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Youth far-right politics in Finland as a form of lived citizenship

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ABSTRACT

Geographies of youth have explored multiple modalities of youth political agency, yet privilege apolitical or progressive forms of politics. We propose expanding the scholarship to formal arenas where conservative and reactionary politics are practiced, as these form another significant domain within which youths exercise citizenship. The paper draws on two aspects of the ‘lived citizenship’ framework developed by Kirsi Kallio and colleagues?: a desire to rescale society to the strictures of nation-state sovereignty and imagined national heritage (spatial aspect), and provocations of despised ‘globalists’ (performative aspect). We analyze these through the former youth wing of Finland’s populist-right party, Perussuomalaiset Nuoret (Finns Youth).

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years, a host of insurgent political parties espousing nativist-nationalist political programmes and presenting themselves as ‘populist’ or otherwise anti-status quo have scored electoral wins across Europe, rattling their respective political establishments. Among the latest is the rise of the populist party *Sverigedemokraterna* in the 2022 general elections into a position to tip the scales in the Swedish parliament, and the elevation of the neo-fascist party *Fratelli d’Italia* to the leadership of the Italian government. A decade earlier, in 2011, it was the turn of Finland’s *Perussuomalaiset* (Finns Party, formerly known as True Finns). In an upset that became known as the *iso jytty* – ‘big kaboom’ – the party came in third in the parliamentary elections, winning 39 seats out of 200. The party leader, Timo Soini, received the single largest number of votes out of any parliamentary candidate, which assured him a strong position. The win brought about a seismic shift within the Finnish political landscape that, since the early 1980s, had been dominated by three moderate parties: the welfare state-oriented Social Democrats, the agrarian Centre Party, and the center-right National Coalition Party. As the *Perussuomalaiset* entered the scene, the long period of consensus politics between the three ended. In an interview with the national broadcasting company, a well-known political editor, Risto Uimonen, summed up the atmosphere (YLE 20 April 2011): “The whole of Finland and half of Europe is stunned.”

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Why was the Perussuomalaiset win considered ‘stunning’? We suggest that two answers to this question are particularly salient. First, the apparent working-class composition of the Perussuomalaiset electorate codified – at least in the view of conventional wisdom – a long-in-the-making reorientation of working-class politics in Western Europe and North America away from its traditional political left affiliations. Second, and more importantly, the rhetoric and the style of Perussuomalaiset candidates expressed what appeared to the political establishment to be a sort of ‘anti-politics’ that was defined primarily by a series of oppositional positions to phenomena considered beyond the realm of public debate: economic globalization, European integration, and, above all, immigration. Indeed, while there is considerable debate over the meaning and content of ‘populist’ politics (see, e.g. Moffitt, 2016), theorists have consistently pointed to a set of oppositions as defining populism in some measure: to pluralism, to institutions, to the ‘elite’, or to the ‘status quo’ (e.g. Müller, 2017; Agnew & Shin, 2020).

A focus on the oppositional nature of political movements designated as populist does, of course, have analytical value, but it has also lent itself to popular, as well as some scholarly, definitions of populism in purely negative terms. What these perspectives have tended to share is a narrative in which populist parties are expressing perhaps understandable disgruntlement, but are doing so on the basis of simplistic and oppositional sloganeering that fails to promote a coherent, positive political vision for the transformation of society. This distinguishes their activities from ‘proper’ democratic citizenship. Such a view was seen in the aftermath of the *iso jytty*, as well. The group of voters who notably contributed to the Perussuomalaiset’s success were profiled by the media as disaffected men, mostly working class, and – importantly – including a significant number of young supporters. This demographic has traditionally been fretted over as *not* taking interest in politics nor participating *enough* in formal politics (e.g. Borg & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2017; Hopkins & Todd, 2015; Kallio, 2018a; Wass & Borg, 2016). Overall, in media representations the voting behaviour of the Perussuomalaiset supporters was often interpreted not as political agency proper, but was rather refracted through a prism of immaturity to produce a series of pejorative tableaux: as a performative toying with politics, as an emotional outburst, as having been led down the wrong path by xenophobic Pied Pipers, or simply as a failure to respect the political agency bequeathed to them by the venerable Finnish electoral system.¹

The actual age composition of the Perussuomalaiset electorate does not reveal that it enjoys disproportionate support from young people. Indeed, Finland’s *Youth Barometer* emphasizes from year to year that youths who support their political agenda do not consider voting to be a particularly valuable form of political engagement (e.g. Myllyniemi, 2013; Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi, 2018). In this context, it is notable that both the media profile of the *iso jytty* supporters as ‘angry youth’ and the larger discursive framing of populist politics as immaturely superficial and performative draw on an implicitly normative understanding of youth citizenship. A common framing marks active youth citizenship as ‘innocent’ or – paradoxically – ‘apolitical’ political engagement that more or less adheres to the contours of the establishment, and that can be comfortably approved and endorsed by adult society (Mycock & Tonge, 2012; Pykett et al., 2010). The mentioned Youth Barometer is a prime example. It monitors the development of youth citizenship in Finland with a clear agenda: more ‘active citizenship’, which includes interest in political parties and voting as well as other formal and informal modes of societal

engagement, is largely considered an unqualified good. While researchers invited to analyze the results of the annual survey often take up racism, climate-denialism, and other concerning issues, active youth citizenship itself appears as a positive force nearly without exception (e.g. Myllyniemi, 2013; Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi, 2018).

This is not to say that critical academic literature on youth political agency ignores the wide range of radical and subversive political identities and activities through which young people contest what is conventionally considered acceptable – even the Youth Barometer, commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and Education in Finland, does that. However, this line of research too is subject to certain normative assumptions, which are particularly apparent in geography. Despite a significant expansion of the subfield of children's and young people's political geographies, this body of literature focuses almost exclusively on youth political agency framed in liberationist or progressive terms (e.g. Bartos, 2013; Cahill, 2007; Collins, 2021; Hopkins & Todd, 2015), as demonstrating values of relational care ethics (Bartos, 2012; Bowman & Pickard, 2021; Ní Laoire, 2011), or as non-representational and more-than-human ways of being in the world (e.g. Mulari, 2021; Pyyry & Tani, 2019).

Put together, these two approaches tend to emphasize that, be they innocent or radical, as active citizens young people are on the right track. Without denigrating the value of the work introduced above (to which one of the authors has contributed herself), we find it puzzling how rare it is to consider questions of youth agency within conservative or reactionary politics. Further, why does the *citizenship* of youths belonging to right-wing populist parties or sympathizing with their values attract so little attention in critical scholarship? Even outside of geography, work on such movements is largely limited to skinhead and neo-Nazi street gangs (e.g. Reid & Valasik, 2018) or symbolic politics expressing explicit racial supremacist views (e.g. Miller-Idriss, 2009). While some literature examining differing political attitudes among youth in multi-ethnic communities exists, this scholarship does not discuss their agency in terms of conservative or reactionary citizenship (e.g. Cottrell Studemeyer, 2015; Laketa, 2019). Research on youth conservative *electoral* politics is exceedingly rare, which has motivated our focus (for exceptions, see Mieriņa & Koroļeva, 2015; Pirro & Róna, 2019), and indeed, a relative paucity of literature dealing with youth partisan political participation of any kind (see Hooghe et al., 2004; Rainsford, 2018; De Roon, 2020), compared to the robust body of work on informal youth politics.

We believe that the lack of attention on youth political agency directed towards conservative political goals and related formal practices of citizenship represents a missed opportunity in several ways: First, it represents a narrow view of the range of purportedly 'authentic' political subjectivities that young people may experiment and choose to identify with. Second, as in the case of the *iso jytty* and other right-populist political phenomena, it cedes ground to a framing of 'youthful' political agency that ignores the actual content of young people's political mobilizations, in favour of stigmatizing immaturity labels. And third, it glosses over the fact that it is precisely youth groups who are increasingly driving some of the most virulent forms of contemporary reactionary politics (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Bateman, 2016; Miller-Idriss, 2018; Pirro & Róna, 2019). There is therefore an urgent need to understand how, and why, some young people are building political subjectivities that celebrate exclusionary identities, sometimes accompanied by violent aspirations or behaviours.

In this paper, we present one approach to advancing such an understanding by looking into the phenomenon as portrayed by the news media that concurrently produces and echoes the contours of public debate in the Finnish context. The article does not present a comprehensive media analysis, which others have convincingly done (e.g. Herkman, 2014, 2017; Palonen & Saresma, 2017; Pernaa & Railo, 2012; Ronkainen, 2012), but pays attention to a specific aspect of this transnational phenomenon by reading existing research in relation to a particular case of right-populist youth organization. We set out to ask, why is the ostensibly dangerous agency of the supporters of nativist-nationalist parties typically denigrated as immature political agency vis-à-vis ‘real’ youth politics, instead of being identified as active, or perhaps even radical, *citizenship*? To explore this question, we turn our attention to the former youth section of the Perussuomalaiset – *Perussuomalaiset Nuoret* (Finns Youth; hereafter PS-Nuoret) – to argue that the agency of such nativist-nationalist groups should be understood in terms of *lived citizenship*, in critical scholarship as well as in public debate. From the start, we wish to emphasize that our endeavour is to discuss the phenomenon in terms of citizenship conceptually, *not* normatively, diverging in this sense from most existing research.

We begin the paper by briefly operationalizing the concepts of ‘populism’ and ‘youth’ as they appear in the paper, before offering a brief introduction to the media landscape in Finland around the 2011 elections. Then, we provide an overview of the lived citizenship framework in relation to our topic, drawing from the second author’s collaborative work with Bronwyn Wood and Jouni Häkli (Kallio et al., 2020). We focus on two specific dimensions, which we find helpful in framing nativist-nationalist populism and young people’s political participation in these kinds of organizations: *spatiality*, and specifically the rescaling of citizenship, and the *performed* character of citizenship. Applying these elements, we offer a brief description history of the PS-Nuoret, drawing from the party’s webpages and other open materials, and public media sources including both the English – and Finnish-language editions of the national public broadcaster, Yle. Our choice of material was not comprehensive but focused on incidents in which the activities of the youth party leadership brought the party public notoriety and caused tension with the parent party.

In the latter part of the paper we consider the potential of the conceptual framework of lived citizenship in understanding youth agency, as it is enacted within nativist-nationalist political parties with multiple strained boundaries: between ‘respectable’ nationalist partisan politics and extreme nativism and nationalism; between youth militancy and ‘adult’ pragmatism; and between global alliances and strictly nationalist political framings. The approach broadens perspectives on the possible outcomes of youthful political agency as citizenship that, we argue, should not be normatively defined at the outset. Rather, normativity should be reserved for empirical analysis of *practices* and *acts* of citizenship (cf. Isin & Nielsen, 2008). We conclude by calling for further attention to youth political agency as it pertains to nativist-nationalist politics, particularly electoral politics in which young people have been largely invisible to scholarship.

Populism and youth

Our discussion is set against a larger backdrop: the rise and sustained electoral successes of political parties sometimes characterized as right-populist, and which overlap with a

broader category of far-right politics characterized primarily by its nativism and ultra-nationalism. The meanings of the terms ‘populist’ and ‘far-right’ to describe political movements are subject to considerable debate (see, e.g. Moffitt, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014; Müller, 2017 for the former; Golder, 2016 for the latter). The presence of elements common to both such as illiberalism, authoritarianism and ethno-nationalism further blurs the line between the two in popular and scholarly discourse (Bonikowski, 2017). The emphasis of our discussion on lived citizenship, and especially its performative aspects, echoes Moffitt’s (2016) conception of populism as a style characterized by performances of anti-establishment authenticity. Nevertheless, in going beyond populism’s oppositional characteristics and assuming that it presents its supporters with a coherent and aspirational vision for the future, we also employ “methodological empathy” that allows us analytical access to the phenomenon under scrutiny (Griffin, 2018; see also Lizotte, 2020).

While a detailed discussion of class as a modality of populist politics is beyond the scope of this paper, we wish to briefly consider how it might be operationalized as such. It is, by now, clear that there is no strong empirical relationship between individual economic circumstances and support for parties and movements typically considered populist (e.g. Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Nevertheless, a ‘class consciousness’ of sorts has been identified, articulated and expressed through many populist movements including the Perussuomalaiset – a consciousness focused on a solidaristic, if not necessarily individual, sense of status loss (Jackson & Grusky, 2018). On this basis, while we agree with classic definitions of populism as morally designating a ‘people’ and an ‘elite’, we would add that these categories are not deployed in purely negative terms. Rather, they connote an aspirational aim at bringing ‘the people’ forward to a better future – albeit a better future for a *pars pro toto* conception of ‘the people’ (see Müller, 2017).

With the terms ‘youth’, ‘young people’, and ‘youth politics’ we refer most importantly to a generational position, not to a legal definition (which in the EU is up to 25 years, in Finland up to 29 years) or an experienced age (as is typical in critical research). In political debate and media representations, and in related research on political attitudes, behaviour and action, ‘the youth’ is typically used as a counterpart of the adult society (e.g. Ronkainen, 2012; Wass & Borg, 2016). Indeed, in countries like Finland, where the population is dramatically aging, the meanings attached to youth are constantly changing. A good example is the characterization of the current national government. When established, they gained notable media attention as a ‘youthful government’, as the Prime Minister and three other key ministers were 33–35 years of age. In particular, Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s youthful lifestyle has been a topic of public discussion in ways that both denigrate her (as a “store clerk from Tampere”) and elevate her (as an avatar for powerful young women) ever since, and her own ways of using social media, appearing in commercials, and organizing and attending popular cultural events have established the idea that today, in political life, youth as a generational position extends to one’s late 30s.

At the same time, youth politics is forcefully visible through movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future, involving many people of below voting age. Greta Thunberg, one of the best known individuals among them, started to speak out in public at the age of 15. In Finland as in many other countries, school strikes inspired by her activities have gathered pupils throughout the school system (Huttunen

& Albrecht, 2021). In Sweden, 636 people between 7 and 29 years of age are currently suing the state over climate policy. These examples offer yet another age perspective to youthful lived citizenship, extending it to children who may develop political attitudes and formal agency through (self-)organized political activities.

It is the political agency of this young generation that forms our interest – people who do not yet fulfil the criteria of ‘political adulthood’, regardless of their legal position, but are taking positions in the ‘Political’ sphere (Skelton, 2010). The youth who follow Sanna Marin on social media channels and those inspired by Greta Thunberg’s activism share this youthful position in political life, as do the youth who consider the anti-immigration agenda of *Perussuomalaiset* inviting as well as the new generations involved in Neo-Nazi groups. Empirically, we explore the case of PS-Nuoret. Membership in the present and former iterations of this organization is available to persons from 15 years of age, yet an interesting shift has taken place regarding the upper age limit. Whereas the PS-Nuoret accepted members below the age of 31, the current organization *Perussuomalainen Nuoris* sets an age limit of 30 – yet they also accept ‘adult members’ who are between 30 and 35 years old. This is a telling example about the extension of youth, in political life, beyond merely legal criteria.

Perussuomalaiset as abject citizens of the 2011 parliamentary election

Applying the term ‘populist’ to the *Perussuomalaiset* is not a straightforward task. Indeed, the party leadership has, at times, publicly rejected such a label (Pappas, 2019). The character of the party has changed over time, from its agrarian roots to a Eurosceptic focus during the 2010–2011 Eurozone crisis (Herkman, 2014), to a more explicitly ethno-nationalist tone with the election of Jussi Halla-aho as party leader in 2017, the latter of which has been further emphasized under Riikka Purra’s leadership from 2021. In the spring of 2022, the party’s immigration policy made a quick turn-around as they welcomed (white European) Ukrainian refugees to Finland wholeheartedly, temporarily abandoning their anti-immigration agenda, yet a recalibration appeared soon after, manifesting a total ban for nearly all migration from beyond the EU, excluding only high-skilled well-paid professionals (*Perussuomalaiset*, 2023). Hence, while the party’s agrarian roots can still be identified from voter profiles – for instance, in recent municipal elections they were particularly successful beyond the bigger cities (Statistics Finland, 2021) – race, ethnicity and nationality clearly lie at the heart of their politics.

Despite the ambiguity inherent in the term ‘populism,’ we have chosen to use the terms ‘right-populist’ or ‘nativist-nationalist populist’ as we feel they best capture how the *Perussuomalaiset* representatives generally characterize themselves: championing a curated ‘Finnish’ heritage, anti-elite and Eurosceptic. As will be seen, the youth wing has attempted to operationalize a vision of active citizenship that has sometimes pushed the party’s identity further along the nativist-nationalist dimension, including more explicitly racialized portrayals of Finnish identity, a quasi-fascist narrative of national decline and renewal (see Griffin, 2018), and reactionary attitudes about gender. Some of these elements have also been promoted as ‘official’ *Perussuomalaiset* positions, while others were the targets of sanctions, leading to the youth wing’s eventual dissolution.

In 2011, the dominant media reaction was one of bemusement: the normal workings of the Finnish parliamentary system had been radically subverted. In Finland's newspaper of record *Helsingin Sanomat*, the lead editor of the politics section expressed concerns regarding them by highlighting a comment from an anonymous "veteran politician [...]" The most frightening in this is that the supporters of the Perussuomalaiset do not even want to discuss but rather stay at home. This is a revolution of the silent men." (Junkkari, 2011). In his analysis Sami Borg (2012), a leading scholar in Finnish election analysis, indicates that at the time of the 2011 elections, the Perussuomalaiset was the most popular party among the young, thus a considerable number of these 'silent men' presumably came from among younger generations even if they did not form a majority among all voters.

Perussuomalaiset voters in general were criticized for endorsing crooked interests and participating 'wrongly' in what is considered the most venerated of political institutions – the elected Parliament. Their voices were largely interpreted as a protest vote, not *for* parliamentary politics but *against* it. One implication of this is that political agency considered unacceptably dissident can be denigrated as immature, or 'youthful', in order to dismiss it as unserious or unsophisticated. In an analysis of the media debates preceding the elections, Salokangas (2012) highlights editorial views characteristic of this attitude, noting for example, the regional newspaper *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*'s identification of Timo Soini as a candidate for "protest prime minister" (219), or summing up the opinion of respected journalist Risto Uimonen in a Yle (Finland's public broadcaster) interview as such: "Timo Soini's performance in the four major debates was full of poppycock (*hölynpöly*), yet he [Uimonen] presumed that this makes little difference to Soini's supporters as Perussuomalaiset voters are rather emotionally than rationally motivated" (197; on populist emotional politics, see Beurskens, 2022 in this special issue).

Invoking emotion as a disqualifying basis on which to express political opinions resonates with an attitude generally expressed in the news media towards young voters. Haverinen's (2012, p. 57) study from 2011 reveals that young people's public views and activities were portrayed in newspapers as being based on ignorance, "bad influences" and incompetent reasoning, which "calls into question their political activity *tout court*". In this paper, we will demonstrate that a normative interpretation of active youth citizenship, of 'innocent politics' that should be widely endorsed by adult society, has somewhat grown into a status quo, even among elites within the nativist-nationalist populist establishment that, ultimately, dismissed the PS-Nuoret from the sphere of citizen activities.

The 'other' radical lived citizenship

Lived citizenship at the nexus of mundane and formal politics

The concept of lived citizenship draws from a theoretical framework that directs attention away from formal, binary categories of citizen/non-citizen and towards political agency through which subjects enact their own understandings of how to be a citizen (e.g. Hall & Williamson, 1999; Kallio et al., 2020; Lister, 2003). Since the early 2000s, scholars have distinguished between citizenship as a legal status with associated rights

and duties, and citizenship as agency experienced and enacted in various real-life contexts (Dickinson et al., 2008; Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Marston & Mitchell, 2004; Sultana, 2020). These approaches typically highlight “the meaning that citizenship actually has in people’s lives and the ways in which people’s social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens” (Hall & Williamson, 1999, p. 2). Citizenship thus conceived has been explored, for example, in the context of children and youth (Bartos, 2012; Kallio & Mills, 2016; Lister, 2003; Wood, 2010), transnational migrants (Ho, 2009; Pascucci, 2016; Staeheli et al., 2012), and with reference to religion (Laksana & Wood, 2018; Nyhagen, 2015). Across these settings, the central argument has been that such mundane citizenships reveal a broad spectrum of political realities and agencies often considered ‘non-political’.

What is typically left aside in these approaches is that lived citizenship does not preclude formal citizenship nor the established practices and institutions that make space for the enactment of citizen rights and duties. While scholars have concentrated on arguing that mundane forms of political agency should be identified in terms of citizenship (including one of the authors, e.g. Kallio, 2018b; Kallio et al., 2015, 2020; Kallio & Mills, 2016), the perhaps self-evident fact that mundane, informal and formal modes of citizenship intertwine in people’s political lives has received less attention (cf. Skelton, 2010). It is precisely the intertwining of the very mundane and the very formal that stands at the heart of contemporary nativist-nationalist populist movements: *political identities* introduced to people through populist politics, *parliamentary politics* manifested by the Perussuomalaiset, and voting as a formal *democratic practice*. This intertwining is vital for understanding the attraction of these movements, but also political disengagement. The literature on participation in formal political parties in general, and youth participation in particular, has consistently pointed to the finding that ‘would-be members’ consider political parties largely as ineffective, hypocritical and/or indifferent to issues *important to them* (e.g. Myllyniemi, 2013; Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi, 2018). That is, disengagement stems from a lack of resonance between experienced realities and party agendas (e.g. Kimberlee, 2002; Sloam, 2014; Weber, 2017). This nexus is at the core of nativist-nationalist politicization.

The rise of nativist-nationalist populism has provided some people an opportunity to receive public recognition and validation of who they feel to be as persons in their lived realities. While it is far from clear that European populist parties and politicians drive increased voter turnout in an absolute sense (Leininger & Meijers, 2020), nativist-nationalist parties and actors have unquestionably dramatically raised the political *salience* of several issues. This has been apparent in the success of right-populist parties in repoliticizing issues such as immigration and other matters previously considered outside of the discursive *cordon sanitaire* of respectable electoral politics (Kaufmann, 2019).² But beyond the specific issues that right-populist mobilization has elevated to the arena of national debate, it has offered a form of agency and identity affirmation crucial in explaining its appeal (Lizotte, 2022; see also Luger, 2022).

Opportunities for articulating an authentic political agency and identity are especially central in understanding *youth* involvement in the political right. A consistent finding among studies of youth far-right subcultures is that they provide a sense of belonging for otherwise disaffected young people (Miller-Idriss, 2018; see also Pirro & Róna, 2019). As Gray (2018) notes, the American “alt-right” offers its adherents a “category-

based epistemology” often presented as an induction into the ‘reality’ of social relations against what is perceived as the Left’s deliberately disingenuous peddling of intersectional oppressions. That these inductions are often referred to as ‘red-pilling’ in a reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, the plot of which revolves around the liberation of humanity from a false reality imposed by malevolent machines, underscores the extent to which the right portrays its invocations of political agency as liberationist and positive, not simply oppositional and negative. This recognition of a sense of self – or political subjectivity (see, e.g. Kallio et al., 2019) – has led to a broad public activation among people who, thus far, have remained rather inactive in formal politics.

While we join in the scholarship where informal acts, such as the sharing of opinions among friends and family and acting on that basis in everyday life, are identified as forms of citizenship, we stress that the same persons’ voices in the public sphere – irrespective of the message they carry – form another important facet of their lived citizenship. We draw attention to this matter, as we believe that disputing the civic value of nativist-nationalist public expressions does not make them disappear but, quite the contrary, may create the perception of opinions being suppressed by a complicit or even conspiratorial media and political establishment. In this aim, we align with many radical geographers who present serious concerns about the current state of democracy and political polarization.

Hence, this article suggests applying the framework of lived citizenship to identify a full range of active citizenships, not only those that we, as critical and perhaps radical-left scholars, wish to endorse. What does ‘radical’ citizenship mean, after all, if not positing ways of being that get at the ‘root’ of social injustice, which is exactly what right-populists are claiming from *their* point of view? While it is tempting to understand right-populism primarily as the negation of values and identities critical scholars cherish, through methodological empathy we can identify how right-populisms – like any successful radical political programme – offers their adherents a positive vision in the form of a promise of a better world once its enemies are overcome (Müller, 2017; see also Griffin, 2018). This conception of empathy refers the generic human capacity to understand the point of view of the other, which is crucially distinct from sympathy that refers to positive emotions for the other (see Lizotte, 2021; Spathopoulou et al., 2021). Next, we offer two justifications for our position, drawing from *spatial* and *performed* dimensions of lived citizenship as portrayed in Kallio et al. (2020).

Spatial dimensions of nativist-nationalist lived citizenship

First, nativist-nationalist politics contests the *spatialities* of lived citizenship. These forms of politics seek, in mundane and extraordinary ways, to rescale the state to the space of the nation (in this special issue, see Casaglia & Coletti, 2021). While this move may first seem to entrench the status quo, i.e. the nation-state, it is from a certain point of view a radical contestation of current transnational realities. Embedded in what we might call a sort of reappropriated “methodological nationalism”, the endeavour rests upon the idea that society can be equated with the nation-state, an idea criticized by geographers for over two decades (Häkli & Strømsø, 2022; also Erdal et al., 2018; Häkli, 2001; Martin & Paasi, 2016). Right-populist calls to sever ties with transnational organizations and state bureaucracies viewed as conspiring to undermine national sovereignty call into

question a whole spectrum of global networks, for example: the world of city-regions (Moisio & Rossi, 2020), translocal connections (McFarlane, 2009), transnational flows (Collyer & King, 2015) and cross-border regions (Western, 2007). These scalar structurations are characteristic of the globalized world where states actively circumvent nationally-scaled spatial governance structures in order to keep and gain favourable geoeconomic and geopolitical positions. Hence, proposals to rescale the state 'back' to an idealized national past contest the whole contemporary world order, which, for its part, reveals why many quarters are not enthusiastic about recognizing this brand of political agency in terms of citizenship.

That some members of young generations find simplistically nationalist framings of society inviting only adds to the scholarly tendency to overlook it as a form of citizenship. Work on youth political engagement has focused on progressive politics, in which the translocal and transnational scales tend to emerge as significant sites of youth engagement and citizenship (e.g. Bridger, 2016; Harris & Quicke, 2019; Salih et al., 2017). Political geographers have been particularly effective in providing insights about youthful political agency extending beyond the local scale and other territorial boundaries (e.g. Hopkins & Alexander, 2010; Hörschelmann & El Refaie, 2014; Evans, 2020). However, this drive to document novel socio-spatial forms of political identity and agency has, in part, had the effect of downplaying the continuing relevance that modernist nation-state territoriality has in the contemporary world (Murphy, 2022a).

Instead, little work exists on conservative (youth) politics where desires for community and recognized identity drive engagements with nativist and ultranationalist movements (for exceptions, see Gray, 2018; Miller-Idriss, 2018; Nilan, 2021; Pirro & Róna, 2019). These impulses, initially driven by a localized need to resist alienation and to connect with like-minded peers (e.g. Blee, 2007; Pilkington, 2016; Gray, 2018), highlights the intersubjective dimension of lived citizenship that can then be rescaled in a variety of ways (see Kallio et al., 2020). In the case of conservative and extreme-right politics, the drive towards solidarity is given political salience through messaging from nativist-nationalist political parties, while their youth wings provide avenues to voice such political consciousness in a national arena. This politics stand in stark contrast with common approaches in youth politics and critical citizenship studies where 'radical' citizenship is typically reserved for certain demographics and not native, white, male citizens, whose articulations of citizenship are often deemed 'problematic'. Rather, groups marginalized by race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability or other socially structured positions form a typical focus of research (e.g. Rasmussen & Brown, 2002; McEwan, 2005; Routledge, 2017). Yet how we have conceptually outlined radical democracy and related modes of citizenship, beyond normative assumptions, does not preclude young nativist-nationalist populists who are concerned with their local communities and set out to contest the prevailing power relations that have made them feel – rightly or wrongly – disempowered.

Performative dimensions of nativist-nationalist lived citizenship

The second dimension of nativist-nationalist populism ill-suited to conventional notions of democratic citizenship concerns how it is *performed*. The approaches of lived citizenship draw specific attention to "the embodied performance of citizenship, and how people negotiate rights, responsibilities, identities and belonging through interactions

with others in the course of daily life” (Kallio et al., 2020, p. 713). Understandably, when dealing with political agency that regularly dehumanizes, engages with conspiratorial reasoning or insinuates coming violence, not all ways of negotiating are considered equally civic from the point of view of critical scholarship. However, if we agree that certain forms of political agency do not belong to citizenship, where do we draw the line? Further, who controls the lines that separate radical citizenship performances from other ways of negotiating rights, responsibilities, identities and belonging? This is another dilemma, we suggest, that citizenship studies should deal with when placing nativist-nationalist populism on the map.

Concurrently, we agree that extending attention to youth nativist-nationalist political performances in terms of citizenship poses ethical challenges. In arguing for an expansion of which political performances should be recognized as reflecting a more or less sincere desire for engagement in the polity – however spatially defined – we by no means endorse performances that evoke exclusionary, racist and/or violent visions of belonging. Instead, through methodological empathy, we set out to understand their stated radicalness against other radical forms of citizenship. Uncivil political performance is generally identified as a key aspect of youth political engagement. Consider, for example, the radical environmental movements that work through public performances, such as *Extinction Rebellion* whose demonstrations performing “non-violent, disruptive civil disobedience”³ are regularly disrupted and even violently ended by the police, and are subject to judgement by courts (e.g. Bowman & Pickard, 2021). In critical scholarship and journalism, these performative aspects go easily together with the idea of radical citizenship while in public debate the democratic character of such activities is highly contested.

For progressive and conservative political performances alike, we believe that the recognition of lived citizenship is vital if we are to understand their siren calls – calls deeply attractive to large portions of the electorate in different settings across the world, even if they are being drawn in completely different directions. In nativist-nationalist populist politics, a key aspect is the mobilization of an exclusive popular sovereignty set against unresponsive, if not traitorous, elites (Moffitt, 2016, 2019). Such was eminently on display in the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol, by supporters of former President Donald Trump convinced of the existence of a ‘rigged’ election – egged on in part by the ‘QAnon’ conspiracy theory that holds that Trump’s Democratic enemies are engaged in satanic rituals and child sex trafficking. In “green populism” (Davies, 2019), young activists and scholars similarly point to the political elite as the obstacle for radical change, and sometimes the entire adult population is placed on the firing line. Greta Thunberg is exemplary of this generationally-targeted rhetoric, claiming that older generations are “doing nothing” in the face of climate change (e.g. the “Glasgow talk”).⁴

Despite the significant ambiguities and slippages in fitting nativist-nationalist political actors into the category of ‘populism’ (to say nothing of the even more contested ‘populist’ character of environmental activism), many nevertheless find it at least occasionally strategically useful to invoke performances of authenticity conferred by popular legitimacy in making their claims for rescaling identity. “Authenticity” is operationalized, among other traits, as “honesty and realness” (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018), which favours actors who are seen as willing to subvert and even smash established norms of civility

and propriety (e.g. Bucy et al., 2020). This performed disdain for established norms is a significant element that bridges ‘respectable’ nativist-nationalist politics and its extremist fellow travellers, especially among youth participants. The performed nativist (if not fascist) subject is, of course, difficult to align with a democratic citizen, but at the borderline, things become less clear.

Political parties that rest on the border between extremism and ‘mainstream respectability’ also use provocative political performances that blur the line between extremism and self-styled ‘resistance against political correctness’, to command media and public attention. In Finland, recent examples can be found from expressions by members of the center-right National Coalition Party (*Kokoomus*) and its youth wing, which from time to time are accused of racism. While it is beyond the scope of this article to do so, such performances call on scholars of both progressive and conservative political movements to critically interrogate how ‘mainstream’ and ‘extremism’ mutually produce each other as nodes around which acts of radical political agency are constructed (e.g. Bowman & Pickard, 2021; Ince, 2022).

A further aspect of performances of youth nativist-nationalist citizenship that merits scrutiny is the ways in which it offers a contestation of the terms of citizenship offered by the liberal democratic nation-state. A key common feature among the diverse movements that comprise European nativist-nationalist populism is a claim that the civic nationalisms promoted by political elites are no longer satisfactory as a basis for social solidarity (Kaufmann, 2019). Instead, these movements advocate for a return to an imagined golden age guided by ethnocultural traditions and, in extreme cases, sealed by a blood-and-soil social contract (ibid; Wending, 2018). While many parties attempt to thread the needle by downplaying their traditional insistence on white phenotypical appearance as a condition for membership in the national community, white symbols continue to saturate nativist-nationalist affective sensibilities of national identity. The divide between belonging and otherness hence comes down to the question of race and/or ethnicity, not cultural heritage or legal citizenship status. In the Finnish context, the expression *kantasuomalainen*, used extensively by the Perussuomalaiset as part of their immigration critique to the point of its naturalization within Finnish political discourse, is a banal example of how this takes place (recently ‘kantaväestö’ with reference to population, as in Perussuomalaiset, 2023). The term ‘kanta’ is polysemic, referring on one hand to biological roots (e.g. plant species, animal populations) and secondarily to cultural hierarchies (e.g. primitive/developed, tribes), but also in general to a heel or a basis of any kind (e.g. the heel of the foot, the bottom of a triangle) or simply to a principled opinion (e.g. a religious conviction).⁵ The distinction between kanta-Finns and other people therefore remains ambiguous, which makes the use of the term extremely arbitrary. Nevertheless, it has grown into a common expression in Finnish society, to be found even in legislative documents that declare absolute political correctness (e.g. Education Policy Report, 2021, p. 75).

This ambivalence – embracing bluntly simplistic notions of nationally-bounded ‘racial groups’ while simultaneously (and often superficially) disavowing them – shows how national citizenship does not appear as a status that can be legally flipped on and off like a switch, but an affective state of being that inherently belongs to select members of the nation (Smith, 1986; on the affective dimension of lived citizenship, see Kallio et al., 2020). Such a position was, of course, utterly discredited in the mid-twentieth

century due to the crimes of a state whose ideology was largely built upon such terms (see Murphy, 2022b). As such, its apparent reemergence has been broadly considered alarming and so has been stigmatized by casting it as ‘immature’, ‘irrational’ or even ‘racist’ ethno-national affects. While nativist-nationalist populism’s smashing of discursive norms around race and ethnicity have created space for these affects to be more freely expressed than would have been recently possible, such norms do continue to exert some influence over political rhetoric. Yet the appeal to immutable identities has been broadly electorally successful in offering an alternative to what is perceived as a vacuous neoliberal ‘progressivism’, which helps explain the continuing triumph of methodological nationalism in right-wing populism.

Deviant youth: degrading the citizenship of Perussuomalaiset Nuoret

Our analysis comes at a critical juncture in which nativist-nationalist parties are attempting to carefully calibrate their political messaging. Most of these parties in contemporary Europe, especially those with fascist or neo-Nazi roots, have cultivated a brand of anti-establishment insurgency that is nevertheless ‘respectable enough’ to have broad appeal beyond an ultranationalist base. Recent examples are *Fratelli d’Italia*, led by Georgia Meloni, whose political career started in the *Fronte della Gioventù*, the youth wing of a neo-fascist political party cherishing Mussolini’s legacy, and *Sverigedemokraterna* that has verified connections with fascist and white nationalist groups, especially through its former youth wing, *Sverigedemokratisk Ungdom*. The latter was abandoned by the parent party in 2015 precisely on the basis of these affiliations. The cultivation that such parties do sometimes results in instable alliances as, for example, old-guard social and religious conservatives are brought into uneasy coalition with forms of anti-Islam that promote superficially progressive “homonationalisms” and “femonationalisms” (Farris, 2017; Möser & Reimers, 2021). As young people participate in these parties and their youth auxiliaries, they often produce tensions between performing the calibrated script of the parent party and their own youthful ideas of transgression and provocation.

Although many aspects of the nativist-nationalist identity apparatus are common across national contexts, the Finnish case casts several of them in a unique light. Notably, Finnish anxieties around whiteness are key in this regard. As Keskinen (2013) notes, with the burgeoning of a Finnish national identity in the nineteenth century and independence in the 20th, Finns were at pains to first convince other Europeans of their whiteness (as opposed to being descended from the ‘mongoloid race’), and then to consolidate that status through a continuous reproduction of white and Western identity. Particularly key in this ongoing process has been the production and maintenance of the Finnish-Russian border, which has helped mark the line in the Finnish imagination between civilized European society and the belligerent, menacing Russian Other (Paasi, 1999). In the current situation of war, these oppositions are being stressed by many means: For instance, building a wall at the Russian border and welcoming white European refugees from Ukraine to Finland are two initiatives endorsed by nativist-nationalists.

The driving imperative to perform whiteness among Finnish nativist-nationalist actors is also linked to anxieties around gender that echo but also nuance the

transnational backlash against feminism common among right-populist actors. For these groups, progressive ideas about gender and sexual identities and gender roles are seen as an insidious, if not conspiratorial, threat against the decency of hardworking (heteropatriarchal) nuclear families (Cornejo-Valle & Ramme, 2021; Keil, 2020; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). Nevertheless, for nativist-nationalist actors who lean heavily on discourses of the superiority of Western civilization, an essential performative aspect is the distinction drawn between a muted and highly curated form of ‘Western gender equality’ and the Muslim Other who represents subjugation of, if not outright violence towards, women (Meret & Siim, 2013). The Perussuomalaiset and the PS-Nuoret similarly equivocate on gender issues. In particular, the latter has engaged in campaigns viciously attacking progressive ideas around gender (Saresma, 2018), and yet the former organization’s English-language website listed “equality between sexes” as one of its core values. Electoral alliances with the Christian Democratic Party are another example of their equivocal, nationalist-conservative gender politics.

The architecture of the Perussuomalaiset itself is also an important factor in how it has decided to present itself politically, and as such, what performances of nativist-nationalist identity it is willing to tolerate amongst its members. Since its founding, the membership of the Perussuomalaiset has been consistently engaged in disseminating political rhetoric that has tested the boundaries of acceptable – and at times, legal – discourse in Finland. At times specific incidents have led to censure of the responsible parties. For example, Helsinki city council member Olli Sademies was charged with ethnic incitement for a Facebook post in which he argued that African men immigrating to Finland should undergo forced sterilization (Yle News 4 January 2017). The Sademies case represents the ambivalence that the official leadership of the Perussuomalaiset has sometimes expressed in relation to such events: initially, Perussuomalaiset council group chair Seppo Kanerva had expressed outrage at the post, characterizing it as “mad,” “fascis [t],” and “not the party’s view.” At the following meeting of the council group, however, the matter was not raised and Sademies went unpunished (he was later expelled from a local Perussuomalaiset city council group).

A second incident concerns Olli Immonen, who posted a picture on Facebook in which he posed with several members of the Neo-Nazi Finnish National Resistance Movement – itself a branch of the Swedish-founded Nordic Resistance Movement – at the grave of Eugen Schauman, a nationalist icon for having assassinated the Russian governor-general of Finland in a 1904 murder-suicide (Yle News 26 August 2015). Two weeks later, Immonen, also the chairperson of Suomen Sisu (an ultranationalist far-right association), posted on Facebook and Suomen Sisu’s website a manifesto announcing a “fight until the end” against the “nightmare of multiculturalism” (Yle News 26 July 2015). Although the Facebook post drew no public condemnation from the party leadership, Immonen was temporarily relieved of his parliamentary duties.

The history of the PS-Nuoret likewise contains several examples of its members flouting norms of political conduct, which the Perussomalaiset leadership has tolerated to a greater or lesser degree. In February 2015, party leaders expressed bemusement at the PS-Nuoret’s plan to publicly burn the European Union flag in the city of Mikkeli. Then-chairperson Timo Soini characterized the act as useless deliberate provocation, and “not something that Finns would do.” MP Mika Niikko agreed, stating that the party’s youth organization needed to understand the uselessness of such socially

unacceptable behaviour (Yle News 21 February 2015). Despite the public finger-wagging disapproval, the flag-burning exercise did not draw any consequences for the PS-Nuoret. Other widely condemned acts committed by youth wing members have been defended by party leadership, notably those linked to former PS-Nuoret chairperson Sebastian Tynkynen (Yle News 1 November 2015).

Among the incidents that led to tensions between the PS-Nuoret and the Perussuomalaiset, those instigated by Toni Jalonen, the third deputy chairperson of the PS-Nuoret, had the most significant impact on the future of the youth organization. In May 2019 he tweeted a photo of a black couple holding a newborn baby to which he added the caption: “Vote for the Perussuomalaiset so that the future of Finland doesn’t look like this.” As a result of this, the Ministry of Education and Culture refused to pay out the remaining portion of the PS-Nuoret’s government-allocated funding, and demanded that the already-paid portion, some €57,500, be returned (Yle News 19 June 2019). Jalonen expressed regret for the tweet, calling it “thoughtless” and “misguided” (Yle News 23 May 2019). While not addressing the tweet directly, then-Perussuomalaiset chairperson Jussi Halla-aho offered a broader critique of the incident on Facebook, claiming that scrutinizing genetic heritage or defining “Finnishness” were not part of the party’s goals, adding: “Unfortunately, there is a small group of people in the youth organization who do not seem to understand and accept the party’s line and whose activities focus on harming the party and its youth organization – for example, by attacking the party’s own candidates” (ibid).

Matters came to a head in February 2020, when Jalonen, by then the PS-Nuoret’s vice spokesperson, attended the *Etnofutur IV* conference in Estonia. During his prepared remarks, he declared “Today I am ethno-nationalist, traditionalist, and fascist.” The fallout from this incident was swift and far-reaching. The Perussuomalaiset leadership immediately moved to dismiss Jalonen from the party, and stridently denied any link between the Perussuomalaiset and fascism or national socialism. Halla-aho echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that “the party does not accept such activities from its youth wing or even independent youth organization[s] that use the Finns Party logo” (Yle News, 24 February, 2020). For his part, Jalonen told news agencies that he stood by his statement, adding that he had been speaking as an individual and not as a representative of the PS-Nuoret or the Perussuomalaiset.

Nevertheless, the parent party took an extraordinary step to try to take the youth wing in hand: As a condition of continued affiliation, the PS-Nuoret was required to adopt a bylaw change limiting its voting membership to those who were concurrently members of the parent party. A supermajority of the PS-Nuoret membership failed to ratify that rule change at a meeting in Tampere. Following that, the Perussuomalaiset dissolved the PS-Nuoret and established a new youth wing, Perussuomalainen Nuoriso (also “Finns Youth”, with a slightly different spelling in Finnish), in which it was required of members of eligible age to also join the Perussuomalaiset. Halla-aho said, of the decision to form a new youth wing, “we don’t want any racism or ‘skull-measuring’ in this party” (Yle Uutiset, 5 March 2020).

Performed right-populist citizenship at the scale of the nation-state

Our brief description of the events leading up to the dissolution of the PS-Nuoret contains many moments that we can unpack by subjecting them to analysis through lived

citizenship as *spatialities* and *performances* – and indeed, these two categories intertwine in many cases.

One key strategy that most European nativist-nationalist populist parties have engaged in over the last twenty years has been to quarantine older, ‘biological’ racism as unacceptable while widening the rhetorical space for limiting immigration on the basis of – ostensibly – race-neutral ‘cultural difference’. This phenomenon is influenced by many factors, including ethno-pluralist intellectual currents on the right (Lizotte, 2020; Margulies, 2015), as well as dog-whistle strategies that blur and “bundle” overt racism, ethno-nationalism and other elements of populist rhetoric (Åkerlund, 2022; Bonikowski & Zhang, 2017; Steen, 2019). The overall result has been a careful policing by the leadership of right-populist parties of the line between ‘speaking truth to power’ style provocation and sanctionable extremism. Within this environment, both Perussuomalaiset MPs and members of the PS-Nuoret have engaged in nativist-nationalist performances expressing a desire for radically rescaling citizenship to the scale of the nation-state.

Occasionally, these performances have violated the anti-racist *cordon sanitaire* even in its expanded, populist-approved dimensions. This is notable in the context of a more general right-populist, nativist-nationalist movement that relies in part on such rhetoric (Pilkington, 2021). Despite a considerable broadening of acceptable rhetoric on immigration and cultural difference in Europe and North America, even actors presenting themselves at the vanguard of speaking suppressed truths engage in their own policing of political discourse. Although members of both the Perussuomalaiset and the PS-Nuoret have been sanctioned for transgressions, the party apparatus’s disciplining power has tended to fall more heavily on the youth wing than renegade MPs. In particular, the demand from the Perussuomalaiset that legal adults within the PS-Nuoret become members of the parent party represents a move explicitly aimed at curbing youth performances of transgressive statements taking aim at ‘political correctness’.

The double standard applied to youth members by the party leadership is particularly noteworthy in the case of Toni Jalonen’s offenses. Notably, then-chairperson Halla-aho, who has himself been charged with ‘ethnic incitement’ on several occasions, was quick to cast Jalonen’s literally black-and-white tweet as a marginal and even unwelcome element within the larger Perussuomalaiset apparatus. Following that incident, and again after Jalonen’s declaration of fascism, Halla-aho repeatedly distanced the main party from Jalonen and the wider youth wing by declaring their activities to be ‘racist’ and therefore not in line with Perussuomalaiset values. In particular, his characterization of the youth wing’s ideology as ‘skull-measuring’ racism was itself a performance meant to disarm and preempt the potential impacts of Jalonen’s act by shoving it firmly back into the category of outdated, biological racism rather than the ostensibly sensible cultural realism touted by the party (see Ansell, 1997).

The 2020 incident further demonstrates another key difference in youth performances – and particularly Finnish youth performances – of nativist-nationalist identity as opposed to older adults, as shown with the use of the word ‘fascist’ as a triggering event in bringing the punitive force of the Perussuomalaiset on the PS-Nuoret. Before the present war situation where the Russian state has reintroduced the fascist as the ‘evil other’, the popular meaning of the word had become increasingly disconnected from any historical referents. In the early 2010s, it was freely used on the left as well

as the right to delegitimize political enemies (in addition to being conflated with the popular conception of populism; see Griffin, 2018). Yet for older generations, it had a clear salience (see Zembylas, 2021). While some nativist-nationalist movements have been attempting to dismantle the stigma attached to the Nazi and fascist periods (see Nadal, 2020), their supporters and sympathizers of a certain age are nevertheless aware of the stigma attached to fascism and so have a strategic reason to disavow it, even if they may privately support fascist principles (or principles they understand to be fascist).

Consider, for example, Seppo Kanerva's characterization of Olli Sademies's call for forced sterilization of African immigrants as fascist. Whether it meets the technical criteria for being labelled as such is debatable (see Griffin, 2018), but it does express the crude biological racism that savvy party officials like Kanerva recognize as politically radioactive. The label 'fascist' effectively distances the party leadership from an element judged to be extreme without having to substantively engage with the rhetoric in question. On the other hand, younger generations, further removed from the Nazi period and Finland's collaboration, have less of a reason to recoil reflexively from the idea of fascism and may even see it as alluring for its 'forbidden' nature (see Love, 2017). Here, the Deleuzian micropolitical understanding of fascism, as proposed by Zembylas (2021), is apt: Whether Jalonon accurately characterized himself as fascist is not particularly important; his use of the word, rather, mobilized its *performative power*, and clearly signalled his intent to transgress accepted norms of political discourse. Indeed, his earlier openly racist tweet calling for resistance to non-white immigration to Finland had 'primed the pump' such that his self-declaration as 'fascist' would be understood primarily as a performative, not descriptive, act of citizenship (see Isin & Nielsen, 2008).

Moreover, it is also *spatially* significant that Jalonon made his declaration at an international conference in Estonia. Despite the obvious ideological anchoring of most nativist-nationalist populist parties and movements in an imagined national past, the transnational organization of the broad far-right, in both its "respectable" parliamentary and more radical "groupscular" (Griffin, 2003) forms, has been well-documented (Doerr, 2017; Knüpfer et al., 2022; Macklin, 2013). The youth wings of nativist-nationalist populist parties have likewise increasingly engaged in cooperative international activities through which they share ideas and engage in occasional joint activism. For instance, *Génération Nation*, the youth wing of the French far-right *Rassemblement National*, promotes its cooperation with other far-right youth wings such as the *Junge Alternative* in Germany (with which it promises to "intensify its partnership," *Génération Nation* 18 April 2021), or the *Lega Giovani* in Italy (*Génération Nation* 1 August 2018). Hence, while flagging a nation-state centred world order, they enact the transnational political reality like any other growth-oriented network.

Further, while official youth wings such as *Génération Nation* make an effort to toe the line of their parent party and maintain a façade of respectability, they maintain ties with more radical youth organizations. Such groups, like the French *Génération Identitaire* and its European franchises, serve as a reservoir of transgressive nativist-nationalist energy that can be tapped into or disavowed as the situation calls for it. These ties pose a potential liability, as Jalonon found out: although the Etnofutur conference itself is organized by the youth wing of the Estonian far-right party *EKRE* and so is

part of the ‘respectable’ Estonian far-right establishment, it attracts a range of transnational norm-offending speakers including avowed white nationalists and anti-Semites such as the US author Greg Johnson. This makes visible the scalar ambivalence of performed nationalist-nativist lived citizenship.

Overall, despite the common cause between the Perussuomalaiset and the PS-Nuoret, to a certain degree the parent party treated its youth wing with the same sort of bemusement that had been directed at the party’s own rise to prominence with the *iso jytty*. We understand this as part of the more general attitude towards youth politics judged to be ‘immature’, and therefore of low quality or unserious, that characterizes how youth political agency in general is often seen. This manifests in three general ways: First, even allied political actors tend to keep their youth associates at arm’s length as a contingency plan. Even in the case of nativist-nationalist and other right-populist political movements, which are typically more than willing to express themselves in shocking or extreme language, the Perussuomalaiset leadership has tended to consider the youth wing as a potential liability as much as a reserve of future activists and leaders. At the same time, even far-right figures known for their extreme rhetoric exercise care in terms of the limits of their speech and that of their associates (as seen, for instance, amongst figures in the American so-called ‘alt-light’, which performatively rejects the overtly racist ideas of the ‘alt-right’, causing major schisms between the factions; see Wending, 2018).

Second, there was a consistent frustration at youth cohorts’ unwillingness or inability to understand the ‘correct’ way to express a political movement’s ideas. In general, this rests in part upon false assumptions about youth political participation in which young people are seen as blank slates who create moderate political identities when adequately educated and socialized – especially by the praised Finnish school system (e.g. Fornaciari & Rautiainen, 2020). Whereas the typical view on youth participation in politics considers it problematic that youths do not feel encouraged to express their views through democratic institutions (Myllyniemi 2013; Wass & Borg, 2016), in the context of both the *iso jytty* and the PS-Nuoret the problem has been that they express their views *wrongly*. As such, even within the radical context of the Perussuomalaiset’s claims about the nature of Finnish identity and culture, the youth in this movement and their performances of those claims ultimately proved too radical for the party leadership’s tastes.

This brings us to the third key issue. The case makes explicit the dominant normative perspective on active youth citizenship, typically considered a neutral force that deserves ever more support from the adult society as it is *not* political in character but rather related to youth wellbeing, belonging, marginalization and skills of expression – unless the politics involved is considered desirable. The case of youth environmental activism is illuminative in this regard: the polite society endorses its progressive political character as ‘responsible’ citizenship, while they condemn youth conservative or reactionary activism as illicit rebellion. Hence, the wellbeing approach overlooks a range of youthful political performances, including those expressing a continuum of conservative identities, still not well-understood by researchers of either youth political agency in general or the far-right in particular. Without discarding the insights of either of these bodies of work, there is a need to understand how conservative radicalism and pragmatism are alternately performed within youth politics as citizenship, as well as the spaces in which these performances take place.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an alternative way of understanding youthful political participation, through the analytical lens of lived citizenship. Without celebrating the achievements of nativist-nationalist populist parties – on the contrary – we have argued that this perspective is useful for three reasons: First, it reflects the ways in which right-populist movements have successfully introduced into what has been carefully constructed as the political ‘mainstream’ a vision of citizenship that rejects the universal legalism of thin civic nationalisms in favour of thick, ethnocultural definitions of national identity. Second, it allows to hold in tension several boundaries that have marked specifically youth participation in these political movements: margins and mainstream; respectability and provocation; and obedience and transgression. And third, it helps to observe how youth nativist-nationalist politics slip between scales as local issues are given national salience, and international alliances are forged that mutually reinforce nationalist claims of sovereignty.

The geographies of children and youth subfield has, so far, exclusively focused on instances of youth political agency directed towards *progressive* causes, and, as such, implies that empowering youth to organize politically will lead them inevitably towards such causes. Applying the lived citizen framework to a select nativist-nationalist youth organization reveals how a youthful need for solidarity and identity-building can quite easily result in reactionary and exclusionary politics that, at their extreme edges, blur into violence. Given the growing prevalence of this kind of politics in an increasingly politically polarized atmosphere and strained geopolitical situation, the temptation of selection bias and presupposing normative conclusions should be avoided in critical scholarship, *precisely* for the sake of democracy. To put it simply, right-populism has been broadly electorally successful, and stigmatizing it will not make it disappear. By examining it on its own terms, we will not only bring robustness to theory, but also be better prepared for what promises to be an unpredictable political scene in the West over the next decades.

Being ‘better prepared’ is particularly vital. We first submitted this paper in an exceptional geopolitical situation, during the last days of February 2022. While the global pandemic had fluctuated in and between societies for about two years – giving rise to inward-looking national politics everywhere including heightened and selective border governance – during the peer review phase it has become evident that the pandemic time is now accompanied by an actualizing (risk of) war in Europe, provoked by Russia. The alarming situation forces us to ask: How will European citizens respond to the challenges following from the emerging violent conflict, be they immediate or indirect? Based on what we have argued in this article, there is a growing number of citizens in Europe whose subjectivities are strongly grounded in nativist-nationalist ideology, who are affiliated with right-wing populist parties and whose experienced citizenship is being constantly contested by the liberal side of their respective societies. Learning from the past, this raises serious concerns. During the first year, Western states have been expressing a joint position for maintaining peace in Europe, but it remains to be seen if citizens are willing to continue to support that aim should the war and its related effects of increasing inflation continue to challenge their life conditions. The transgression of ideological borders required for that entails dialogue rather than juxtaposition. This, again, means that everyone’s lived

citizenship should be understood as an existing societal position from which to act as part of unified polities. Hence our proposal for acknowledging nativist-nationalist lived citizenship.

Notes

1. We do not suggest that these are the only ways in which the party and its supporters were or are discussed in the media. Many new media reports consider them among other parties and supporters, as part of the regular newsfeed. Yet followers of other parties are rarely framed in the news media in ways brought up in this article, i.e. beyond citizenship.
2. We in no way dispute that settler-colonial and former colonizer nation-states are built upon embedded forms of symbolic and material white supremacy in ways that include and exceed electoral politics. Here, we focus on Kaufmann's point that the decade of the 2010s saw the rise of political "entrepreneurs" who successfully campaigned on policy proposals, such as limiting documented immigration, that had been broadly marginalized in the electoral arena since roughly the end of the Second World War.
3. Quotation from the webpage: <https://rebellion.global/get-involved/>
4. The talk can be found at the FridaysForFuture YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBL7td5sozk>
5. See also the similar French term *souche*, which can denote a tree stump as well as genealogical origins (e.g. *français de souche*).

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