



Making Identity Count: Estonia 1990¹

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Introduction

In 1990, Estonian national identity strongly centered on independence, unity, and cultural heritage, with cultural symbols like national literature, holidays, and traditions playing a critical role. While independence was the primary goal, uncertainty persisted due to divisions among the political establishment, fears of being a small state dominated by great powers, and differing views between the Congress of Estonia and the Supreme Soviet regarding the path forward.

The public admired both national traditions and Western culture but criticized ineffective governance amid a deepening economic crisis, rising crime, and social inequality. Though communism had lost its appeal, the difficult transition to a market economy brought new challenges. The Soviet Union was overwhelmingly viewed in negative terms for its role in occupation, repression, and environmental damage. While some nostalgia for the stagnation era remained, aspirations for national independence were underpinned by a strong anti-colonial sentiment, as the Soviet Union was portrayed as a colonial occupier.

Historic memories of Russia and Germany were ambivalent – perceived both as threats and cultural influences – while Estonia’s interwar independence, as well as the restoration of national independence based on legal continuity, the reclamation of the pre-1940 national identity, and ancient freedom remained positive reference points.

Russian speakers in Estonia had not yet formed a distinct social or political identity, as they were largely identified with the Soviet regime, its institutions (such as the Soviet army), or pro-Soviet movements like the Intermovement.

1. Text selection and classification of sources

For the 1990 archive (see ‘Sources’ below), the following leadership speeches were sampled: Edgar Savisaar’s address upon his appointment as Prime Minister and the formation of the government (3 April 1990) and Tunne Kelam’s *Presentation at the 3rd session of the Estonian Congress (Ettekanne Eesti Kongressi III istungjärgul)* (26 October 1990).

In 1990, Edgar Savisaar (1950-2022) served as Minister of Economic Affairs and, from 3 April, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers (i.e., Prime Minister). Tunne Kelam (b. 1936) was chairman of the Estonian Committee, the executive organ of the Congress of Estonia. The Congress of Estonia was a transitory, grass-roots representative body of Estonian citizens dedicated to the restoration of independent statehood on the basis of the legal continuity of the Republic of Estonia. The Congress, elected in February 1990 in the first free and democratic elections held in Estonia since 1930s, derived its legitimacy from the citizenry claimed the highest authority on questions pertaining to Estonian statehood.

The highest-circulating daily papers in 1990 were *Rahva Hää* (*The People’s Voice*, 200,000) and *Noorte Hää* (*Youth Voice*, 186,000) (Vihalemm 2002, p. 287). Until 1990, *Rahva Hää*

¹ This national identity report was completed as part of the *Making Identity Count (MIC) Estonia* project (PRG1052 – *National Identity and Estonian-Russian Relations: A Longitudinal Study of Elite and Mass Discourses*). The sampled material was coded using the standard MIC procedure (Allan 2016). The full collection of MIC Estonia national identity reports is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10062/108183>.

functioned as the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Estonia and *Noorte Hääl* represented the Communist Youth. In February 1990, *Noorte Hääl* was renamed *Eesti Päevaleht*. Both papers were ideologically aligned and based in Tallinn, maintaining ties to the Communist Party). In addition to these, the daily paper *Edasi* (*Forward*, circulation 154,000) was included for three reasons: (1) *Edasi* had more stable readership than *Rahva Hääl*;² (2) although previously affiliated with the local Communist Party Community, all Communist Party members on its editorial staff had resigned by autumn 1989 (Lauristin, Vihalemm 1990, p. 498); and (3) *Edasi* was published in Tartu and primarily circulated in southern Estonia. As of 1 May 1990, *Edasi* was named *Postimees* (*The Postman*). Accordingly, *Edasi/Postimees* and *Rahva Hääl* were sampled as newspapers.

For opinion-editorials, all editorials, staff articles, and signed commentary published on the 15th day of each month³ in *Rahva Hääl* and *Edasi/Postimees* were examined for identity-relevant content. This selection yielded 551 op-ed articles (469 from *Rahva Hääl*, 82 from *Edasi*) and 1,335 initial codes (1,049 from *Rahva Hääl*, 286 from *Edasi*), from which 3,758 codings were ultimately included in the final matrix of most prominent categories.

The sample of readers' letters included all such submissions published throughout 1990 in the same newspapers. *Edasi/Postimees* featured reader letters in most issues, either in full or quoted by the editors. *Rahva Hääl* published letters fewer letters overall. In total, 313 letters were analyzed (283 from *Edasi/Postimees*, 30 from *Rahva Hääl*), resulting in 1,443 codes (654 from *Edasi/Postimees*, 789 from *Rahva Hääl*), of which 1,362 codings were included in the final list of most prominent categories.

As no data was available on the most-watched Estonian-produced films in cinemas in 1990, selections were based on prominence in national culture and international recognition. Two films were chosen: "Autumn" ("Sügis", 1990) and "Sister of Mercy" ("Ainult hulludele ehk halastajaõde", 1990). "Autumn", based on Oskar Luts' novels of "Autumn" and "Business Day" ("Äripäev"), reflect the cultural centrality of Luts (1887-1953) as Estonia's canonical national author (Epner 2005, p. 390). The film portrays, with an adventurous and comic flair, the life of upstanding farmers in Estonia after the First World War. "Sister of Mercy" tells the story of a young Estonian man recovering in hospital after a suicide attempt. He meets a beautiful Russian nurse Rita, who tends to him and restores the man's self-confidence, virility, and vitality by offering love and affection. Her kindness, however, provokes ridicule from colleagues and bystanders. "Sister of Mercy" received accolades from film festivals in Italy, Russia, Germany, and France.

Since the Society of Estonian Publishers began publishing the annual book sales data only in 2001, the selection for 1990 was based on official print runs and prominence in the Estonian literary landscape. Two novels were included: "Posthumously Rehabilitated" ("Postuumselt rehabiliteeritud", 80,000 copies) by Raimond Kaugver (1990) and "Indigo" (15,000 copies) by Peeter Sauter (1990). Kaugver's "Posthumously Rehabilitated" the post-Gulag reintegration struggles of deportees in adapting to their new lives back in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. A large number of copies were printed, and it resonated with the highly popular glasnost-era public discussion of the history of the Stalinist period (e.g., deportations in the 1940s, experiences in Soviet prison camps, and the post-Gulag return to Estonia). "Indigo" is regarded as a seminal literary work, exemplifying the prose renewal that took place in the 1990s. "Indigo" was a 'cult book for his generation' (Hennoste 2019, pp. 92–99), capturing the

² The percentage of stable readership was 69 for *Edasi*, 70 for *Noorte Hääl* and 61 for *Rahva Hääl* (Lauristin and Vihalemm, p. 496).

³ If newspaper was not published on the 15th day of the month, the issue of the 16th (or closest to the 15th) was selected.

life of the youth in the mid-1980s – those born in the 1960s and fascinated by Western culture (jeans, Zeppelin, Pink Floyd), loitering among punks, businessmen, and dive bars.

The sample of Estonian secondary school history textbooks was limited to the two available for that calendar year (Arjakas *et al.* 1991; Õispuu 1989). Departing from the standard Making Identity Count method, which recommends beginning with the early 20th century (Allan 2016, p. 35), we coded the content from the pre-Christian period in the 13th century to the 1990s. This broader scope was warranted by the salience of ancient and medieval history in 1990 identity debates. The Soviet nationalities policy had marginalized and minimized Estonian history, often casting Russians as “ancient allies” of Estonians and distorting “many of the facts” about Estonian history (Kõiva 2006b, p. 17).

2. Raw identity categories

To balance the unequal distribution of raw identity codes among genres, we calculated percentages normalized by genre to determine the relative prominence of raw codes across these genres. The categories with an average prominence across genres below 1.05% were eliminated, which resulted in a list of 32 categories and 3,758 codings.

Table 1 (at the end of this report) presents the raw frequencies of the most common identity categories by genre for 1990. Table 2 maps the topography of identity categories based on valences (+ for positive and aspirational, - for negative and aversive, ~ for ambiguous, and / for neutral).⁴ Categories were thematically grouped (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87) into six clusters – *Independent/Nationalist*, *Governance*, *Conservative*, *Market Liberal*, *Significant Others*, and *Historic Others*. The number of symbols in each cell of Table 2 indicates the affective relevance of a given identity category. Within each cluster, categories are arranged according to the numbers of valence symbols assigned.

The five categories receiving highest scores of valence symbols were: **SO: Soviet Union** (30),⁵ **Conservative** (18), **Independence** (17), **Market economy** (17) and **Independent state** (1918-1940) (16). The most prominent affective categories (i.e., categories that were assigned most valence symbols) scored valence symbols from both elite and mass sources,⁶ with the exception of **Conservative**, which was affectively salient only in mass sources. Table 2 also illustrates those categories that resonated affectively primarily with the masses (**Rural / Pastoral**, **Religion**, **Educated / Prudent**), with the elite (**Democratic**, **Political Elite**, **SO: Scandinavia**) or with both (**United / Nationalist**, **SO: West**).

Independent / Nationalist

This cluster contains categories linked to the aspiration of independent statehood of Estonians. In 1990, the restoration of national independence remained ‘work in progress’, driven by the Popular Front (established by reform-minded Communists in 1988) and endorsed by the sovereignty proclamation of the Estonian Supreme Soviet on 16 November 1988. This

⁴ If a specific valence assigned to a code (e.g., independent “+”) appeared in more than 1% of all code-valence pairs (where code “independent” and other valences have their own score) in each genre (e.g., political speeches), it was represented in Table 2 by one symbol of valence attributed to the related category. The number of symbols followed the scale: 1.0–2.0 (1 symbol); 2.0–5.0 (2 symbols); 5.0–7.5 (3 symbols); 7.5–10.0 (4 symbols); above 10.0 (5 symbols).

⁵ SO refers to ‘Significant Other’.

⁶ According to the Making Identity Count method, leadership speeches, textbooks, and op-eds represent “more elite” genres, while letters, novels, and films are “more mass” (Hopf 2016, p. 5). The distinction between mass and elite discourse relies on the type of text (genre), not on the content of discourse.

proclamation included the right to veto Soviet laws that infringed on the sovereignty of the Republic (Shafir 1995, p. 164).

The *Independent/Nationalist* cluster attracted more than twice as many positive valences (Table 2) as any other cluster (67.4% of its valence symbols being ‘positive’ – far ahead of the *Conservative* cluster, which ranked second at 33.3%). It therefore represented the dominant and most widely supported identity categories in 1990. In particular, its three categories – **Independence, United/Nationalist, National Culture/Symbols** – indicated that the principal objective of the nation was to the establishment of an independent nation-state grounded in the cultural heritage of the Estonian people.

Estonian people were **united** by an aspiration for an independent Estonian state that would be “by the Estonian people, for the Estonian people, and of the Estonian people”:

The Estonian people are like one big political party that has only one interest – to become free, independent, to escape colonialism, to become the master of their fatherland, i.e., to be the sole owner of the Republic of Estonia, so that everything that is here belongs to the Estonian people, so that the laws of Estonians would apply here, which currently, but not formally, protect the interests of Estonians. (Leps, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_00700})⁷

At the same time, the prospects of achieving full independence remained shadowed by uncertainty. For example, as one 70-year-old working pensioner wrote in a letter to the editor:

Freedom, freedom. For myself, I wish that at least the children would see this freedom, I probably won't see it anymore. (Ester, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_02340})

Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar admitted that both unrealistic hopes and complete fear were rife in Estonian society. At the core of this uncertainty was a fear that the small nation would risk being tossed around by great powers or being too dependent on powerful countries of both the East and West:

Anxiety and distrust are spreading, extreme naïve optimism and hope for an imminent liberation are side by side with complete skepticism, pessimism, and fear about the future. In fact, both fears and hopes are based on empty assumptions, as no one knows how far the East will go in relation to us and how far the West will go. (Savisaar, 1990; {1990_S_SAVI_00250})

The political elite was divided over whether the way toward independence should be led by the Congress of Estonia, which advocated for the restoration of the pre-1940 nation state with more restrictive citizenship rules, by or Supreme Soviet, which supported a less exclusive approach to citizenship and a more moderate pathway to independence. According to Tunne Kelam, the only road to independence was through the Congress of Estonia:

... the Congress of Estonia [...] is the only representative body of the citizens of the Republic of Estonia that was as freely elected as possible during the occupation period and that is authorized to restore legal state power. (Kelam, 1990; {1990_S_KELA_00310})

Others placed their trust in the Supreme Soviet, which had been freely elected on 29 March 1990 for the first time, when independence forces, including reform Communists, were able to attain 75% of the votes and seats (Misiunas and Taagepera, 1993, p. 334). They preferred the moderate style of leadership characterized by both Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar and

⁷ References indicate to the original source (can be found in lists of ‘Sources’ and ‘References’ below) and, in braces ({...}) the code ID used in the coding table (stored in the National Identity Database).

Chairman of the Supreme Council Arnold Rüütel (1928-2024),⁸ who was the elected head of the state in 1990:

We must move towards the Republic of Estonia intelligently, thoughtfully, and with work. I very much appreciate the balanced policy of our president Arnold Rüütel and the government. Nothing will be achieved by haste. I am not in favour of the Estonian Committee, which wants to impose its decisions very quickly. (Hunt, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_02480})

To achieve the restoration of national independence, unity **with** all Estonians (including those living abroad) was invoked:

The prerequisite for everything is general trust, the awareness that we are Estonians regardless of where we live, i.e., not emphasizing that some are inside and others are outside. In the current era [...] it is precisely [national] cohesion [...] that should be emphasized. (Nõu, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_00870})

Stop distributing the pie of a non-existent country, unite under one flag, let it be our common blue, black, and white. (Müürsepp, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_06410})

All-encompassing unity was deemed essential due to the small size of the nation:

Let's stick together, as there are only 900,000 of us against both East and West. (Vissak, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_01810})

Therefore, the Estonian nation would only survive if all parties were to unite behind shared goals and recognize their one and only enemy:

We can only survive [...] by cooperating between different movements, remembering that the main enemy of democracy and the Estonian people is on the other side. (Kaasik, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_06280})

In 1990, this common enemy was symbolically perceived to be those “who sent us to Siberia” during the 1940s. However, who exactly constituted those who “sent us to Siberia” was also a matter of dispute. A dialogue between characters in the novel “Posthumously Rehabilitated” exemplifies this controversy:

“What kind of justice was that?!” shouted Peeter rather angrily. “We were sent to Siberia by the official power, the state power!” – “Yes,” Verner interrupted. “But these were your own boys who pointed the finger directly at you and me and others.” – “They weren’t anyone’s boys!” – “Who were they – the Chinese or what?” – “The tail cells of the Reds!” (Kaugver, 1990, p. 156; {1990_N_POST_00940})

Here, the “tail cells of the Reds” refers to local collaborators of the Soviet regime – malicious talebearers and traitors of the national cause. However, during World War II, Estonians were also wronged by fellow Estonians serving in Home Guard⁹ units:

On 9 June 1944, my father was shot dead in the yard of his home and my mother was beaten to death. This was done by Estonians, the Home Guard. (Kalvet, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_01000})

⁸ Arnold Rüütel served as the last chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR (from 1983) until 29 March 1990, when he was elected Chairman of the Supreme Council. Rüütel served as a head of state and Chairman of the Supreme Council until this institution was terminated in October 1992.

⁹ The Home Guard (*Omakaitse*) was a voluntary military organization that acted in Estonia before and during the period of German occupation (1941–1944).

The restoration of Estonian nation-state was underpinned by a renewed appreciation for various manifestations of Estonian cultural heritage – art, painting, music and choral singing, national enterprises such as the Kalev candy factory, national literature (in particular “Truth and Justice” (“Tõde ja õigus”) by Anton Hansen Tammsaare), traditional national holidays, the national flag, and the national currency used in the interwar Republic of Estonia:¹⁰

In Estonia, our own currency has been for so long awaited. (Lind, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_01170})

The mental fortitude for the restoration of independence was drawn from ancestral habits and customs:

We have started to recreate farms, our entire way of life, our independence needs to be recreated. This is the mission of our current generations. We draw strength for this from the history, habits, and customs of our ancestors. (Frey *et al.*, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_01590})

In relation to Estonian nationalism, the Song Festival acted as a particularly powerful institution for both political mobilisation and national memory (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2014). According to the history textbook, the first Song Festival in 1869 was a milestone during early national awakening:

... [it] was the first time that Estonians were able to come together nationwide. The Song Festival increased the sense of national unity amongst Estonians and gave them strength and courage for future.” (Arjakas, 1990, p. 219; {1990_T_ARJA_07530})

A foreign Estonian writes in a letter to the editor how she experienced feeling of emotional belonging to the Estonian nation during a Song Festival:

For the first time in my life, I sang a song about freedom, heart to heart, at the Tallinn Song Festival, hand in hand with native Estonians. I felt that I was in my own country, among my own people, where I belonged. (Kõiva, 1990a; {1990_L_RAHV_06810})

In 1990, people admired not only the historic traditions and ancestral heritage, but, concurrently, they admired Western culture. The protagonist of the novel “Indigo” describes the youth of 1980s:

Everyone knew music and sports. Some were more of Kiss, some of [Deep] Purple and [Black] Sabbath, some of Zep [Led Zeppelin], Yes, and Genesis. (Sauter, 1990, p. 41; {1990_N_SAUT_00410})

During the Estonian War of Independence (1918-1920), the **youth** also emerged as a crucial social force for national liberation:

At the beginning of the war, the mood of most of the Estonian people was oppressed, no one wanted to believe that Estonia could successfully fight against the great Russia. The only exceptions were officers and schoolchildren. [...] Schoolboys mostly did not have any discussions. They simply took up arms and went to defend their country, the first one that the Estonian people had since ancient times. (Õispuu, 1989, p. 31; {1990_T_OISP_02380})

¹⁰ Official currency in Interwar Republic of Estonia was Estonian mark (from 1918 until 1927) and Estonian kroon (from 1928 until 1941). Originally a national self-defence force against Soviet regime, during Nazi occupation it was incorporated into the police structure (see Birn 2001).

However, entering the final decade of the 20th century, the younger generation was widely characterized as pessimistic, disinterested, and ethically compromised:

The past is robbing young people of faith in the future; many have been struck by indifference. (Atonen, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_02890})

The moral decline of young people, which I witness every day, is, of course, a separate issue. (Reks, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_06400})

According to Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar, the youth needed leadership that would guide them and provide them a clear sense of purpose:

[...] the young people need a clear political perspective in order to get involved. (Savisaar, 1990; {1990_S_SAVI_00390})

During the Soviet era, rapid industrialization and unchecked resource extraction intensified public apprehensions regarding environmental preservation, because “almost no attention” had been paid to the environmental protection (Õispuu, 1989, p. 145; {1990_T_OISP_06730}). As the Soviet regime came to be viewed the adversary of the national cause, the national discourse highlighted Estonian’s historical unity with and closeness to nature:

When our forefathers in ancient times went to the sacred grove to make sacrifices to the gods, nature and tranquility were still unspoiled. (Linnamägi, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_00875})

We have called ourselves rural people, which is due to our historical way of life. We were able to acquire everything necessary for life without destroying nature and the land. We have been able to remain a nation thanks to peasant unity with our nature and land. (Frey *et al.*, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_01070})

Despite the 1989 Language Act, which designated Estonian as the sole official language, the weak presence of **Estonian language** (alongside Russian and English) in public communication and public institutions remained a lasting concern:

We Estonians have become in our ancient homeland not “second-class” people, but already “third-class”. Everything has been taken from us. You can study in your native language at school, but you can’t use it anywhere but home. This, however, means the cultural decline of the nation and its gradual extinction. (Tiidi, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_01970})

Despite its legislative intent, the Language Act encountered significant challenges in its practical implementation:

It is a pity that there is no section in the Language Act that would help against the onslaught of the English language. I would immediately ban many words with all the severity of the law. One of the scariest words now is *show*. (Torn, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_04120})

Governance

In 1990, political establishment was criticised for internal divisions and ineffective governance. The sense of crisis was heightened by the transition to market economy, rising crime, lawlessness, economic uncertainty, and price speculation. While democratic ideals had some unifying potential, public attitudes toward democracy were mixed. Russians were often associated with the Soviet regime or the Intermovement, further deepening tensions.

Despite the anticipated role of the existing **political elite** in fostering social cohesion, the political establishment was widely criticised for its divisive internal conflicts:

All public figures call on the Estonian people for unity. At the same time, however, there is a fierce scuffle between the factions. [...] So, the most direct struggle for power is ongoing. (Kraft, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_01750})

The drive for power and the resulting division were blamed not only on the ruling political elite but also on their rivals:

All movements and groups have one thing in common – to curse those who were and are now in power, in order to secure a share of future state benefits for themselves. (Müürsepp, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_04430})

Polarization divided the political elite more than the people. At one extreme were Communists and the Intermovement,¹¹ in favour of remaining in the Soviet Union; at the other extreme were the Congress of Estonia and ENIP:¹²

The dissatisfaction of the Communists and the ENIP does not yet mean a gap in the whole society, but only between the majority and the minority, and far from the main one. Perhaps the gap is only between the those at the top. (Liivaku, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_01680})

In the case of the Communists, the Central Committee (Politburo) of the Communist Party was most denigrated:

[...] I do not consider the composition of the current Politburo to be a collection of people with the highest intellect. I just can't think so, because I know more than one or two people out there who, when you look at them and listen to them, ask, "Are they really leading us?" (Rattus, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_02700})

Russians in Estonia were identified either with the Soviet regime and its institutions (e.g., the Soviet army) or with the Intermovement. According to a history textbook, the establishment of Estonian as the official language of the state by the Language Act (of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic) was strongly opposed by the Intermovement as "[t]he pro-imperial forces tried to prevent the introduction of the law in every way, seeing it as a restriction of their rights" (Arjakas *et al.*, 1991, p. 451; {1990_T_ARJA_01370}).

Hence, Russians in Estonia – occasionally stereotyped as “migrants” (Männikoks, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_05980}) – were identified with the Soviet empire, occupation of Estonia, and with the army of occupiers:

The Russians must first gain trust, which they have not considered necessary so far. Why? They had a large army and officer corps. Even now, the officers are demanding the restoration of the old order. Their muscles itch for violence. To commit violence against the peoples of our land! (T., 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_04210})

Therefore, Russians in Estonia were seen as not having any other representation than Communist Party and Intermovement, hence lacking proper territorial representation. The more Russians in Estonia felt under-represented or unrepresented, the more they were perceived to be represented by the Intermovement:

¹¹ The Intermovement (*Interdvizhenie*) was founded in 1988, aligned with pro-Soviet part of Communist Party and opposed Estonian independence movement.

¹² Estonian National Independence Party (*Eesti Rahvusliku Sõltumatuse Partei*) was the first non-communist party established in Soviet Union on 20 August 1988.

At the moment, there is no recognized organization that would have the right to represent the Russian community. (Määrits, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_01310})

However, the less we take into account the concerns and aspirations of the Russian community, the more powerful and threatening the Intermovement becomes. (Kraft, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_01300})

Occasionally, Russians as individuals were distinguished from Russians as social identity group, the latter seen as steeped in Soviet propaganda:

I work with the Russians. We get along very well. To avoid tensions, we don't talk about politics. But for them, only what "Vremya" says is true. They never see things from the other side; they don't even want to know anything about it. [...] This is how people behave who do not doubt they're right. Just like "Vremya". (N., 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_07370})

Even when positive inclusion of Russians was articulated, they were treated together with the authorities in the Kremlin:

Derogatory hints about Russians and baseless defamation of Moscow should be avoided. (Kraft, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_01890}).

The manner of governing the state and managing public bureaucracy – i.e., **governance** – was criticized for unaccountability, incompetence, fraud, corruption, inefficiency, and for being “not interested in people’s wellbeing.” Many of these aspects were raised by Tunne Kelam in his political leadership speech:

The rise in prices has been particularly controversial, not because of the phenomenon itself, but because it has been carried out in an incompetent and bureaucratic manner, spending the sacrifice demanded from the people senselessly and probably without results. (Kelam, 1990; {1990_S_KELA_00050})

For some, the incapacity and inaction of the government was very frustrating:

I look at the empty store shelves, the crazy rise in prices, and the talky-talk of the government and don't want to live anymore. (Suun, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_01720})

In 1990, people held unclear or mixed views about both democratic processes and the values of **democracy**. On the one hand, an ideal of democracy had the potential to unite society even more widely than the ideals of an independent nation-state, as it was positively evaluated by Russians in Estonia (Nurseitova 2024) and was officially endorsed by the Estonian Communist Party:

The restoration of independence, which is supported by most of the population and without which the development of Estonian society towards democracy, justice, and the welfare of the people is not possible, is also the goal of the Estonian Communist Party. (Rannamets, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_00540})

On the other hand, the competitive nature of democratic processes – like political pluralism and diverse viewpoints – was a feature of multiparty democracy that felt too unfamiliar to be fully accepted or embraced:

There have been so many political parties, groups, and alliances that a mere mortal cannot take a stand in this confusion. (Müürsepp, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_00480})

As both economic and political systems were in transition, the accompanying **social disorder** manifested itself in rising crime, vandalism, violence disrespect toward the law, uncertainties

resulting from transition to market economy, corresponding price speculation, and in the decline of social stability and certainty. The multifaceted crisis left pessimists paralyzed, while it pushed the ambitious to become bold and inventive:

Corruption, nepotism, and speculation are rampant, crime is spreading, and permissiveness is increasing. It's as if we don't live in a civilized society. Laws are not obeyed; sacred human values are trampled underfoot. It will be a long and difficult road from a morally depraved society to a healthy and independent Republic of Estonia. (Räitsak, 1990; 1990_L_RAHV_04720)}

The deepening political and economic crisis in Estonia requires both new ideas and new forces to implement them. (Aamer *et al.*, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_00310})

The old is falling apart, but we have started with the new quite boldly, as for some people there is too much uncertainty and risk in it. (Savisaar, 1990; {1990_S_SAVI_00120})

The term "speculation" was commonly used with a negative connotation, referring to anyone who resold goods at much higher prices for profit. Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar, however, used the term to describe illegal economic activity:

Speculation and crime have quickly begun to flourish in this no-man's-land. (Savisaar, 1990; {1990_S_SAVI_00140})

Conservative

Conservative values centered mostly on gender relations and strict punishment for crime, overwhelmingly articulated by mass discourse. Criminals were sometimes dehumanized and deemed deserving harsh punishments:

However, according to the Bible, the punishment of a murderer or terrorist is not left for God's judgment alone, but man is given a right on earth to conduct it himself. [...] The murderers cannot be re-educated with gentle and solemn epistles, but they must be severely eliminated from society. (Anso, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_00870})

In every society, there are people who work honestly and those who use their hands to commit crime, so not all people are human. (Kibis, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_05050})

Some childless couples were viewed as unpatriotic or anti-Estonian for failing to meet their demographic responsibility to the nation:

If so-called married couples without children would abandon their anti-Estonian attitude and fulfil their social duty in raising the next generation in the interests of their homeland ... (R., 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_01890})

For others, gender equality had become a self-evident norm:

I am convinced that a woman must work. I have never understood the demand (perhaps more from men) that a woman should sit at home, raise children, and cook for a loving family. I see the envy of men in this demand, that some women have gotten ahead of them in studies and in work. (Rosenfeld, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_05960})

The **rural** and **pastoral** aspects of Estonian identity were romanticized and regarded as a valuable legacy and foundation for national revitalization:

Rural culture has been the cradle and breeding ground of our national culture, and we must preserve it as such. Agriculture is the starting point of our nation's history and social life. (Õispuu, 1990, p. 157; {1990_T_OISP_06900})

Estonians were historically viewed as a nation of rural people closely connected to the land, forests, and natural environment:

We have called ourselves rural people, which is due to our historical way of life. [...] We have been able to remain a nation thanks to peasant unity with our nature and land. (Frey *et al.*, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_01080})

Most of you will agree that it is necessary to restore the farm. The farm is the foundation of Estonianness! As an indigenous forest people, Estonians have always lived in the middle of nature. (Jalakas, 1990 {1990_L_RAHV_02030})

Accordingly, the character in the movie "Autumn" affirms:

I want my heirs to live on their own land, on their own farm, as befits an Estonian. (Kruusement, 1990, 00:58:38-00:58:43; {1990_M_SUGI_00310})

However, as most of the population had become urbanized and regions outside the capital, Tallinn, had transformed into a secondary periphery, rural communities and lifestyles faced increasing marginalization:

The rural population has always been considered a lower class, and this is still the case today. (Puugas, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_05450})

For decades, Estonia was transformed into Tallinn and its periphery. (Raudnask and Jakobi, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_02770})

After five decades of atheist Soviet rule, **religion** was perceived as simultaneously traditional and novel, both familiar and foreign, holding a complex, ambivalent relationship to national identity. According to a history textbook, even ancient Estonians struggled to adopt Christian beliefs, as many of its principles were difficult for them to understand or align with their worldview:

For example, in their world, there had been no separation of two warring opposites – evil and good, wrong and right, satanic and divine. They were not fully accustomed to such clear distinctions for several hundred years. (Arjakas *et al.*, 1991, p. 87; {1990_T_ARJA_03080})

In contrast, Christianity was praised in instances where it had contributed to the development of national culture:

The efforts of the Jesuits in the fields of culture, in the establishment of schools, and in the publishing of books must be highly appreciated. (Arjakas *et al.*, 1990, p. 134; {1990_T_ARJA_05620})

During the Interwar Republic, most Estonians actively practiced Lutheranism, but by 1990, the natural association had largely faded:

How many people are left whose hearts are quietly shaken by words such as church, Martin Luther, mass, outdoor altar, communion wine? And how often these words are used by the unbelievers! It is not wise to just smear such words. (Karu, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_05200})

Market Liberal

Despite the decline of Communism's public appeal, the complex transition to a market economy brought with it competition, speculation, rapid change, growing inequality, and poverty, sparking public concern. Education, science, and practical leadership were valued, with resilience seen as a national strength.

As early as November 1988, the Estonian Supreme Soviet had amended the Republic's constitution to allow for the introduction of private property (Shafir 1995, p. 164), meaning that people already had some experience with a transition to a **market economy**. They had mixed reactions to the free market; while certain aspects, such as competition, were appreciated, others, such as speculation, understood as selling goods for more than their purchase price, were criticized:

There has to be a competition. Nothing moves without competition. It is no longer a dull and dark time of empire. Now, it's a republic, and all the places are full of competition. (Kruusement, 1990, 00:03:19, 00:03:34; {1990_M_SUGI_00020})

Unfortunately, there are those who defend speculation, affectionately calling it business. Speculation has been severely condemned by the Estonian population. (Peepmaa, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_04240}).

While some people expected the government to curb rising prices and crack down on speculation, others defended speculation as a typical aspect of a free market economy:

Now that the decaying economy is unable to supply people at national prices, greedy speculators are taking advantage of the situation. I would very much like to know how such companies are given permission to operate and by whom. (A., 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_04140})

The words "speculator" and "speculation" are a fiction of stagnation. The activity of buying a shirt or trousers (including a bottle of vodka) from a state store (in the appropriate quantity, of course), putting beautiful texts on them, and then selling them at a different price is called a business [...] the first feature of the free market and a very welcome phenomenon. (Kuusik, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_04180})

Some individual voices expressed unease at the rapid shift from a socialist to a capitalist economic system:

We have paid a heavy price for the victories of so-called socialism. Why should we now give up the few advantages we have? Do we now need capitalism in addition to the shortcomings of socialism? (Vain, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_00670})

Poverty in general, as well as the specific hardships faced by the poor, were acknowledged as negative consequences of economic liberalization:

[...] because half or even most of us live below the poverty line, i.e., less than 125 roubles per month for each family member. (Vissam, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_03260})

It is not easy to walk forward in the landscape of our national economic crisis if elected. Quarrels, mistrust, suspicions are caused by POVERTY. This is a poverty dispute. (Puusemp, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_01440})

Nowhere in the world are prices raised until the main food of the poor is regulated – the subsistence minimum. [...] There are no soup bones, no cheap broth, not to mention fine groats, this pork food. (Kütt, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_06270})

The shift to a market economy produced three forms of inequality that became subjects of public concern. First, there was a class-based divide between low-income citizens and “the leaders do not want to understand the people’s concerns” (Käpa, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_07750}).

Second, there was a spatial divide between the capital, Tallinn, where the majority of resources and opportunities were centralized, and the rest of the country:

Is Tallinn Estonia? Is it worth it for a resident of Tallinn to have their mouths full in the name of the whole of Estonia? After all, there are still two-thirds who do not live in Tallinn, do not use the benefits of Tallinn, but do bow down for the benefit of the capital from morning to night. (Mets, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_05705})

Third, there was the divide between a small wealthy minority and the rest of the population:

One more thing that bothers me is that there is one Estonian state, but a big class difference, rich and poor. The rich shop at currency stores, the poor at rouble stores – one country, two monetary systems. (Randla, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_02300})

Communism had few remaining true believers or followers, while merit-based education, academic achievement, and science were highly valued in the pursuit of creating an **educated** and enlightened nation:

The CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] must be outlawed! Communism, as a neo-fascist ideology, must have no place in the Baltics! May God help us! (Bulõgina, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_00160})

I propose to reclaim the sovereignty of the Estonian state in order to build the world’s first state of wisdom [...] Just as Switzerland is a country of banks, Estonia will become a country of wisdom. A special feature of this country is that the value of a person will be determined by his wisdom. (Priisalu, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_02190})

The national leadership was expected to demonstrate a practical approach and a cautious, **prudent** mindset, while the **hardworking** mentality of the Estonian people would help to cope with and survive any difficulty:

I would like to remind our esteemed heads of state that we must act slowly and wisely on behalf of the entire nation, because every ill-considered step can lead us all to an even more critical situation. (Mägi, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_04650})

In every situation, the Estonian people have fed their families with their work and filled their soup pots themselves and survived. (Loit, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_02080})

Estonians are hardworking, sober, and honest. Vodka, felt boots, and fun customs came from the “great homeland”. (Planken, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_00110})

Significant Others

In the 1990 database, categories related to the historic and actual Soviet Union were the most prominent themes of the year. The actual **Soviet Union** was assessed in mostly negative terms, which was based on an appraisal of the type of regime as an “inhumane social system” (Loo, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_04785}), which had facilitated the occupation of Estonia, deportations

during 1940s, as well as had brought about the institution of the army, conscription,¹³ immigration, the enforced superiority of Russian language, industrialisation, stagnation, environmental pollution, living conditions and the status of human rights, collectivisation, and land expropriation:

There has been enough fear and misery in life. Running away from home, hiding, misery. Watching from the sidelines of how my father's farm was looted and destroyed, it's all behind us. I live on my father's farm once again. Soon, I will get back everything that belongs here, including the land. (Arjukese, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_05080})

A year later, it was possible to see the suffering that a nation was destined to bear - the day of deportation on 14 June is still one of the most tragic memories in our history. (Eestima Rahvarinde eestseisus, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_00610})

Notably, there was no broad longing for the "good old" Soviet days, although some individuals still advocated for staying within the Soviet Union:

I also say that I join many others who have decided to vote in favour of remaining in the USSR in the event of a referendum. Never mind that I'm a native Estonian. If my own Estonians want to make me beggars in their own country, I don't need that kind of Estonianness. (Anonymous from Kohila, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_00980})

Although the Soviet Union was viewed more favorably during the Perestroika period after 1985, the ongoing restoration of property ownership raised increasing concerns:

But now such a stupid law was made that a beautiful house, which actually belongs to the state farm, is given to the nephew of the former owner. [...] Doesn't it cause trouble and tears in the village, making people angry with one another? (Riistan, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_02120})

Historically, Estonia belonged to the cultural **West** “[t]hanks to the Swedes and Germans”, who integrated Estonians to the European culture (Leps, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_01880}). Thus, belongingness to the West was viewed both as an aspiration and a historical reality. For example, the history textbook acknowledged that the type of marriage practiced in 18th century Estonia (i.e., delayed marriage and a high proportion of women remaining unmarried throughout their lives) was of “the European type of marriage” and

was the first phenomenon that clearly distinguished the demographic development of Estonia from its direct eastern neighbour, as well as from the development of most Eastern European countries. (Õispuu, 1989, p. 173; {1990_T_OISP_07570})

Aspiration to become Europeans while remaining Estonians was a well-known slogan of the group of intellectuals “Young Estonia” in 1905 (Arjakas *et al.*, 1989, p. 240; {1990_T_ARJA_07830}). Additionally, in the 1960s, a generation of youth had grown up, who

had not had to submit to the compulsion of “socialist realism” on its creative work and whose perception of the world was open to the basic truths of European culture. (Õispuu, 1989, p. 159; {1990_T_OISP_07000})

¹³ On 12 April 1990, the Estonian Supreme Soviet ended all compulsory military service from Estonians in the Soviet army (Park 2009, p. 130).

While the United States was arguably for Estonian people “the land of their dreams” (Murutar, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_02050}) and the political elite was aspiring to incorporate Estonia as a member state to international organizations – according to president Rüütel, the goal of Estonia was to become “a full member of the United Nations and other international organisations” (Rüütel *et al.*, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_02230}) – the dominant popular perception was that Estonia was first of all a small state caught between a mostly dangerous East and a hopefully supportive West:

Let’s stick together, there are only 900,000 of us against both East and West. (Vissak, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_04750})

Unfortunately, there is a widespread belief that everything that comes from the East is bad, while in the West, there are only good things. (Kraft, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_01890})

Western countries were primarily expected to support Estonia’s pursuit of political independence rather than to assist in overcoming its economic crisis:

It is humiliating to accept Western alms. It is better that they support us in our desperate struggle to restore the freedom that has been stolen by the great powers. (Laigna, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_06080})

The **Scandinavian** countries (Finland and Sweden) were treated to the same extent as the United States as examples to follow in terms of their living standards (Pillesaar, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_04640}), public administration (Lepajõe, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_04720}), and other manifestations of advanced society and culture:

At the moment, the dear Estonian people still use Finland as the unit of the world, and America as the land of their dreams. (Murutar, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_01690})

Historic Others

Estonia’s interwar independence was remembered positively while the Soviet Union was mostly criticized for its imperialism, military conscription, and migration policies, although some nostalgia for the stagnation era had emerged. Russia and Germany were historically perceived as threats, as well as vectors of cultural influence: Russia through the 19th-century conversions to Orthodoxy and Germany through its role in Europeanizing Estonians. World War II evoked mixed feelings, primarily symbolizing the loss of independence, while ancient Estonia was recalled as a time of early freedom.

One of central identity narratives related to the **independent state (1918-1940)** was the War of Independence (1918-1920):

The Estonian War of Independence is the first war completely won by Estonians in historical times. (Arjakas *et al.*, 1991, p. 272; {1990_T_ARJA_02450})

In contrast to the low level of economic development in 1990 in comparison to Western countries, Interwar Estonia had a significantly higher average standard of living:

In terms of its average standard of living, Estonia surpassed Spain, Portugal, the Balkan countries, Poland, and Lithuania. [...] However, Estonia’s standard of living still lagged far behind that of highly developed European countries. (Arjakas *et al.*, 1991, p. 285; {1990_T_ARJA_05860})

The interwar Republic of Estonia was generally perceived very positively, with only two significant points of controversy associated with it. The first controversy centred on the Vaps

Movement (the *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit*, a movement of veterans of the War of Independence) that operated from 1929 until it was banned as a far-right movement in 1935:

It was also surprising that even now [...] we still disparagingly call the freedom fighters “Vaps” [...]. There was nothing in the activities and plans of the participants in the Estonian War of Independence that would have meant a threat to the Republic of Estonia, to the Estonian people, for whom they had shed blood on the front. (Aller, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_00820})

The second point of controversy concerned the decision made by Estonia’s leadership, Commander-in-Chief Johan Laidoner and President Konstantin Päts, who signed the Soviet-Estonian Mutual Assistance Treaty on 28 September 1939, which brought Soviet troops to Estonia and led to the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940:

Let us not blame Konstantin Päts or Johan Laidoner. It is another matter if they had betrayed their people and fled. There is no doubt that K. Päts and J. Laidoner made their decision on the basis of sober deliberation, to save our small nation and country. (Eever, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_04100})

The historical **Soviet Union** was mostly denounced. A letter to the editor sarcastically challenged the Soviet Union’s so-called civilizing mission:

[...] the same style as in the great Soviet Union: Soviet authorities brought Estonians down from the trees, taught them to read and write, built houses, and gave them all the benefits while the shameless Estonians try to prove that this is not the truth and consider themselves to be the victims. (Laanetee, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_05250})

However, a certain nostalgia – not for the Soviet period per se, as Estonia was still formally a part of the union, but for the Soviet Union’s era of stagnation (1964–1985) – had begun to surface:

During this much-maligned period of stagnation, I at least had my clothes on and my stomach full. You could always buy the essentials in the store. (Selg, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_07090})

Specific criticism was directed at the Soviet Army or at military service in the Soviet Army:

When I went to the army, I decided that I would just cut those two years off my life, I wouldn’t live them, I would somehow pass them by. (Sauter, 1990, p. 41; {1990_N_SAUT_00390})

In addition, it was emphasised that Soviet migration policy had been engineered to undermine Estonian ownership of land and the economy:

In order for Estonia not to be the property of Estonians, the central government did everything it could, settling our land with foreigners, so that in the future the question of Estonians’ ownership of Estonia could not have arisen at all. (Leps, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_02220})

Historical **Russia** was depicted the most negatively for the devastation it wrought on the Estonian lands during the Great Northern War (1700-1721):

The Great Northern War devastated Estonia more than any other war in our history. (Arjakas, 1989, p. 185; {1990_T_ARJA_06850})

The colonialist nature of expansionist Russia was and “is deadly dangerous to the existence of small nations” (Pöder, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_02030}). Even in those historical contexts in

which actual colonization did not occur, the imperial mindset of Russians remained a source of concern:

What worries me the most is the empire-centric thinking that has been instilled in Russians over the centuries. Russia is used to expanding its political, territorial, and ideological influence. The reduction of this effect is taken as a personal insult. (Kaldre, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_01510})

In addition to Russia as a threat and negative historical Other, Estonians have also shown a degree of fascination with Russia at certain moments. During the 1840s, over 100,000 peasants converted from Lutheranism to Orthodoxy, and thousands migrated to other regions of the Russian Empire:

The peasant movements of the 1840s and 1850s gave birth to a naïve imperial orientation among the Estonian peasantry, which persisted in the following decades. (Arjakas *et al.*, 1989, p. 206; {1990_T_ARJA_07200})

Finally, Russia was and inevitably is a geographic neighbour with whom Estonia needs to find a *modus vivendi*:

The Estonian people understand quite clearly that they cannot choose their neighbours, and living next to a great country, we are inevitably in its sphere of interest and influence. (Kivirähk, 1990; {1990_P_RAHV_00960})

A significant historical Other was also **World War II**, when Estonia “fell victim to the policy of violence of great powers” (Arjakas *et al.*, 1991, p. 337; {1990_T_ARJA_01650}):

The attitude of Estonians towards the Soviet regime was particularly influenced by the deportation of 14 June [1941] and the arrests of public figures, as well as mass killings [...] at the beginning of the war in Tartu, Kuressaare, and Viljandi (Õispuu, 1989, p. 119; {1990_T_OISP_05820})

According to history textbook, the war tested the mentality of Estonia, because neither of the two totalitarian states (Soviet Union and Nazi Germany) “maintained respect for local cultural life or its material bearer” (Õispuu, 1989, p. 136; {1990_T_OISP_06370}), and as such, the Estonian nation was tragically divided between two foreign superpowers:

Tens of thousands of Estonian men fought against each other on both sides of the front line. All of them dreamed of a better Estonia. However, neither regime actually promised an acceptable way of life for the majority. (Õispuu, 1989, p. 134; {1990_T_OISP_06150})

As a result, the annual celebration of the end of World War II is seen with mixed feelings – welcomed for bringing peace but condemned for the loss of independence:

Although the end of the war did not return the statehood that had been stolen from us, it was still the greatest victory over stupidity and cruelty in the whole of history. This great victory was celebrated by everyone. (Eevere, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_03490})

Until World War II, **Baltic Germans** used to be the key internal Others of the Estonian nation. The 23 June 1919 victory over the Baltic (German) Territorial Army (*Baltische Landeswehr*) was described in the history textbook as the ultimate victory over an enemy that had denied Estonian independence for the seven previous centuries:

On 23 June, Estonian troops captured Cēsis. This day is the victory day of the Estonian people, when the enemy who had quashed Estonia's independence in the 13th century had been finally defeated. (Õispuu, 1989, p. 37; {1990_T_OISP_02710})

Previously, the deep-rooted animosity of Estonian peasants towards the Baltic German landlords manifested itself during the 1905 revolution:

The primal hatred of the Estonian people against the German landlords flared up uncontrollably in the burning, destruction, and looting of manors. (Õispuu, 1989, p. 14; {1990_T_OISP_00710})

Germany played no positive role on the establishment of Estonian national independence during First World War:

There was only one hope left, that both the Russian and German empires would collapse during the war. However, the idea of self-determination of peoples and a democratic social order represented by England, France, and the United States prevailed. (Õispuu, 1989, p. 25; 1990_T_OISP_01600})

In addition, during World War II, Germany had been perceived as guilty and responsible for the beginning of the war, for the loss of Estonian independence, and, indirectly, for the imposition of the Soviet rule:

We do not want to be beggars in front of the country that helped Stalin devour the Baltic states. (Kurm, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_05890})

In the end, the German people are also to blame for the fact that we are now in this hole where we find ourselves. (Vahtre, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_03440})

In parallel, however, the German Democratic Republic (which reunified with West Germany on 3 October 1990) touted as an example of economic and political reform:

[...] our economists and political scientists should follow everything that is being done in Germany very carefully. [...] Because the GDR is probably the first of the newly socialist countries to make a complete turnaround in its economy and state system. (Kostabi, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_01750})

Finally, aspirations to integrate fully into the cultural and political area of Europe also involved a narrativization of a German culture that historically allowed for the transformation of Estonians into Europeans: "Thanks to the [...] Germans, we have integrated into European culture" (Leps, 1990; {1990_P_EDAS_01740}).

The textbook referred to the period of **Ancient Estonia**, before the Christianization of Estonia during the 13th century by the Teutonic Order, as a period during which relations with Russians of Kievan Rus were more complex. At times, relations between Estonians and Russians were good, as they jointly stood against German invasion; at other times, Estonians had to fight for their independence against the Russians:

The period from 1030 until 1061 was very important in the entire history of Estonia. The serious attempt of the Russians to defeat Estonia was repulsed. Estonians had become a sufficiently strong and organised force to defend their freedom and successfully fight against the aggression of a great power. (Arjakas *et al.*, 1991, p. 28; {1990_T_ARJA_04070})

This period was also considered a period of ancient independence during which the fight against the Teutonic Order at the beginning of 13th century represented an ancient fight for national independence:

The ancient fight for freedom of the Estonians had come to an end and with it ended the ancient era as well, that is to say, the ancient period of independence. (Arjakas *et al.*, 1991, p. 57; {1990_T_ARJA_04700})

3. The predominant discourse and its challengers

In 1990, the predominant identity categories were related to articulations of cultural and political nationalism shared and positively valued both by the elite and the masses. The shared objective of all of those within the Estonian nation was to fully attain an independent nation-state founded on the cultural heritage of the Estonian people. In contrast, the most negative categories in both mass and elite discourses focused on both the historical and actual Soviet Union. Accordingly, hegemonic discourse justified the legal restoration of national independence with anti-colonial (cultural) nationalism that confronted Soviet occupation.

The condemnation of Communism as a ideology, and the mentality associated with the Soviet regime, was so pervasive that that the adjective *Soviet* became a term of opprobrium. For instance, when an author of a letter to the editor wanted to defend “speculation” as a normal feature of the market economy, he accused detractors of harboring “Soviet” thinking, asserting that “speculation”, i.e., reselling goods at much higher prices for profit, is a normal practice and arguing that “[t]o call speculation [...] a crime is a Soviet way” (Teemant, 1990; {1990_L_RAHV_04220}).

There was a discernable elite-mass consensus not only in dominant narratives but also in less central discourses. The admiration for, or aspiration toward, the West were relatively muted, given the enduring presence of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. Estonians were unsure of their belongingness to the West and did not straightforwardly identify with the Western side, but concurrently, Western countries were expected to support Estonian independence. At the same time, Estonians did not know how both the East and West would react and respond to the reestablishment of their independence.

Elite discourse was distinct in its explicit commitment to democracy, but this commitment was riven by a deep internal divide between the Congress of Estonia and the Supreme Soviet over the appropriate path and speed of transformation.

Mass discourse, by contrast, more frequently expressed themes such as conservative social values, religion, reverence of rural lifestyle, and concerns about social welfare and inequality. However, these thematic divergences did not represent any counter-hegemonic opposition to elite consensus. The difference was one of emphasis rather than antagonism.

Popular concerns focused especially on economic challenges and social stratification:

We have apparently developed a multifaceted social stratification. Some people still do their grocery shopping calmly, paying large sums of money to the checkout every day, while others are visibly restricting their purchases. (Siimat, 1990; {1990_L_EDAS_02280})

However, the political leadership acknowledged these concerns. For example, Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar recognized that “The people are tired” (Savisaar, 1990; {1990_S_SAVI_00100}).

4. Conclusion

The opportunity to reestablish national independence was made possible due to the liberalizing effects of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, as well as the broader disintegration of the Soviet Union. In 1990, the goal of an independent Estonian state was not yet achieved, but was in process amid a fraught transitional period. National identity remained grounded in independence, unity, and cultural heritage, with both elites and the public valuing cultural nationalism. Public discourse often focused on the restoration of the interwar republic and privileging ethnic Estonians in matters of such as citizenship and public administration. At the time, national visions remained fluid, and the primary challenge lay in severing the Soviet legacy (Pettai 2007), while having to navigate internal political divisions and the potential domination by global powers. The Soviet Union was widely denounced as a colonial occupier; Communism and Soviet mentalities were widely rejected and served as pejoratives for any ideas or practices deemed illegitimate. Public opinion favored national traditions and Western culture but also voiced criticism of poor governance, economic crisis, inequality, and rising crime. Russian-speaking residents of Estonia had not yet been reconstituted as a distinct group, remaining primarily associated with the remnants of Soviet authority.

Table 1. Raw count

Category	Total codes	Speeches	Textbooks	Newspapers	Novels	Movies	Letters
Soviet Union	505	1	226	103	38	2	135
HO: independent state (1918-1940)	297	1	260	7	1	5	23
Independence	218	29	42	38	3	1	105
HO: Russia	216		192	12	2	2	8
SO: West	167	2	77	38	5	8	37
Market economy	154	6	2	45	4	2	95
Governance	140	6	3	13	1	2	115
HO: Soviet Union	132	11	63	20	11	1	26
HO: WW II	132		95	7	11		19
United/Nationalist	126	9	30	23	13		51
Poor	121	3	7	22	14	1	74
Economic crisis and inequality	131	1	9	12	6	1	102
Conservative values	98				24	14	60
National culture/symbols	95		37	18	13	1	26
Rural/Pastoral	95		37	9	1	13	35
HO: Baltic Germans, Germany	93		79	6	1		7
Russians in Estonia	92	5	14	15	3	10	45
SO: Scandinavia	89		47	23	1		18
Crisis: social disorder	87	11		7	2		67
Political elite	83	20		32	1		30
Anxious/Exhausted/Self-destructive	78	16	3		26		33
Educated/Prudent	73	1	11	9	9	1	42
Democratic	69	25	4	14			26
HO: Ancient Estonia	64		64				
Religion	61		35	1	10	2	13
Social welfare	61			9	1		51
Communism	53	2	21	12			18
Estonian language	48		9	3	3		33
Hardworking	46		10	2	11		23
Foreign Estonians	45		29	4	1		11
Young / Youth	45	1	3	8	21	1	11
Environmentally friendly	44		6	12	3		23
Totals	3758	150	1415	524	240	67	1362

Table 2. Topography of Estonian identity

	Speeches	Textbooks	Op-eds	Novels	Movies	Letters
<i>Independent-Nationalist</i>						

Independence	++++~	++	+-/		+	+++
United / Nationalist	~++	+	++	~+~		++
National culture / symbols		+	++	++-	/	+
Young/Youth			+	~+~	-	
Environmentally friendly			-	+		
Foreign Estonians		/				
Estonian language						+
<i>Governance</i>						
Russians in Estonia	~		-		///~	--
Political elite	+++--/		--+			-
Governance	--+		-		//	---+
Democratic	-----		+			+
Crisis: social disorder	--/		-			--
<i>Conservative</i>						
Conservative values				--/~+	---/~++	++
Religion				~	/+	
Rural/Pastoral		+	-		++++~	-+
<i>Market Liberal</i>						
Market economy	++		++//~	-	-+	--~++
Anxious / Exhausted / Self-destructive	---/~			---~+		-
Poor	-		-/	--	~	--
Economic crisis and inequality			--		~	---
Educated/Prudent				--	+	++
Social welfare			-			-+
Hardworking				--		+
Communism			--			
<i>Significant Others</i>						
Soviet Union		-----+	///~+	---//~	-/	---+
West		++	++-~		///~+	-
Scandinavia		+	++			
<i>Historic Others</i>						
Independent state (1918-1940)		-- //~++++ +			+++-	+
Soviet Union	---	--	--	~+	-	-
Russia		---/~++	-		//	
WW II		--/~	-	-/~		
Baltic Germans / Germany		--				
Ancient Estonia		/+				

Saliency of categories is measured on the following scale: 1.0–2.0 (1); 2.0–5.0 (2); 5.0–7.5 (3); 7.5–10.0 (4); above 10.0 (5).

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