

(Karina, first secretary of a university faculty BRYU committee, 2016)

This interdisciplinary dissertation has analyzed the post-Soviet afterlife of the republic-level Komsomol organizations and contemporary government-affiliated youth activism in Russia and Belarus. It has explored the complex interplay of structure and agency as well as of change and continuity in the sphere of government youth policy, and it has analyzed the responses of youth associations and young people to it. Following the traditions of history and area studies and my critical realist worldview, the theoretical starting point was to examine the given socio-political phenomenon from various perspectives while remaining sensitive to temporality. Following a comparative multi-level research strategy, I collected diverse qualitative research material primarily on site in Belarus and Russia, the analysis of which has been presented in this dissertation. In this conclusion, I summarize the key arguments of this work and elaborate on their theoretical takeaways.

The first argument of the dissertation engages with the existing literature on the collapse of the Soviet Komsomol. This dissertation found that in both Belarus and Russia, union republic-level Komsomol organizations adapted to the changes taking place in the political, economic, and social environment in the USSR during the *perestroika* era by transforming themselves into independent non-governmental organizations, or to be more precise, into professional youth advocacy organizations. However, change within these legacy organizations was intertwined with cultural and administrative continuity, reflected in the way these “orphan organizations” sought to position themselves *vis-à-vis* the government, state institutions, other youth associations, and young people in general. In Belarus, the Belarusian Youth Union rejected the calls for cooptation from the newly elected President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, which put it on the road towards a forced merger with the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union, a new pro-presidential mass membership youth organization, whereas in Russia the government’s preference for managed pluralism in the youth sphere created permissive conditions for the survival of the Russian Union of Youth, and later, its prosperity. What is more, the decisions taken by each organization throughout the period under scrutiny did not take place in a geographical vacuum. Instead, both formal and informal transnational flows of

information framed the choices made by individual associations. These developments, I have argued, necessitate a partial revision of the history of the Komsomol's end and its afterlife. Some members of the Soviet youth league can justifiably claim, in the words of its official hymn, that they “never part[ed] with the Komsomol.”

Second, the dissertation has argued that authoritarianization generated permissive conditions in both Russia and Belarus for the re-emergence of state-affiliated youth activism. I argued that policymakers in both countries have come to perceive young people as a “problematic resource,” and that they view a proper patriotic upbringing as one method for developing young people’s “resourcefulness” and, correspondingly, reducing their “problematicness.” Moreover, from the perspective of both governments, channeling youth activism towards platforms that can be controlled by the state is vital for ensuring that young people engage in the kind of activism that enables rather than jeopardizes the future of the authoritarian status quo in both Russia and Belarus. State-affiliated youth activism is therefore believed to be one source of authoritarian resilience (Brownlee 2007; Maerz 2020; Hinnebusch 2006), an antidote against “colour revolutions.”

While the portrayal of young people as a “problematic resource” marks a continuity from the late Soviet era, policymakers in neither country have explicitly sought to reconstruct the Komsomol. In Belarus, Lukashenka recognized the shortcomings of the late Soviet-era Komsomol and thus opted to support a unitary mass membership youth union that would only “continue the *best* traditions of the Komsomol in real deeds” (Lukashenka, quoted in BelTA 2003, italics by the author). In reality, many unwanted elements of the late Soviet-era Komsomol have (re)emerged in the BRYU. In Russia, the government opted to support a network of meso-level platforms enabling micro-level, state-endorsed youth activism while engaging with “resourceful” young people directly at the youth forums analyzed in detail in publication IV. In both countries, the current infrastructure of government-affiliated youth activism is sustained by the permissive conditions determined by the government at the structural level as well as by the productive agency of policy entrepreneurs, whether individuals like Usievalad Yancheuski or actors like the Central Committee of the Russian Union of Youth on the meso and micro level. My argument about the pluralism of platforms enabling state-affiliated youth activism contributes to the burgeoning literature on quasi-civil society organizations prevalent in post-Soviet autocracies in particular and in authoritarian states in general (Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019; Richter 2009; Owen 2020).

Third, I have argued that young people who participate in government-affiliated forms of activism in Russia and Belarus apply their agency to both engage with and disengage from the official structures and agenda targeting youth at large. Moreover, they apply different strategies to determine *how* they can best engage in activism. This agency, I have suggested, can have an empowering effect within an authoritarian structural setting that is both

restricting and enabling. As the quote from a BRYU activist at the top of the previous page suggests, young people participating in state-affiliated youth activism are used to navigating between the expectations of policymakers and their personal and collective interests and desires. Following Alexei Yurchak (2006), I have argued that both governments' focus on the performative dimension of ritualized acts over their constative meaning generates much room for the processes of re-signification and negotiation typical of "consentful" contestation (Straughn 2005; Cheskin and March 2015). Moreover, I have suggested that understanding the variety of motivations prompting formal participation in government-affiliated youth activism is important for making sense of the phenomenon at large and for envisaging the potential for both the resilience and vulnerability of authoritarianism in Belarus, Russia, and beyond. It is by studying government-affiliated activism, designed by the state to mobilize the "masses," that we can learn about the societal dynamics within the "silent majorities" of "average" youth.

These arguments provide fertile ground for broader reflection on the temporal dynamics of a "monster event" like the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as its aftermath. Based on the analysis provided in this dissertation and the existing literature on the social acceleration of time (Vieira 2011; Rosa 2013; Scheurman 2004), it is interesting to observe that in seeking to assert political, societal, and economic "stability" after the "chaos" of the 1990s, the governments of Belarus and Russia were involved not only in the pessimistic framing of acceleration (Vieira 2011) but also in implementing policies of deceleration on the ground (Scheurman 2004). Furthermore, although the Soviet collapse was a singular event in history, it remains one of the narrative pillars in contemporary Russia and Belarus. Since it is constantly invoked in the present, its meaning is increasingly derived from the present "now" rather than from the past "then" (Tamm 2015). By providing a window into the Soviet collapse from various temporal and spatial perspectives, the dissertation has demonstrated that an event can look quite different from different perspectives. It has also shown how its afterlife is sustained in the present.

As a dissertation in political history, one theoretical question I have sought to address is whether the legacies of the Komsomol have remained operative thirty years after the collapse of communism, and if so, then how and why (Kotkin and Beissinger 2014). To answer this question systematically would require further research but, based on the findings presented in this dissertation, it could be suggested that there are various channels and agents through which the Komsomol's legacies persist. The Komsomol's self-proclaimed legacy organizations, such as the BRYU, the RUY, and the youth wings of the Russian and Belarusian communist parties, all interpret and convey the Komsomol legacy in their own way. The Komsomol's legacy can also be identified in the general contours of state youth policy, in which case the legacy persists thanks to those who draft

policies pertaining to patriotic education and social responsibility. One way to make sense of this fact is to point to the socialization of the current ruling elite in the USSR, which can arguably influence how those individuals perceive the Komsomol and young people, which in turn has an impact on the kind of policies that are drafted to target them (see the “good Soviet Union” as a “paradise lost” in Gel'man, Travin, and Marganiya 2014; Sanina 2017).

While the Komsomol's legacies can be identified, the Komsomol “stamp” on state–youth relations in both Belarus and Russia is becoming increasingly translucent. What is emerging instead, I would argue, is similar to universal youth policy configurations in contemporary authoritarian regimes globally. In essence, youth policy is always politically, culturally, and temporally situated because it portrays an ideal citizen as envisioned by the political establishment at a specific point in time. Autocrats around the world see young people as the key to the longevity of the political system (as a threat or as a resource), and autocrats throughout the world are encouraging young people to engage in activism that can be steered by the government (see, e.g., Lüküslü 2016; Spires 2018; Sika 2019; McGlinchey 2009).

All this raises the question of whether the explanatory power of post-communism is approaching its end even in Russia and Belarus, considered the “core” regions of the former USSR. The question mirrors Martin Müller's (2019) argument that postsocialism as a concept ought to be abandoned due to its limited success in explaining developments in former state socialist countries as well as its problematic conceptual and political implications. Moreover, since the early 2000s scholars have been debating whether the initial transition period of post-communism has ended and a new era of post-post-communism emerged (King 2000; Kubicek 2009). Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2017), likewise, have elaborated on the difference between living through communism and living in a post-communist country. In a sense, then, discussions about youth or ways of participating in government-affiliated youth activism should focus more on the present-day experience of consolidated authoritarianism than on the Soviet past.

In both Russia and Belarus, a generation has been born and come of age under the regimes of Lukashenka and Putin. Although both regimes have undergone important qualitative shifts during the reign of the two presidents, the trend toward authoritarianism rather than liberal democracy has been constant, even during Medvedev's modernization campaign (Wilson 2015). This dissertation has given a voice to the young people often dismissed as a “generation of conformists” (Vyzhutovich 2018), whose activism, due to its consentfulness, is often overlooked or misrepresented. While the findings of this dissertation are hardly generalizable to all young Russians and Belarusians, I maintain that the young activists studied here provide insights into what state-affiliated youth activism—certainly a mass phenomenon in contemporary Russia and Belarus—looks like in practice. The findings also provide insights into how young people themselves perceive their activities,

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which may look “compliant” on the outside but, as the quote at the beginning of the chapter as well as the history of the Soviet Komsomol suggest, can look quite different and diverse from the inside.

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APPENDICES

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

PUBLICATIONS I, II, III AND IV

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Belarus

Oral history / elite interviews

- Svetlana Koroleva, former leader of RADA, Minsk, April 18, 2017
- Nataliya, one of the founders of RADA, Minsk, April 18, 2017
- Grigorii, analyst for the *EuroBelarus* consortium, Minsk, April 18, 2017
- Former activist of RADA (f), Minsk, April 19, 2017
- Vadim, former Direct Action activist, Minsk, April 18, 2017
- Maksim, former activist of BPYU and RADA, Minsk, May 1, 2017
- Alla Danilova, first secretary of the BYU (2001–2002), Minsk, May 23, 2017
- Aleksei, former BYU employee, Hrodna, My 10, 2017
- Andrei, former BYU employee, Homiel', May 3, 2017
- Aleksandr Feduta, first secretary of the LKSMB–BYU (1990–1993), Minsk, May 5, 2017
- Former employee of the LKSMB, BSM, and state youth affairs committee in the 1990s. Interviewed by email, May 30, 2017
- Vladimir, leader of LKSMB city and regional committees (1989–1991), Minsk, May 3, 2017
- Vasilii, leader of LKSMB city and regional committees (1989–1991), Minsk, May 23, 2017
- Anatolii, former LKSMB employee and *Znamya yunosti* journalist, Minsk, May 23, 2017
- Former BYU and Unesco Clubs employee (m), Minsk, April 27, 2017

BRYU activists and organization outsiders / non-elite interviews

- Elena, passive member of the BRYU, Minsk, June 10, 2016
- Ilya, of AEGEE–European Students' Forum, Hrodna, April 3, 2017
- Aleksandr, first secretary of a university BRYU committee, Minsk, June 11, 2016
- Alexei, passive member of the BRYU, Hrodna, June 2, 2016
- Evgenii, activist of Belarusian Student Association (BSA), Minsk, June 18, 2016
- Karina, first secretary of a university faculty BRYU committee, Minsk, June 7, 2016
- Mikhail, first secretary of a university BRYU committee, Hrodna, May 28, 2016

Oleg, former first secretary of the BRYU committee, Minsk, June 8, 2016
Margarita, activist of the Francišak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society,
Minsk, June 18, 2016
Piotr, first secretary of an oblast' committee, Minsk, June 17, 2016
Georgii, first secretary of an oblast' committee, Mahilyow, April 14, 2017
Sergey, first secretary of an oblast' committee, Minsk, June 17, 2016
Activist of RADA, Minsk, May 22, 2017
Activist of BRYU, Hrodna, May 11, 2016
Activist of BRYU, Mahileu, June 16, 2016

Russia

The Russian Union of Youth

Tatiana Novikova, first secretary of the Kemerovo Komsomol oblast' committee (1987–1990) and secretary of the Central Committee of the LKSM RSFSR – RUY (1990–1994), Moscow, May 7, 2018
Evgenii Ivanov, first secretary of Tver' oblast' committee since the early 1980s. Tver', May 20, 2018
Vera Skorobogateva, since 1989 an official of the Komsomol–RUY, since 1994 a member of the central committee of the RUY, and 1997–2002 the first secretary of the RUY. Moscow, May 29, 2018
Igor' Fatov, a member of the Central Committee of the LKSM RSFSR since its establishment in 1990. Moscow, May 23, 2018
Tatyana Seliverstova, Deputy Chairman of the RUY, Moscow, May 28, 2018
Irina Grodzenskaya, Director of the autonomous non-profit organization “Centre of the Realization of the Programmes of the RUY,” Moscow, May 28, 2018

Youth policy experts

Lena, a high-ranking Rosmolodezh' employee with considerable experience in organizing forums (including *Territoriya smyslov*), Moscow, May 31, 2018
Vadim, a mid-level Rosmolodezh' employee involved in the organizing of forums (including *Territoriya smyslov*), Moscow, May 28, 2018
Political scientist, specialized in the study of youth politics and involved in designing educational activities at *Territoriya smyslov*, Moscow, April 25, 2018

Former *Rosmolodezh'* employee with considerable experience in organizing forums (including *Territoriya smyslov*) (f), Skype, May 2, 2018

Former *Nashi* commissar, who worked many consecutive years at *Seliger* (m), Moscow, May 24, 2018

Former *Nashi* commissar, who worked many consecutive years at *Seliger* (m), Moscow, May 30, 2018

Political scientist and former *Rosmolodezh'* employee with considerable experience in organizing forums (including *Territoriya smyslov*) (m), Skype, May 10, 2018

Territoriya smyslov

Matvei Navdaevy, director of the organizing committee *Territoriya smyslov*, Moscow, May 29, 2018

Member of the organizing committee *Territoriya smyslov* (f), Moscow, May 25, 2018

Member of the organizing committee *Territoriya smyslov* (f), Moscow, May 25, 2018

Employee at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and an instructor at *Territoriya smyslov* (f), Moscow, April 28, 2018

Employee at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and an instructor at *Territoriya smyslov* (m), Moscow, May 18, 2018

Employee at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and an instructor at *Territoriya smyslov* (f), by phone, June 1, 2018

Vera, *Rosmolodezh'*-affiliated youth policy freelancer and an instructor at *Territoriya smyslov* since 2016, Moscow, April 27, 2018

Ilya, student at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and a participant in *Territoriya smyslov* in 2016, May 9, 2018

Anna, student at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and a participant in *Territoriya smyslov* in 2017, May 23, 2018

Student at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and a participant in *Territoriya smyslov* in 2017 (f), Skype, May 28, 2018

Government-organized youth mobilization in an authoritarian political setting is subject to active debate in academia and the policy-making community, but knowledge of the mechanisms of “compliant” activism remains limited.

The dissertation addresses this empirical and theoretical gap by examining changes and continuities in the sphere of state-affiliated youth activism in post-Soviet Belarus and Russia. It explores the little-known afterlife of the republic-level organizations of the Leninist Communist Youth League of the Soviet Union, the Komsomol, and studies contemporary government-affiliated youth activism.

The dissertation is based on a diverse collection of qualitative source material ranging from archival material to interviews and ethnographic analysis. The data is utilized to develop novel analytical concepts pertaining to the complex dynamics of state-sanctioned youth mobilization both from the perspective of the decision makers and the young people engaged in “compliant” modes of activism.

The dissertation further demonstrates that while legacies of the Komsomol remain operative in some spaces, the Soviet “stamp” on state–youth relations in both Belarus and Russia is becoming increasingly translucent.

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