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To cite this article: Kadri Aavik (2018): The animal advocacy movement in the Baltic states: links to other social justice issues and possibilities for intersectional activism, Journal of Baltic Studies, DOI: 10.1080/01629778.2018.1473263

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2018.1473263

Published online: 12 May 2018.

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The animal advocacy movement in the Baltic states: links to other social justice issues and possibilities for intersectional activism

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the animal advocacy movement (AAM) in the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Taking an intersectional perspective, I examine whether and how key animal activists in the Baltics see links between animal rights and other social justice issues. I also consider how the movement communicates its messages to the general public in settings where ideas around animal justice and possibilities for animal advocacy are relatively recent and unfamiliar. This analysis contributes to debates regarding possibilities for intersectional activism and collaboration between social justice movements in the Baltics and beyond.

KEYWORDS

New social movements; activism; animal advocacy movement; animal justice; intersectionality; critical animal studies; Estonia; Latvia; Lithuania

Introduction

The contemporary animal advocacy movement (AAM) emerged in the UK in the early 1970s. The idea of animal rights was introduced to wider audiences in the mid-1970s, with the publication of Peter Singer’s seminal book *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (1975). Singer argued that we have a moral obligation to take into account the interests of non-human animals, on the basis of their capacity to suffer. The work of Singer and other moral philosophers, academics, and activists helped to propel the movement from the fringe to a more established presence in contemporary (Western) societies.

In recent decades, the AAM has been the subject of an increasing range of academic work. This literature, however, has largely been produced about AAM in the West, with little attention to the emergence and development of the movement elsewhere, such as in the post-Soviet and post-socialist space. This article focuses on the AAM in the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and, Lithuania. The AAM is a particularly novel phenomenon in this social, geographical, and political context, as it started to emerge in these societies only from the mid-2000s. As of 2017, we can speak of an increasingly active and visible AAM in the Baltics. As such, the movement and its key developments, as well as its position vis-à-vis wider society deserve scholarly attention.
This article has the following aims. First, I seek to understand whether and how animal activists in the Baltics link their agenda to other social justice issues and movements. This question is not only relevant to the AAM in the Baltics, but simultaneously addresses some key contemporary debates and developments within the AAM globally. In recent years, the question of whether the AAM should focus narrowly on animal-related issues or take an intersectional approach, which includes engagement with other social justice issues, has become an increasingly important issue of discussion within the movement. Hence, this article seeks to contribute to this debate, drawing on the case of the AAM in the Baltics.

As a second and related issue, I am interested in how the Baltic AAM communicates its messages to the general public in social and cultural settings where ideas around animal rights and possibilities for animal advocacy are relatively recent and unfamiliar to wider audiences. What possibilities are seen for intersectional messaging? The organizational strategies that the AAM adopts in this regard have implications for the development of the movement, its relationship to other social justice movements, and its position in mainstream society.

Finally, the key question I tackle here is: What possibilities do animal activists in the Baltics see for intersectional activism? The findings presented and discussed in this article, based on the case of the Baltic AAM, provide insights into the larger question of the relationship between the contemporary AAM and the general public and society. In exploring the issues outlined, I draw on empirical data in the form qualitative interviews conducted in 2015 with key animal activists in the three Baltic countries.

As a conceptual framework, I rely on an intersectional approach. According to intersectionality, socially constructed categories as well as disadvantage and privilege based on these acquire meanings in relation to each other, and should be viewed as intertwined. When applied to the context of social movements, an intersectional perspective means that some of the key issues that social justice movements tackle, such as inequality and marginalization based on gender, race, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness and so on, should not be approached separately, such as is common in contemporary identity politics, but as entangled.

I situate this article within the key epistemological commitments of the emergent discipline of critical animal studies (CAS) (see e.g. Taylor and Twine 2014). This approach ‘perceives that relations between human and nonhuman animals are now at a point of crisis which implicates the planet as a whole,’ as evidenced by the large-scale exploitation and slaughter of animals globally (Best, et al. 2007). Scholars working within this paradigm position themselves as linked to animal activism or at least argue that knowledge production should not be detached from the material conditions of animals. This idea of engaged scholarship is similar to the core principles of feminist epistemology, maintaining that the knowledge produced through academic inquiry should be beneficial to marginalized groups. CAS researchers continue to challenge human exploitation of other animals, highlight connections between various intersecting oppressions, and emphasize the need to challenge all of them simultaneously, both in knowledge building and activism (see e.g. Taylor and Twine 2014, 2, 6, 7, 11), and hence, take an intersectional approach. CAS scholars have added species as a category of oppression to be considered in (traditionally anthropocentric) intersectional analysis.
The animal advocacy movement in the Baltics

The emergence of new social movements was virtually impossible in the Soviet Union and under the socialist regimes of central-eastern Europe, as there was no free civil society (for an extended discussion on the specificities of social movements in post-Soviet and central-eastern Europe, see e.g. Piotrowski 2015; Petrova and Tarrow 2007). New social movements, such as the feminist movement and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and Intersex (LGBTQI) movement in this region began to appear only with the collapse of these regimes.

Compared to those in the West, social movements in post-socialist central-eastern Europe have been characterized as relatively weak, for example, in terms of low individual participation rates (Císař 2013; Howard 2003; Petrova and Tarrow 2007). Movements aimed at critiquing the core principles of the functioning of contemporary societies (e.g. anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberalist, and anti-consumerist initiatives), or those focusing on challenging social inequality, including on a structural level and/or intersectionally, have yet to emerge or become influential. Some reasons for the lack or low impact of such movements include the socialist legacy (Císař 2013; Piotrowski 2015, 10) and a strong neoliberal political and social agenda prevalent in these societies today, a paradigm to which no significant alternatives have yet emerged in the collective social imaginary.

The AAM, while a new phenomenon in the Baltic countries and rather small in numbers, having emerged only in the 2000s, has nevertheless become quite visible and vocal. Animal advocacy organizations (AAO) in the Baltic states tend to be rather grassroots. At the time of writing, there are four active AAOs in the Baltics: Loomus and Loomade Nimel (Estonia), Dzīvnieku brīvība (Latvia), and Tuštis narvai (Lithuania). All operate with minimal funding of an irregular nature, with only one to two paid part-time staff members per country. In all countries, there are also vegan organizations (in the case of Latvia, Dzīvnieku brīvība is also engaged in vegan advocacy), whose aims and activities overlap with those of the AAOs to some extent. These organizations, however, remain beyond the scope of this analysis.

Intersectionality and social movements: coalition-building

Intersectionality is a theoretical-methodological paradigm originating from Black feminist thought (see e.g. Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 1990; Hill Collins 1993). In the past decade, it has become an increasingly prominent theoretical and methodological approach in feminist scholarship and is increasingly finding its way into social science research more broadly. Intersectionality stresses the need to view various socially constructed categories (the original emphasis was mainly on gender and race, but also class) and inequalities (including privilege) based on these as interlinked and inseparable in people’s experiences.

Intersectionality has primarily been conceptualized and employed in academic research as a more nuanced approach to understanding identities and social inequalities. It could, however, also be of use on a more practical level, in terms of being used as a framework for guiding activism. Implicit in the intersectionality paradigm lies the desire for positive social change and the dismantling of power hierarchies and inequalities. As such, it offers a basis for building solidarity politics, for instance, in the form of (temporary) intersectional coalitions between groups and individuals who...
might be positioned differently in the social hierarchy, yet might share some similar interests. The capacity of intersectionality to reveal ‘unlikely or counterintuitive coalition partners’ has been seen as one of its key benefits (Hancock 2011, 119).

These intersectional coalitions are not based on historical identities but rather on certain common political interests, with the aim to cooperate in specific questions in which the political interests of various groups converge. Seemingly very dissimilar groups could form strategic coalitions against hegemonic normative ideologies and practices that damage their lives. A coalition could be formed, for instance, by animal activists and slaughterhouse workers against the animal-industrial complex (Noske 1989), highlighting the negative impact this industry has on both non-human animals and slaughterhouse workers (Compa 2005). In practice, forming intersectional coalitions is often a difficult task, as it involves the need to consider differences, risks, and contradictions (Reagon 1983). For the AAM, however, as well as for other social justice movements, forming intersectional partnerships could be instrumental in spreading their message to wider audiences.

**Intersectionality and the animal advocacy movement**

The original as well as current mainstream conceptualizations of intersectionality operate within a humanist framework, and from this perspective, dismiss speciesism as a form of oppression alongside race, gender, class, and other categories relevant in human social relations. Challenging this anthropocentric paradigm, vegetarian ecofeminist scholars (see e.g. Gaard 2002; Adams 1990; Donovan 1990; Kemmerer 2011; Kheel 2004; Kheel 2008) have demonstrated important links between the exploitation of women and animals, arguing that animal advocacy should be seen as a feminist issue.

Inspired by this ecofeminist work, CAS scholars highlight how all forms of discrimination ‘are rooted in the same system of oppression’ (Glasser 2011, 53). They have pointed out how the implicit anthropocentric bias in our thinking “neglects how the category ‘human’ is socially constructed, and ‘relationally performed, re- and co-produced’ with the category ‘animal’” (Twine 2010, 401). Hence, CAS scholars advocate for expanding the definition of intersectionality to move beyond anthropocentrism by considering the category of species. In addition to linking animal liberation with feminism, anti-capitalist and anti-racist views (as well as those challenging other forms of oppression such as ableism and homophobia) are vocalized alongside animal liberation in ecofeminist and CAS scholarship.

Many animal activists may gravitate toward an intersectional approach in their personal philosophy, stemming from their personal backgrounds, as they are often sensitive toward social injustice on several grounds. Many have been, or are simultaneously involved, with other social justice movements, such as the LGBTQI and the feminist movement.

Yet, in recent decades, the AAM and vegan movements in the West, particularly in the North American context, have received scholarly criticism from an intersectional perspective. The AAM has been critiqued for its focus exclusively on animals and failing to take into account the interconnectedness of all oppressions (Torres 2007). It has been pointed out that these movements primarily consist of privileged individuals in terms of race and class and are complicit in reproducing hierarchies based on these categories (Harper 2010; Nocella 2012; Wright 2015; Kim 2015; Wrenn 2016). Gender
has also been examined in this context (Gaarder 2011; Wrenn 2016). Wrenn (2016, 22) argues that the AAM operates according to ‘a masculinized rationality,’ featuring campaigns that ‘rely on sexism, sexual objectification, and sexualized violence against women.’ Particularly People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), one of the most visible organizations promoting animal rights and veganism, has been seen as going against feminist commitments (Glasser 2011; Wrenn 2016). Taylor (2011) highlights how animal advocacy has been implicated in reproducing ableist tropes. Kymlicka and Donaldson (2014, 121) point out how animal advocacy may (inadvertently) stigmatize (racial) minorities and non-Western cultures. These examples suggest that a lack of awareness regarding intersectionality has led at least some segments of the AAM to (unintentionally) reproduce intra-human hierarchies. It is partly due to these external critiques that (at least some organizations in) AAM, particularly in the North American context have begun to increasingly consider these intersections in their activist work.

In the Baltic societies, however, these debates and criticisms addressed at the AAM have not (yet) emerged, for a number of reasons. For one, the AAM in the Baltics emerged only very recently and is still relatively marginal. Partly due to this, the movement has thus far not been the subject of academic inquiry or public debates, let alone from an intersectional perspective. The lack of these discussions also has to do with the relative smallness and weakness of other social justice movements in these countries. Some more established movements in the West, such as the anti-racist or the disability rights movement, which have criticized the AAM for advancing or perpetuating biases toward certain human groups, are very marginal if non-existent in the Baltics. The intersectional perspective, both as an analytical tool in scholarly work and as a practical approach in the feminist movement, is marginal in this context, accounting for the lack of intersectional critique from the part of new social movements toward others. Different social and historical contexts produce different discourses and practices around social categories and privilege and disadvantage related to these contexts. Race, for example, as a prominent category of differentiation and oppression in the USA, for historical reasons, is understood and operates somewhat differently in the Baltic societies. In the Baltics, nationality and ethnicity stand out as politicized categories over race. Whiteness, while embedded in constructions of Estonianness, Latvianess, Lithuanianess, and in other Eastern European nationalities, has remained unmarked (Imre 2012, 84). The category of class in post-socialist eastern Europe holds different meanings and is not politicized in such a way as it is in the West. Another important reason behind the lack of intersectional critique toward the AAM in the Baltics is, as the subsequent analysis shows, the general sensitivity that AAM activists in the Baltics display toward intersectional considerations and their conscious efforts to avoid reproducing intra-human hierarchies, even if not directly engaging in intersectional activism.

Yet, this does not mean that intersectionality is irrelevant in the Baltic context. Intersectionality deals with ways in which people are differently positioned in terms of the intersecting social categories that they are associated with and these divisions and their intersections are present in some form or another in all societies, in locally specific ways. Similar to most Western contexts, for example, animal activists and vegans in the Baltics share a similar demographic profile: typically, they are educated, urban, young, white, ethnic-majority women – hence, they constitute a relatively privileged group (Aavik 2017). However, they may experience disadvantage in terms
of gender, as well as income, as animal and vegan advocacy work is typically low paid or unpaid in the Baltics. This social positioning of the activists has implications for the spread of the AAM’s message as well as in producing unintended exclusions and upholding privilege. Throughout this article, I take into account locally relevant intersections in the Baltic context.

While the increasing prominence of the intersectional paradigm in theoretical as well as in some activist work has inspired at least some segments of the AAM to focus on various kinds of oppression simultaneously, other approaches, which advocate for focusing more narrowly on animal questions, such as effective altruism, are becoming more influential. The question of which approach to take is increasingly becoming a key issue of division and even a possible source of conflict between organizations and activists in the AAM.

**Effective altruism**

Effective altruism is a philosophical approach to activism increasingly adopted by many segments of the AAM in recent years. Authors writing in this field often have backgrounds in, or have been inspired by, research in psychology, communication science, business, and marketing. The central aim is to increase ‘effectiveness’ of activist work. According to this approach, activist work should consider the following key question: ‘What will be most effective for helping those whom I’m trying to help?’ (Cooney 2011, 6). Social movements and organizations following effective altruist principles choose their tactics according to available evidence or prognosis regarding the success of a given action. Typically, a course of action, which benefits the greatest number of those the organization is seeking to help, is chosen over others. Quantitative indicators are mostly used to measure success.

In order to achieve transformative change effectively, activists are encouraged to critically reflect on their own personal and organizational practices, as potential obstacles to achieving ‘effective’ change. Cooney (2011, 5), for example, advocates for ‘abandoning an aspect of self-identity in order to be more effective at protecting the environment (or animals or people),’ for the purposes of effectively communicating messages to target audiences.

While most of this literature focuses on tactics aiming bring about change for a wide range of different causes (see e.g. Singer 2009; Cooney 2011), an increasing body of literature, including popular writing, deals more specifically with the AAO (one of the most notable examples is Tobias Leenaert’s blog ‘The Vegan Strategist’). For the purposes of this article, it is of interest whether and how Baltic animal activists relate to this philosophy and whether the adoption of effective activist principles by the AAM might present a potential challenge to implementing intersectional agendas.

**Research design and methodology**

This research followed a qualitative approach. 15 interviews with key animal activists and leaders of AAOs in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were conducted (five individuals from each country) in 2015. The average age of the interviewed activists was 29. Ten identified as women and five as men. All were white and part of dominant ethnic groups in their respective countries, and lived in major cities. This demographical profile reflects the typical composition of the AAM in the
Baltics as well as elsewhere in Europe and North America, where animal activists tend to be relatively privileged in terms of several social categories, such as race, ethnicity, and educational status, etc. (Aavik 2017; Harper 2010; Nocella 2012). A semi-structured interview model was followed for all interviews. This allowed participants to reflect on information or opinions without being too confined by the parameters of the questions. The author of this article and a research assistant, Kristina Mering, conducted the interviews. As the interviewers are native Estonian speakers, the interviews with Latvian and Lithuanian activists were conducted in English, whereas those with Estonian activists were in Estonian. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using a qualitative thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006).

In order to make my theoretical lens, my methodological choices, and interpretation of findings more transparent, it is relevant to explicitly position myself in relation to the topic of this article, the research participants, and the AAM. I identify simultaneously as a scholar and activist, having been involved in Estonian civil society for the past 10 years: first as part of the feminist movement, and in last 5 years contributed mostly to the vegan movement, with lesser involvement in the albeit closely related animal activism. Through the latter activity, all interviewed key Estonian activist were well known to me and I had previously briefly interacted with some Latvian activists. The interviewed Lithuanian activists were recruited by my research assistant. As a CAS scholar and activist simultaneously, I on the one hand embrace the intersectional ethos of CAS, and on the other hand, I am sympathetic to the complicated everyday lived realities of animal activists, who might struggle to apply intersectionality in their work. From this dual perspective, I sympathize with the dilemmas discussed in this article regarding intersectionality in theory and practice, and seek to reconcile these two perspectives, inquiring what intersectional activism might mean in practice. I find it important to consider activists’ views on this matter, as their perspectives typically do not feature in scholarly debates on whether and how intersectionality might function in practice.

The interviewed animal activists perceived the movement to be very similar in all the Baltic countries in terms of its historical development, as well as topics dealt with and strategies used. Activists highlighted a common identity and close cooperation among organizations. Common themes and organizational strategies emerged as a result of the analysis. In this article, I do not conduct a comparative analysis of the movement in these three countries. Instead, because of the similarities between the activism in the three countries, the findings serve as a collective portrait of the AAM in the Baltic states.

**Analysis and findings**

**Drawing connections between animal rights and other social justice agendas**

While Baltic activists highlight that linking animal issues with other social justice topics has not been a core theme in organizational agenda setting, it is a question increasingly discussed in internal conversations: ‘It is not a topic that we deal with every day, but it emerges from time to time, so it is quite important. Not primary, but quite relevant. We discuss it amongst ourselves […] Even if we do not have all the answers, we are thinking about it.'
Activists appeared to address intersectionality tentatively. While admitting that there are no ready-made or easy answers, they stress that the issue is important and coming up with solutions is a long-term and on-going process, which involves holding internal negotiations within their organizations and tackling some personal ethical dilemmas. At the time of the interviews, none of the Baltic AAOs had stated in their public outreach that their organizational aims or values include those beyond animal advocacy.

The interviewed activists recognized links between the oppression of non-human animals on the conceptual level. A common basic mechanism between various kinds of oppression was identified. The idea of justice and protection of individual rights (to life and to non-harm) of human and non-human beings was emphasized:

Yeah, of course I see them [connections] and I think the basic reason for like animal protection, animal rights, is this idea about justice. It’s not just about reducing suffering but it’s more about justice. And in this sense, like protecting individual rights… like the scheme is more or less the same in so many other like rights topics, social justice topics.

The plight of animals was seen as part of the wider social justice agenda, alongside with other social justice issues. For example, links with feminism were drawn: ‘[…] The topic is the same. I really liked the book of Carol Adams. I think it is very clear that female beings are being oppressed and forced to do something and be someone that they don’t want to be.’

Activists argued for the long-term usefulness of making their target groups see links between the concerns of humans and other animals, however conceding that there might be occasions when pointing out these links might not be beneficial, again alluding to the contextual nature of decisions regarding intersectional activist practice:

Making people see connections between issues concerning non-humans and humans, I think it is useful. It might not be so effective sometimes in the short-term, but in a long-term I think it [the discussion] has to go there. It’s quite possible that in some specific situations we should like avoid making very clear those connections.

While the interviewees clearly recognized connections between the treatment of non-human animals and members of some disadvantaged social groups, they pointed out that these links are not seen or acknowledged by other social justice movements.

**Cooperation with other social justice movements: opportunities and obstacles**

While theoretically, strong links were seen between the oppression of humans and other animals, activists found it easier to discuss these on the conceptual level. As soon as the conversation shifted to applying these insights to their own and their organization’s activist work, they admitted that adopting an intersectional perspective in their daily organizational work is not an easy task. This section takes a closer look at the opportunities and difficulties outlined by the activists regarding cooperation with other social justice movements to participate in advancing causes other than animal advocacy.

Activists admitted that there is not much cooperation going on between different social justice movements in their countries. The major reason for this was thought to be the lack of interest on the part of other movements toward the plight of non-human animals. This situation was perceived as somewhat unfair and viewed as impeding possible cooperation with other movements, which neglect animal
concerns. Nevertheless, cooperation with other movements was seen as beneficial to both sides:

I think it [cooperation with other movements] would no doubt be useful and would diversify our movement, and show a larger picture. In the end, all these struggles are paving a way towards a better or more just world, and it is logical that they are all connected. To achieve an animal friendly world to the extent that we desire, some kind of preconditions have to be fulfilled. I cannot imagine an animal friendly world where people are discriminated against. These things should go together. There should be a world where no one would be discriminated against, including animals.

Occasional collaboration was cited to occur with the LGBTQI movement on selected issues and events on an irregular basis. A major reason behind this cooperation is the link between the AAM and LGBTQI movements in the Baltics through some members, as several individual activists are active in both movements. This facilitates the exchange of ideas and collaboration between the two movements, as activists admitted. Yet, cooperation with the LGBTQI movement is inconsistent and contextual. In the following account, a Latvian activist explains how and why their organization decided not to show public support to one of the key annual events for the LGBTQI movement, the Pride parade:

And the idea behind not participating is that we are an animal rights organization and so we kind of focus on it… and we are not like taking a stance on every possible political issue, even including other social justice issues. […] In the very beginning, I personally was in favor of making a broad mission statement in the organization, that we are supporting, like explicitly saying that as an organization, we are supporting all social justice causes. And like to name and also … like to have some statement on our website. I guess I was in a minority, because like this offer was turned down… And so we didn’t…, and this time, it was like two years ago or maybe already almost three… and this time, I was like during this work with trying to see how we can be effective and we as a group, we have become also more pragmatic.

Interestingly, the questions of whether, how, and when to cooperate with other social justice movements is interpreted as reaching beyond simply engaging in collaboration, but framed as a question of identity for one’s own organization, as the same Latvian activist explains, referring to the instance of the Pride parade again: ‘It was more like not a question whether we will cooperate or not, but like it was more like a reflective question, like what kind of organization are we? […] So it’s a question not really of action, but of identity.’

He goes on to cite contextual factors, which he sees as making cooperation with the LGBTQI movement in this particular event difficult:

[…] This cooperation it’s not a kind of mutual thing, yeah, we could go to march, to a Pride march, and that’s basically it, it’s kind of a one time, one way decision. We wouldn’t say okay, and now like the LGBT community sees the animal issue as a social justice issue and for example, we expect LGBT organizations to come to circus demos for example. Or … we like tried to imagine how it would be, we at the circus and the LGBT community also comes with the rainbow flags [laughs], what would our homophobic society think? And so… even [though] it’s like not really a cooperation in this sense. […] Even if we participated, I don’t know if it would bring forward more cooperation.

Two main justifications emerge for the decision not to cooperate with the LGBTQI movement in this instance: first, the belief that further, more lasting forms of cooperation might not follow from this, and second, the fear of losing potential supporters, had the organization publicly shown solidarity with the local LGBTQI movement.
Implicitly present behind both is pragmatic reasoning regarding what is the most ‘effective’ course of action in this instance, in this case, it was deemed that more would be lost than gained.

In addition to concern about public image and potential loss of supporters, another reason put forward by activists in justifying focusing only on animal issues was the need for specialization in organizational work. It was argued that on a practical level, an activist cannot have detailed knowledge of all forms of injustice and ways how to deal with them:

If an animal rights group has some sort of an issue they are working on, then I like the idea of other groups signing it or making a public statement of support, instead of starting to pursue the issue themselves. I mean if the LGBT Association of [country X] would actively engage with animal rights issues, I think that’s not right. I mean, in this case, things will become too blurry. But our [name of organization] manifesto is a good example. It has been signed by different organizations, there are environmental organizations, gay and lesbian organizations, feminist groups etc. I think this is a good example of how to deal with this matter.

The issue of specialization brought up here is certainly very pragmatic and understandable from an organization’s perspective; yet, it can be problematic from the point of view of potential intersectional activism. Intersectional coalition building might benefit from open-mindedness toward other movements’ ideas regarding how to advance the causes of one’s own movement. This excerpt, however, does illustrate activists’ support for more distanced forms of intersectional collaboration, where different movements support each other in specific circumstances and particular causes.

At the same time, in highlighting that activists and organizations dealing with other social justice causes are typically also focused on one particular issue, it was implied that the expectation to deal with oppressions intersectionally should not only fall on animal activists. The next excerpt addresses this concern more explicitly:

There is a lot of discussion in the animal rights movement about this intersectionality idea, about social justice or total liberation… like liberation from all injustice […]. This expectation for animal rights people to participate in other social justice causes comes from the idea that … we are kind of smarter [laughs] and so we have more obligations. Like we see injustice everywhere and the other organizations see less injustice, so where we still see injustice… in animal use, exploitation, then they would borderline before this and don’t go into it, so, as we are smarter and as they fail to see this injustice in animal case, so they are kind of like excused [laughs][…]. We were considering this line of reasoning too during the discussion about like kind of being unfair, the situation. We could say it’s a bit unfair that… how come as animal advocates we are expected to fight against all injustice yeah and why other justice movements do not fight for animals?

As this excerpt illustrates, in seeing themselves as being cognizant of and sensitive toward various forms of injustice affecting humans, the pressure to act on these in some form or another, is, at least in part, self-imposed.

In the next section, I will take a closer look at how activists talked about and reasoned the fear of losing potential supporters, as this emerged as one of the central issues in the interviews when the possibilities for intersectional activism were discussed. This in turn has to do with the public profile of the AAOs and the ways in which activists present their work to the public.

Public image and messaging

In animal advocacy in the Baltic States there has been a shift from early ‘radicalism’ to conscious efforts toward becoming more accepted by ‘society,’ to paraphrase the
interviewed activists. In talking about their own development as activists, research participants highlighted certain changes that had occurred in their personal as well as their organizations’ views and practices over the years. When talking about their early years as activists, some activists portrayed themselves as somewhat reckless and naïve, and lacking strategic thinking:

The image of the AR movement [name of the country] has started to change I think. We did crazy things when we started. Demonstrations in front of stores, yelling and those kinds of things. We were like young and we had not thought it through. But the more we have started to cooperate with other organizations, the more the society has began to accept us I think.

From this later vantage point, the activities of the early years of the AAM in the Baltics were deemed as reckless behavior and seen as contributing to an unfavorable public image. Becoming more mainstream was seen as desirable, and justified on pragmatic grounds. Indeed, this quote suggests that this pragmatism is a move toward increased openness to forming intersectional coalitions, rather than away from it. In attempts to become more mainstream, disseminating their message to the widest possible audience became the primary goal. Therefore, activists emphasized the shift of focus from earlier more spontaneous actions to more strategic communication, involving the use of communication techniques that ‘work’ to influence audiences. A key consideration here – as activists stressed – is to communicate simple messages, which involves focusing on one particular issue at a time. Stemming from these considerations, communicating a message that links the exploitation of non-human animals with various forms of human oppression in organizational messaging was seen as ineffective and undesirable. In the following excerpt, an activist explains why their organization refrains from associating itself with any social justice causes other than animal advocacy:

If animal rights is already a difficult cause, then if we add some other claims and other justice claims yeah like … gay rights or women’s rights or I don’t know… which are also already alone like difficult issues, yeah. Socially difficult issues… And by summing up all those causes, we make it extra difficult for a person to be with us. The more demands we sum up in one set, the more difficult it becomes and fewer people will join us…. And that’s exactly the opposite to what we try to do, we try to make entering the cause as easy as possible.

This excerpt illuminates activists’ understanding of the idea of intersectionality. The above quote suggests that intersectionality should necessarily mean dealing with a wide variety of causes simultaneously, rather than, for example, focusing on a few particular intersections.

In focusing on animal advocacy messages only, the importance of developing a precise focus was emphasized, following the rules of ‘effective communication,’ partly stemming from the effective altruist approach. Intersectional considerations – linking the various forms of oppression of human and non-human animals – was deemed a message too confusing and blurry for audiences, and hence seen as ineffective and undesirable. Thus, on the practical activism level, dealing with other causes was considered as hindering animal advocacy goals:

If you communicate one message to someone, then they either agree with it or not. But if you communicate let’s say three or four… for example, animal rights, feminism, racism and anti-capitalism… and if they disagree with at least one of them, then there is a big chance that they will put away your leaflet or whatever. They do not take the message so openly. So therefore, I
tend to think that in public communication it does not make sense to bring in different aspects, just because this can be ineffective, I think.

In justifying the decision to focus on animals only in their agenda setting and messaging, the concern for the organizations’ public image was central. Factors related to the social, historical, and political particularities of Baltic societies were used to justify not making links to other oppressions for fear of losing supporters. The activists argued that the social and political context they are working in shapes their organizations’ strategic choices in crucial ways, preventing them from setting an intersectional agenda and communicating intersectional messages to the public. The interviewees broadly characterized Baltic and post-socialist eastern European societies as backwards, with prevalent homophobic and sexist attitudes among the mainstream population. Indeed, in terms of LGBTI rights, the Baltic countries are ranked as among the lowest among EU countries, with Latvia and Lithuania being at the bottom of the index, and Estonia occupying nineteenth place among 27 EU countries (ILGA-Europe 2017). All three countries are ranked well below the EU average in the EU Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality 2017). Hence, the activists’ perception that their target audiences might not appreciate intersectional messaging is not just based on their feelings and fears but correlates with empirical evidence on Baltic societies.

Another broad contextual factor identified by the activists concerns the image and status of activism and civil society organizations in these post-Soviet societies. They argued that in the eyes of the general public, activism is a new and misunderstood phenomenon, due to the historical reasons discussed above. Compared to NGOs in many Nordic and Western countries, civil society in the post-Soviet space, and particularly the AAM, was seen as constantly lacking finances and having very few committed activists, particularly in their own area of work. Given that raising the status of non-human animals in society was viewed as a very difficult task in itself, activists were hesitant to also support other issues and groups.

Despite gravitating toward messaging and actions that focus on animals and generally do not engage with other social justice issues, activists admitted that the current strategy is not fixed, but malleable depending largely on the shifts they perceive in wider societal attitudes:

> We can maybe change our image or modify it in time, we hope there will be a point when we’ll go for a march like Mercy for Animals in Los Angeles, but for that to happen sentiments in society must change.\(^8\) We do not want to make animal protection more difficult, or substantially more difficult, because we adopt some unrelated social justice cause.

In this excerpt, the activist seems to be downplaying his and his fellow animal activists’ agency in their movement’s role in cultural change. Embedded in these ideas was a particular image of ‘the public’ or ‘society.’ While it was acknowledged that different segments of the population might be more receptive to animal advocacy messages, an image of the ‘majority of people’ was constructed as conservative and backwards, as illustrated by the following activist in describing their target audience’s possible reaction to his organization’s potential participation in a Pride parade:

> [The public] do not necessarily try to get the whole picture, or analyze something, or like really try to get how it is and what are the reasons or something. I mean there are different groups of people. There might be some groups of people, quite sizeable ones, it could be that just by mere participation in this Pride, they see… maybe they see for example our flag in a march,
some photo in a news portal, maybe this is like a simple trigger, which just tells the whole story for the person. Doesn’t need to do anything, get any additional information. We are there, we are six perverts or something, yeah… And of course this question is like… it is a bit uncomfortable. It doesn’t really fit nicely yeah into our picture of the world.”

Here, the AAOs potential presence at the key LGBTQI event was seen as possibly resulting in loss of supporters, who, while sympathetic to the plight of animals, may not be in favor of advancing LGBTQI rights. As a more recent example however, one of the Estonian AAOs participated as an organization at Tallinn Pride in 2017. This may reflect this AAO’s lack of fear over potential loss of supporters in the Estonian context, due to more favorable popular attitudes toward LGBTQI rights in Estonia, compared to Latvia and Lithuania. As the excerpt above suggests, however, the reasoning and decisions around cooperating with other social movements, are a source of discomfort for activists, as will be discussed in the next section.

**Personal values and organizational strategies: ethical dilemmas around intersectionality**

While activists justified why they generally refrain from incorporating other social justice causes in their organizational agendas and messaging, influenced by effective altruist philosophy, this practice is problematic for them:

Many of us, or almost an absolute majority has transformed during these years…to pragmatic effective activism, which is… not a message we would defend on philosophical grounds or in academia, we make it like more accessible to people, we are focusing more on behavior and politics maybe, if we manage to do this rather than the truth as such. […] We would have more difficulties working with people, if we add other social justice causes to our cause. And there are some, maybe some radical activists, like total liberationists, who are like… they would say like maybe you are coward or something, why don’t you fight boldly for all the ideas you believe in [laughs]… I mean, I won’t pretend that there is like… that this issue is solved like now completely and nicely. It’s not the case, the decision is made but it’s like we have some… it’s still complicated [laughs].

This quote illustrates the conflict between personal values and organizational strategies that activists increasingly have to navigate.

In attempting to navigate the difficult ethical dilemmas concerning cooperation with other movements and public messaging, one consideration appears to be increasingly the central focus. This can be formulated as follows: ‘what is the best for animals if we pursue action x?’; a question central to the philosophy and practice of effective altruism. An activist summarizes the idea of effective altruism and action taken based on this principle as follows: ‘[Effective altruism] is not about what you think or what is right in an ideal world, but about achieving specific results, to save more animal lives.’ The focus is on effectiveness of activist work, and this, according to activists, necessitates narrowly focusing on particular issues in their work:

And our main aim is to be effective, you know, to really help animals, that is our main aim. Of course, I really would love to help everybody [laughs], but we have to be focused, otherwise it’s not working, it’s not working well. And so… this is somehow… at this point, it is really clear for all of us, that it is the way that we should choose.

Yet, some activists also offered critical reflections and expressed uncertainty toward this approach:
Lately, effective activism has been taking over Europe... Some years ago, nobody was interested in it. International organizations, which are now very successful, used to be total abolitionists some years ago, but have changed their tactics, and their message to some extent. [...] This is where the main dispute lies, which is more effective in the end? If you call something effective activism, it does not automatically mean that it's effective. I have doubts, I have not been able to decide. I don't say that I'm an abolitionist, but I don't also agree with effective activism 100%. I try to find some truth in between, which works for me.

In this excerpt, the activist links the changes in activist work and organizational strategies in the Baltic AAM to the developments in the international animal advocacy community, noting the rise of effective altruist philosophy, which he sees as leading some organizations to abandon their abolitionist stance, at least in their messaging, in favor of reformist and welfarist messaging that strives for better conditions for non-human animals rather than focusing on fundamentally challenging their exploitation.

This excerpt also illustrates ways in which Baltic animal activists, while very knowledgeable of and inspired by the latest debates in the international animal advocacy scene, do not simply copy philosophical foundations and strategies from more established Western animal organizations, but engage with these ideas critically and display consideration of the particular context in which they operate.

Ways to reconcile conflicts between personal values and organizational agenda

Given the tension between their personal intersectional dispositions and the limitations they perceived regarding the social, historical, and political context they are working in, the activists found themselves in a difficult situation. Without wanting to turn away from an intersectional agenda entirely, they highlighted some practical solutions, congruent with intersectionality, that inform their everyday activism.

Activists argued that even if they are not actively adopting an intersectional perspective in activist work, they nevertheless follow the principle of avoiding causing further harm and injustice in their activist work:

We would not like to be a cause of further injustice. [...] Our idea is to influence people, whatever people in many possibly ways, so if we can somehow by our actions influence the racist part of the population, without making them more racist... that's what we don't do, we don't say like 'ok, hate the Russians,' for example, because they do this and this to animals [laughs]. Kind of... in [the case of the] fur issue, we could frame a message like this, because we had this social poll and it shows some ethnic, cultural differences in relation to fur. So we could exploit this and say, "it's a Russian thing to have fur" [laughs], and exploit already existing sentiment in society that many people are against Russians, so they might also use fur as a device for it. That we consciously avoid... framing [like] this... And even in some media interviews, like I was mentioning this, but I tried to be as careful as possible about it.

Here, this activist refers to the fact that the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic countries has been found to have more favorable opinions about raising animals for their fur compared to the attitudes of ethnic Latvians and Estonians. He admits that this information could be easily used in anti-fur campaigning that AAOs in Latvia and Estonia are engaged in, however, activists make conscious efforts to exercise sensitivity in highlighting the category of ethnicity in this matter. This example is an illustration of an instance where, while not actively promoting social justice causes, animal activists are making more or less active efforts not to further social inequality and prejudice against some social groups.
Another proposed practical strategy has to do with the education of members of the public sympathetic to animals but holding questionable views on other social justice issues. Rather than immediately turning away and always strictly refusing to cooperate with such individuals, it might be more productive to try to start a dialog with them and introduce them to social justice ideas, hoping that exposure to the AAM and its ideas will increase the support of these individuals or organizations toward other social justice issues as well:

It may not be beneficial, if you just isolate yourself. If someone has let’s say two things they support, two conflicting issues – on the one hand, the topic of animals, and on the other hand, nationalism, then one must somehow prevail. So why not contribute trying to make the animal topic prevail over others, so that they would change their views, instead of just isolating yourself. Perhaps you could try to discuss these things and if you cannot come to an agreement, then do not cooperate. But if it is successful, then it is a bonus if you are able to pull people away from nationalist views.

Hence, it is believed that once people sympathetic toward animals, but holding other oppressive views regarding, for instance ethnic relations, join the AAM, the general progressive climate within the movement would help them change their views.

Finally, a potential solution was proposed as a possible avenue of managing the conflict between personal values and what was seen as strategically effective for the organization. This had to do with distinguishing an organization’s and activists’ own self-image from the group’s public profile: ‘And of course our image is… we perceive that it not like reflects factually or actually who we are. It’s a particularly constructed image to attract people.’ Here, a distinction is drawn between the ‘true identity’ of the core group of activists running the AAO and a particular image of the organization projected to outside audiences, with specific very practical and long-term aims in mind. This move helps to manage instances of acting against one’s own personal values in animal advocacy work.

**Discussion and conclusions**

The starting point of this article was the realization that while the intersectional approach has become paradigmatic in CAS literature, positioning itself as closely aligned to the AAM, the implementation of intersectionality in everyday activist practice has been less discussed. Stemming from these considerations, I examined whether and how animal activists in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania see animal concerns as interlinked with social justice issues and how this is manifested in their everyday activist work. In other words, what does intersectional mean in practice, as seen by animal activists in the Baltics? The choice of organizational strategies of animal advocacy organizations in this respect is of great importance, as it has implications for the AAMs identity, role, and status in society, its opportunities for fundraising, its potential to collaborate with other social movements, and ultimately, its capacity to contribute to social change.

My findings suggest that activists personally conceptualized animal concerns and other social justice agendas, such as women’s and LGBTQI rights, as interlinked. Yet, their organizational strategies and public communication tended to not to take intersectional dimensions. This strategic choice was partly influenced by the adoption of effective altruist principles, which encourage simple messaging and dealing with one issue at a time. This position however produced personal ethical and intellectual...
conflicts for the interviewed animal activists. They reported difficulties in navigating their own personal values and the practices of organizations with which they are affiliated.

Any potential solutions to these dilemmas regarding cooperation with other social movements and building a public profile were seen as highly context-bound, case-specific, and tentative – activists stressed the lack of specific organizational policies or fixed rules and even the impossibility of formulating these, due to a complex and constantly shifting social reality, which they have to adapt to in their work. In principle, they were open to adopting forms of intersectional activism, but maintained that for this certain prerequisites are needed. Namely, activists argued that the social and political context they are working in shapes their organizations’ strategic choices in crucial ways, claiming that it limits them from adopting an intersectional agenda in their organizational work. While an intersectional perspective on oppressions was considered a personal philosophical ideal and a theoretical goal, it was seen as challenging to be implemented in practice. Perceiving Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian societies to be rather conservative, activists saw very few potential cooperative partners and supporters among other movements and the general public. They believed that in these circumstances it is not easy to find supporters with more ‘radical’ intersectional approaches, who aim to link various forms of oppression.

This tendency to avoid intersectional activism and messaging in animal advocacy goes against some of the central tenets of literature, such as CAS, that positions itself as closely linked to animal activism. Authors writing in this field take an intersectional approach to oppressions and challenge not only animal exploitation, but also various forms of discrimination and inequalities prevalent in human societies, such as racism, sexism, and classism.

This discrepancy can be partially explained by the different arenas – discursive and material – where CAS and animal activism operate, respectively. It could be argued that it is easier for CAS and intersectionality scholars to endorse intersectional agendas because these authors largely work on a conceptual level and do not have to take into account the complexities of everyday working realities in which animal advocacy activists have to operate. Their intellectual labor is targeted at other academics often holding similar values, who, if not already embracing intersectionality, can be convinced to do so with theoretical tools.

At the same time, animal activists work on a practical level with very different target groups and might rely on funding from donors who do not necessarily agree with the idea of intersectional activism. This explains the turn to organizational strategies focused on ways to deliver messages most effectively and choosing courses of action that have the potential to benefit the largest number of animals. To achieve this, simplicity of communication is seen as paramount and serves the purpose of attracting more followers, inspired by effective altruist philosophy. In contrast, in academic discourse, ambiguity and complexity are often valued over simplification and reduction favored in public messaging.

The perspectives of animal activists introduced in this article offer valuable input not only to some key questions debated within the contemporary AAM, but also provide insights into discussions on intersectional activism and collaboration between social movements more generally. The exploration of meanings that Baltic animal activists attribute to the idea of intersectionality and its possible implementation in
their own work, which I undertook in this article has raised further questions for subsequent studies.

I briefly provide three possible avenues for further research here. Firstly, more nuanced attention should be paid to particular intersections that the AAM and other social movements build with each other and communicate in their public messaging, as well as different manifestations of intersectionality in organizational practices. The findings of this article suggest that intersectional activism involving collaboration in some areas, for example, between the AAM and LGBTQI movement might be more difficult to initiate, foster, and present to supporters than other intersections, such as between animal advocacy and environmental justice (curiously, the latter intersection was entirely missing from activists’ accounts of intersectional activism in the Baltics). It should be considered that intersectionality is likely to manifest itself differently in various activities and documents of organizations, such as mission statements or campaign slogans. Teasing out the meanings of intersectionality in these different contexts would be productive. Secondly, as one obstacle to intersectional activism, Baltic animal activists pointed to the reluctance of other social justice movements to work with the AAM. Hence, it would be insightful to study the views of other movements regarding potential collaboration with the AAM. Thirdly, research is needed on those AAOs that have adopted an intersectional agenda, as they might provide insights into how intersectional activism and intersectional coalitions appear in practice. This knowledge would be beneficial to social justice movements in the Baltic region and beyond.

Notes

1. I use the term ‘animal advocacy movement’ (AAM) in this article over other terms (for example, ‘animal rights,’ ‘animal liberation’) that describe the movement of people advocating for other animals, such as the ‘animal rights movement,’ to cover a range of perspectives and forms of activism, ‘not all of which can be grounded in a rights-based approach’ (Bourke 2009, 131).
2. Broadly, the idea of animal rights involves the consideration of the interests of non-human animals. Peter Singer specifically rejects the rights-based approach, although his book (and his utilitarian approach) was influential in the development of a more animal rights-based AAM. The rights-based philosophy of Tom Regan and Gary Francione have been most influential in animal rights theory (for an extended discussion on Singer and animal rights, see Pendergrast 2014, 25–29).
3. Speciesism refers to prejudice and assigning different value and rights to beings based on their species membership. Its principal mechanism of functioning is similar to forms of discrimination in human societies, such as sexism or racism. The term was coined in 1970 by the British psychologist Richard D. Ryder and popularized by Singer in Animal Liberation (Singer 1975).
4. For a discussion on race and whiteness in post-socialist eastern Europe, see Imre 2005.
5. For a discussion on this in the Estonian context, see Helemäe and Saar (2012).
6. Sometimes also known as ‘effective activism.’
7. Carol Adams’ seminal book The Sexual Politics of Meat. A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory (1990) is a key work in ecofeminist theory and has greatly influenced the research field of CAS as well as the thinking of many animal activists. Adams highlights similarities in the patterns of domination over women and animals in the patriarchal capitalist social order.
8. In 2015, the Los Angeles based animal advocacy organization ‘Mercy for Animals’ took part in the Los Angeles Gay Pride Parade. The animal activists carried a large rainbow colored banner displaying the organization’s logo and the slogan: ‘No one is free while others are oppressed.’
9. In the context of animal justice and activism, abolitionism refers to opposition to any kind of human use of other animals, and advocates for the immediate halt of this practice. This position rejects solutions offering incremental improvements to the conditions in which humans raise and
slaughter animals, including gradually reducing the consumption of animal-based foods. The latter approach, favoring incremental change, is known as welfarism.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Kristina Mering for her help in conducting interviews with the Baltic animal activists and to Nick Pendergrast for inspiring discussions on gender and intersectionality in relation to the animal advocacy movement and for his valuable comments on the draft of this paper. I would also like to thank Luke Stange for his helpful feedback to this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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