



Making Identity Count: Estonia 2000¹

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Introduction

This report analyses the discursive construction of Estonian national identity in the year 2000, drawing from both elite and mass perspectives. While shared ideals – such as cultural heritage, state sovereignty, responsible governance, and social cohesion – formed common ground, crucial divergences emerged. Elite discourse emphasised patriotism, national culture, and modernisation, whereas popular narratives were more ambivalent, particularly towards nationalism and the political elite. National identity was framed through historical continuity, cultural institutions, language preservation, and symbolic markers such as the national currency (the kroon). Integration debates centred on concerns regarding the Russophone minority and the impact of EU accession on sovereignty and agriculture. Northern Europe, especially Finland and Sweden, was viewed as a normative reference. The legacy of the Soviet Union, imperial Russia, and Baltic Germans remained central to historical self-understanding. The Estonian language, education, and moral values were seen as essential to continued national survival. Overall, identity discourse revealed a dual dynamic: on the one hand, a forward-looking aspiration to become a typical meritocratic, neoliberal market-state; on the other, lingering anxieties tied to the hardships of economic transition, Estonian emigration to the West, persistent poverty, and growing societal insecurity.

1. Text selection and classification of sources

For the 2000 archive (see ‘Sources’ below), the sample of leadership speeches included the Independence Day address of President Lennart Meri (24 February 2000) and the speech *Preparations for Estonia’s Accession to the European Union (Ettevalmistused Eesti liitumiseks Euroopa Liiduga)*, delivered by Prime Minister Mart Laar during an information session of the Parliament (19 January 2000). In 2000, Lennart Meri was serving his second term as President of Estonia (1992–2001). His Independence Day speech, delivered as the formal head of the state on the anniversary of the Republic, was the most symbolically important speech on the state of the country, addressing the nation as a whole. Mart Laar was then leading his second cabinet (25 March 1999 – 28 January 2002), a coalition of the Pro Patria Union, Reform Party, and Moderate People’s Party. His selected speech reflected the main priorities of Laar’s government: EU accession, budgetary discipline expressed through cost-cutting and balanced budgets during liberal market economic reforms, and administrative restructuring through the downsizing the state bureaucracy and the development of digital infrastructure for an e-state.

In 2000, the highest circulation dailies were *Õhtuleht* (66,100) *Postimees* (62,000) (Estonian Newspaper Association). For the ‘opinion-editorials’ all opinion articles, editorials, and journalist-authored columns from these papers were scanned for identity-related content in issues dated the 15th of every month.² This yielded 246 op-ed articles (116 from *Õhtuleht* and 130 from *Postimees*) with 615 initial codes (342 from *Päevaleht/Eesti Päevaleht* and 273 from

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>.

² If newspaper was not published on the 15th day of the month, the issue of the 16th (or closest to the 15th) was selected.

Postimees). Of these, 459 codings were retained in the final matrix, based on the list of most prominent categories.

The sample of readers' letters comprised all such letters published in the same newspapers across the year. A total of 428 letters were scanned (302 from *Postimees*, 126 from *Õhtuleht*), resulting in 1,962 codes (1,442 from *Postimees*, 522 from *Õhtuleht*), of which 1,593 codings were retained in the final list of most prominent categories.

As there was no significant Estonian-produced film in 2000, two films were selected: "The Heart of the Bear" ("Karu süda", 2001) and "Names in Marble" ("Nimed marmortahvlil", 2002). Both were chosen for their popularity and critical reception (both films participated in more than a dozen international film festivals; "The Heart of the Bear" was Estonia's submission to the 74th Academy Awards (2002) for Best Foreign Language Film and was nominated for European Film Awards). "Names in Marble," directed by Elmo Nüganen, became the most viewed Estonian-produced film of all time, breaking box-office records in 2002 with 167,958 viewers (Eesti Filmi Andmebaas, 2002). The "Heart of the Bear" attracted 22,326 viewers in 2001 (Eesti Filmi Andmebaas, 2001).

"Names in Marble" is a war drama based on Albert Kivikas's 1936 novel. It follows a group of schoolboys who volunteer to fight for their homeland during the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920). The story combines the struggle for national independence with the journey into manhood and first love – where some find both love and a free homeland, while others are remembered only as names carved in marble.

"The Heart of the Bear," based on Nikolai Baturin's 1989 novel, opens with a dedication to the indigenous peoples of the North (Iho, 2001, 00:00:10-00:00:11; {2000_M_KARU_00010}).³ It follows a young Estonian hunter, Niika, who retreats to the Siberian taiga in search of self-understanding. He becomes immersed in love, myth, and Nganasan tribal life. After killing a bear symbolising his shadow self, he becomes wracked by guilt and falls in love with a woman abandoned by fate – yet ultimately, he is offered a path to inner peace.

For novels, two were selected: Andrus Kivirähk's *Rehepapp, ehk, November (Old Barny, or November, 2000)*, which by 2008 was sold 32,000 copies, making it the decade's best-selling novel (100aastat100raamatut), and Kaur Kender's *Ebanormaalne (Abnormal, 2000)*, which was the best-selling novel of 2000 with 5,120 copies sold (Seaver 2002). *Old Barny, or November* is an allegorical satire rooted in national mythology and folklore, portraying the hard life of Estonian peasants under the oppression of manor lords, spirits, and goblins lurking in the bushes. In desperate circumstances, people take whatever they can – whether from a neighbour's pantry, the manor garden, or the devil at the crossroads. *Abnormal*, by contrast, is a book that centres on an ambitious young man's search for love and identity, unfolding mainly in New York and Bangkok. It explores themes of modern male psychology and sexuality, loneliness and alienation, normality and abnormality, and the blurred lines between reality and simulacra based in a world saturated by contemporary mass culture, advertising, consumption, and social status.

The sample of Estonian history textbooks for secondary schools included the only two then available: *Eesti ajalugu gümnaasiumile [Estonian History for High School Students]* by Andres Adamson and Sulev Valdmaa (1999), and *Eesti ajalugu gümnaasiumile [Estonian History for High School Students]* by Lauri Vahtre (2004). The content of textbooks was coded from the pre-Christian era up to the 1990s.

³ References indicate to the original source (which 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).

2. Raw identity categories

To balance the unequal distribution of raw identity codes among genres, we calculated genre-normalised percentages to determine the relative prominence of raw codes across six genres. Categories with an average prominence below 1% across genres were excluded, resulting in a final list of 32 categories and 3,738 codes.

Table 1 (at the end of this report) presents the raw frequencies of the most common identity categories by genre for 2000. 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 Final categories were organised into six thematic clusters: *Identity and Belonging*, *Political Elite and Governance*, *Values, Economy and Justice*, *Significant Others*, and *Historic Others*. The number of valence symbols per cells in Table 2 indicates the affective salience of a given identity category within each genre. Within each cluster, categories are arranged according to the numbers of valence symbols assigned. The five categories with the highest total valence scores were: **HO: Soviet Union** (22),⁵ **SO: West** (19),⁶ **Religion** (18), **SO: Russia** (17), and **Conservative** (15). The most prominent affective categories received slightly more valence symbols from mass sources, except for HO: Soviet Union, which was more strongly emphasised in elite sources.⁷

Identity and Belonging

In this cluster, elite and mass discourses largely converged, though elite discourse expressed more positive sentiments toward categories such as **nationalist/patriotic** and **national culture**, whereas mass discourse tended to be more ambiguous.

Regarding national culture, the discourses emphasised elements such as national foods (black bread, rye bread, and kama), traditions (sauna culture, Song Festivals), literature (folklore, proverbs), the national press and education system, national symbols (the Estonian flag and anthem), and cultural institutions such as the Art Museum and the National Library.

President Lennart Meri underscored the enduring significance of cultural memory, rooted in a deep connection to origins, as the foundation for meaningful progress:

We need a realistic perception of the present and the future, but the prerequisite for this is knowledge of the past and Estonian cultural history over and over again. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_00910})

The history textbook likewise emphasised that despite significant obstacles, Estonia's cultural awakening was both rapid and hard-won – a powerful testament to resilience and determination:

In just a couple of generations, the Estonian people rose from very poor, backward, spiritually degraded nation to an equal to other cultural nations in Europe. A professional culture in our own language was emerging. 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 HO refers to ‘Historic Other’.

⁶ SO refers to ‘Significant Other’.

⁷ According to the Making Identity Count methodology, leadership speeches, textbooks, and op-eds are considered “more elite” genres, while letters, novels, and films are categorised as “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.

development had taken place despite the opposition and disapproval of the local Germans and Russians. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 127; {2000_T_ADAM_04690})

Since then, a strong interdependence has persisted between national identity and the cultural institutions and traditions that sustain it:

The preservation of the assets of the Art Museum or the continuation of the Song Festivals [...] are matters of the conscience of the Estonian people. (Ummelas, 2000; {2000_L_POST_01110})

Therefore, the preservation of national culture is seen as requiring structural continuity and institutional support:

The culture is consistent. Destroying a properly functioning cultural institution and repository, scattering funds here and there, can cause irreparable damage to national culture and national identity. (Janssen, 2000; {2000_L_POST_13190})

The discourse of **independent** Estonia resonated with both elites and the broader population, drawing on narratives of ancient sovereignty, the struggle and sacrifice for national freedom, significant historical events such as the St. George's Night Uprising of 1343, national symbols such as the Estonian kroon, and a growing political consciousness rooted in independence.

The loss of independence in the 13th century marked a turning point in Estonian history – ushering in centuries of subjugation but also a form of cultural transformation. Despite defeat, Estonians were drawn into the wider orbit of European and Western civilisation. According to the history textbook, the legacy of resistance left a lasting imprint on national identity:

However, the fact that our forefathers fought for their country and freedom as they understood it remains irrefutable. It would be cynical to reproach them for resisting Western and Christian values, which we only came to appreciate much later. The memory that independence was not surrendered without a fight helped Estonians preserve their sense of self. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 35; {2000_T_ADAM_00990})

For many, the Estonian kroon – which served as the national currency from 1992 to 2011 – functioned as a concrete symbol of sovereignty and pride:

I remember the great sense of pride when, returning from Estonia to Finland for the first time by ship, I handed the waiter a 500-kroon note. He apologetically asked what money he could return, as he did not yet have any kroons. That was the moment I felt that Estonia was an independent country, with its own legitimate currency. (Burov, 2000; {2000_L_POST_01970})

The discourse of **nationalism/patriotism** found stronger and more consistently positive resonance among the elite. In contrast, mass discourse treated these themes more ambivalently; they appeared less frequently and were often approached with mixed sentiment. Central topics within this category included political awareness as a form of national identity, the celebration of national heroes, the defence of both historical and contemporary nationhood, the intergenerational transmission of a national mission, loyalty to the state, and love of the fatherland.

Some perceived traditional ideals of nationalism and patriotism as increasingly marginalised:

Straightforward universal human qualities, such as honesty, courage, incorruptibility, fidelity to one's spouse, and loyalty to the fatherland, have been replaced by a skewed ability to stay one's head above water: to change parties,

families, and lovers; to make empty promises; to organise bankruptcies; and, at the same time, to blur the line between private interest and the common good. (Kortspärn, 2000a; {2000_L_POST_06940})

Similarly, President Lennart Meri expressed contempt for those who did not hold nationalism in high regard:

Let this be said with absolute clarity about the self-preservers and softies whose ‘unique intelligence’ seems to prevent them from defending their homes. Unfortunately, the cover of this ‘unique intelligence’ is often miserable and boils down to little more than a knack for clicking a mouse, a few hundred English words, and feeble logic and ethics – lax morals and flabby body on top of that. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_01010})

Discourses on **Russians in Estonia** were predominantly negative, with a recurring emphasis on the perceived threat posed by Russian Federation:

There is also the matter of moral hypocrisy: the Finns can calmly commemorate their fallen and honour their heroes even in front of former enemies. But for Estonians, it remains strictly forbidden – God forbid we offend either our eastern neighbour or some of the ex-Soviets who were left behind in Estonia. (Sima, 2000a; {2000_L_POST_02410})

As one op-ed noted, many Russophone discourses in Estonia often perceived the leader of the Centre Party as their political representative – despite a political track record that would not seem to justify the loyalty:

Savisaar became the only Estonian politician whom Russians respected, if only because he had no single painful anti-Russian position on his account. However, it was during his time as prime minister [1990-1992] that the current relations between the state and the Russian community took shape and developed, which are unfortunately far from ideal. Even though the Centre Party has done little of substance for non-citizens, the mere absence of anti-Russian rhetoric has sufficed to preserve their image as “defenders of the Russian population.” (Šegedin, 2000; {2000_P_POST_02160})

Overall, Estonians attitudes tended to be indifferent toward local Russians or, when necessary, conditionally tolerant. Forgiveness for past grievances was possible – but this tolerance frayed when local Russians were perceived to exhibit arrogance or adopt attitudes reminiscent of the colonial-style domination that Estonians experienced during the Soviet era:

[...] the current relations between the average Estonian and the average Russian are broadly like the relations between the former occupied and the former occupier. [...] [This] allows Russian-speaking residents to act in a domineering and brazen manner, especially in regions where Estonians are a minority. (Kortspärn, 2000b; {2000_L_POST_06150})

Some Russian speakers were seen as fundamentally unwilling to integrate into the Estonian state, while others were viewed as permanently aligned with pro-Kremlin revanchism:

As for those non-Estonians who want Estonians gone, their mindset is familiar from earlier times – Estonia is a beautiful little oblast – if only Stalin had deported more Estonians to Siberia, there would fewer of them left here. This group will never integrate, no matter how much money we spend on integration. (Raudsepp, 2000; {2000_L_POST_07250})

Estonia's Language Act, which made proficiency in Estonian a requirement for naturalisation, was seen as the main cornerstone of Russophone integration. As one commentator put it, "any significant liberalisation of the Language Act will deprive local non-Estonians of any motivation to learn Estonian" (Jaeger, 2000; {2000_L_POST_01530}). This perspective reflected the belief that language policy is foundational to both social cohesion and national unity.

The discourse around the **Estonian language** revolved around the preservation of Estonian-language education, maintaining linguistic purity in public media and everyday use, countering perceived significant external threats posed by Russian and English.

While the Estonian language had survived decades of Soviet Russification relatively intact, new cultural pressures promoting the use of English were introduced in the post-independence period:

After half a century as a member of the Soviet Union, we managed to preserve our nation and language despite everything. Now, the Estonian language has already begun to be harassed by English. (Kukk, 2000; {2000_L_POST_04110})

It was seen that the Estonian language required protection from the growing influence of English.

I welcome everyone who fights for the Estonian language and invite as many as possible to develop it, replacing foreign words with Estonian ones! (Vaher, 2000; {2000_L_POST_09990})

The **indigenous/protectionist** discourse emphasised the (primordial) connection between those whose ancestral roots have been in Estonian territory for centuries and their land, and calling for the protection of local ownership – of resources, capital, and goods:

The roots of our people have been in this soil for millennia. (Mürk, 2000; {2000_L_POST_09880})

The history textbook asserts that Estonians were the autochthonous inhabitants of their homeland and that this territorial identity has endured, uninterrupted, for thousands of years:

... the knowledge that you are the indigenous people of the land, present long before others, and that the land has been taken away from the indigenous people by force. Thus, it cannot be said that the cultural continuity – one could also say identity – of Estonians has been broken. It survived the harshest times and was passed on to future generations. (Vahtre, 2004, p. 114; {2000_T_VAHT_01830})

According to history textbook, even during Swedish rule (1561-1710) were Estonian peasants perceived to be the owners of the land even though they remained legally bound as serfs:

Estonian peasants [...] still opposed themselves to all the "Saxons" and considered themselves the only true masters of the land. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 78; {2000_T_ADAM_02550})

In the novel "Abnormal," the protagonist rediscovers his indigenous roots while in New York, with the memory of his grandmother's pancakes serving as a symbolic link to his heritage:

You can't walk into someone's house on a slow Sunday afternoon, even your grandmother's, and eat pancakes. Even if you don't share the general pancake nostalgia, and even less do you miss the domesticity of eating cutlets, you still

feel that there are too few people here in New York. *Your* people. You will begin to understand for the first time what is meant by ‘roots.’ (Kender, 2000, p. 174; {2000_N_KEND_01240})

Political Elite and Governance

Mass discourse strongly emphasised unity and tended to be more sharply critical of the political elite in comparison to elite discourse. Themes related to democracy, as well as rural and regional issues, resonated more prominently within elite discourse. However, both elite and mass discourses share a common ideal: they value a responsible government and efficient governance, viewing both as standards by which to critically evaluate the actions, behaviours, and performance of public officials and the political class.

The central themes within the **united** category highlighted the value of solidarity and mutual support, simultaneously rejecting division, factionalism, and discord. Prime Minister Mart Laar stressed the importance of unity within the political establishment:

We will only be able to achieve the goals we are aiming for by acting together, by combining the efforts of the executive and legislative powers. (Laar, 2000; {2000_S_LAAR_00720})

Ordinary people experienced a sentiment of national unity most viscerally during large-scale cultural events that brought together large audiences:

At the Song Festivals, the people felt themselves to be a united people every five years, and when they sang “My Fatherland is My Love” [...] they felt their strength [...] (Vahtre, 2004, p. 288; {2000_T_VAHT_05170})

The **political elite** was frequently and intensely criticised in mass discourse, often being portrayed as corrupt, untrustworthy, and immoral. It was perceived as favouring the upper class through policies such as taxation. While members of the political elite acknowledged many of these criticisms, they tended to view themselves as more connected to the public and were more inclined to highlight the achievements of the government. These achievements were particularly emphasised by Prime Minister Mart Laar:

Although we know that “the world is a valley of trouble” and the construction of Potemkin villages has always ended badly, I still invite you, esteemed representatives of the people, as well as all Estonian people, to feel a small, tickling sense of pride in what we have achieved in our joint work. (Laar, 2000; {2000_S_LAAR_00830})

There was a widespread perception that both Prime Minister Mart Laar and his governing coalition were out of touch with the people and public sentiment:

[...] Mart Laar found himself in a situation in which he acts against the will of the people. ... This is where a very dangerous division between the people and the politician has developed. (Adamson, 2000a; {2000_L_POST_12220})

Widespread discontent toward the political elite was rooted in perceived inequalities in regard to resources, income, influence, and power:

This government is not capable of creating or building anything. They try to justify their high salaries and give the people an impression of working by the sweat of their brow. (Karrik, 2000; {2000_L_POST_13220})

Only a minority of the coded quotes conveyed any sort of satisfaction with public administration. The vast majority of them reflected a strong desire for **Competent governance**

that was typically expressed through criticism of the current state. Most frequently, these critiques highlighted bureaucratic inefficiency, flawed or contradictory legal frameworks, a lack of accountability, mismanagement of social services, and repeated calls for more effective administrative reform. Praise of civil servants or politicians is notably absent; instead, the desire for capable and responsible governance arises as a recurring theme. The following reader's letter encapsulates a widely shared perception of bureaucratic dysfunction:

One area of life after another is turned upside down, and no one thinks about the consequences. The only goal seems to be to keep the people in constant tension and stress. Careerism and obsequiousness are cultivated. (Karuks, 2000; {2000_L_POST_07700})

Prime Minister Mart Laar partially acknowledged the challenges facing public governance in Estonia, noting external concerns about the country's administrative capacity:

At times, so much so that it raises doubts and mistrust regarding our abilities, the European Union raises the question as to whether Estonia can implement its fine laws. If we answer yes, our task is to create a functioning management system that is reliable, transparent, and budget-friendly. (Laar, 2000; {2000_S_LAAR_00500})

Responsible governance is articulated as a widely shared ideal, valued both within public and elite discourse. However, the actual practices of the politicians and state institutions are often criticized for their inefficiency, lack of accountability, and consistent underperformance. Common grievances include the evasion of responsibility, blame shifting, and a failure to justify policy decisions. Citizens consistently call for the more effective allocation of taxpayer funds and express a strong desire for a leadership grounded in integrity and aligned with public expectations and values. Poor policy choices – particularly regarding the chronic underfunding of healthcare, education, social welfare, and rural infrastructure – are frequently highlighted:

Now, it was announced that the Health Board will increase the number of state officials. There is a ministry, health protection, an inspectorate, a health promotion bureau, several foundations, and councils. Officials have high salaries and endless trips abroad, but the health of the people continues to deteriorate. (Varik, 2000; {2000_L_OHTU_03160})

President Lennart Meri clearly articulated the role of the state, emphasising that the well-being of citizens hinges not only on economic performance but also on the competence of the public administration:

However, the goal of the state is and will remain to ensure a quality of life for its citizens that meets their expectations. This, as has already been said, depends first and foremost on the quality of our work, on our ability to succeed in the international market, but the achievement of this goal also depends on the quality of our management, that is, the civil servants – our administrative capacity. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_00820})

When social and economic problems are widespread, both policymaking and policymakers are often criticised for a lack of competence:

We are going downhill at full speed toward chaos, crime, drug addiction, AIDS, and rampant hunger. (Halling, 2000; {2000_L_OHTU_03350}).

The discourse on **rural**, **pastoral**, and **regional** issues centres on rural lifestyles, the preservation of traditional customs, and contrasts between the urban and rural populations:

Rural unemployment and low wages should also be known to the townspeople. (Lahesaare, 2000; {2000_L_POST_12680})

However, the strongest emphasis of this discourse emerges around the perceived neglect of peripheral regions by the government and politicians, who are seen as prioritising the capital and larger cities in terms of attention received and resources invested:

The closure of the railway in Southern Estonia would mean a catastrophe for this part of Estonia. A few people will be left unemployed. [...] Depriving young people of opportunities to travel would mean interrupting their education. It seems that, in the opinion of the members of the Riigikogu and of the government, the Republic of Estonia is only Tallinn, and a person is only someone who has a car. (Laarman, 2000; {2000_L_POST_06520})

Politicians are occasionally reminded that Estonia encompasses more than just its capital city, as illustrated by the following remark:

Estonia is not only Tallinn, but also fifteen counties where salaries are several orders of magnitude lower than they are in the capital. (Tõnurist, 2000; {2000_L_POST_00610})

Textbook passages underscore the complex yet significant role of rural life in shaping Estonian national identity, noting that:

Estonians were a peasant nation, and the agrarian way of life produced Estonianness. *Homo Sovieticus* was bred in an urbanised industrial environment. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 208; {2000_T_ADAM_08080})

Life on the individual farms made us independent, tenacious, and stubborn. Unfortunately, selfishness and envy also stem from this same root. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 13; {2000_T_ADAM_00230})

As an example of shared social understanding, rural life is often associated with limited social opportunities for young people, as reflected in the following quote:

I am from Taebala, near Haapsalu. I used to be a good student and did not have much of a social life. Now, after I arrived in Tallinn and got to know Mikko, life is just beginning. It's much more exciting. (Kaupmees, 2000; {2000_P_OHTU_01870})

Democratic institutions and practices were typically evaluated against a normative ideal of democracy. From this perspective, politicians were frequently criticised for disregarding the will of the people, as reflected in the following statement:

But according to the Constitution, the highest power is vested in the people, so these voices should also be heard from among the people! (Einpaul, 2000; {2000_L_POST_01950})

Another democratic ideal viewed as absent from political practice was the principle of direct democracy, particularly in the form of referenda or direct elections for the office of the president. This concern is voiced in the following critique:

Our politicians do not even want to hear that every nation has the right to elect a president. This wish is presented as nothing but vulgar populism. [...] The postponement of direct elections is justified with all kinds of nonsense – the naïve people are still not ready for it, the laws are not ready, and so on. This

arbitrary violation of the fundamental right of democracy by the politicians is a gross violation of human rights and a blatant injustice against their own people. (Mäe, 2000a; {2000_L_POST_13640})

In the absence of meaningful opportunities for public participation between elections, democracy risks being reduced to an electoral oligarchy rather than a truly representative and participatory system. This concern is sharply expressed in the question:

What kind of democracy are we talking about otherwise? Or do we have timocracy (i.e., not a power of the people, but the inexorable power of money)? (Käämbre, 2000; {2000_L_POST_03210})

Values

In narratives centred on values, widespread public discourse often addresses self-destructive behaviours – such as drug addiction, suicide, and excessive alcohol consumption – as well as those themes related to religion and conservative principles. The courageous-militant discourse is also prevalent within both elite and mass spaces, primarily emphasising patriotic commitment through current practices like military conscription and the historical struggle for national independence.

The category of **religion** highlights the role of Christianity – especially the Lutheran tradition – in shaping Estonian moral values, identity, and national culture. The related quotes express an admiration for Christian ethics, concern over perceived moral decay, link masculinity with Christian virtue, and express hopes for a religious revival. Correspondingly, Christianity is presented as a fundamental element of Estonian culture:

Historically, Estonia has maintained a longstanding tradition of Christian instruction and education. (Rebane, 2000; {2000_L_POST_08460})

[...] I have faith that a generation of godly men will rise up and know the truth: masculinity and Christlikeness are synonyms! (Usta, 2000; {2000_L_OHTU_05060})

Some individuals supported the inclusion of religious education in public school curricula, citing its potential for fostering positive moral character development:

When it comes to religious education, we must also recognise its essential role in shaping a person's moral and ethical character. I share the view that religion is fundamental to the development of a well-rounded personality and a complete sense of humanity. In our cultural context, that religion is Christianity. (Mötsnik, 2000a; {2000_L_POST_07480})

Opponents of religious instruction in schools and public life often expressed concerns regarding the erosion of the boundary between Church and state or were viewed as influenced by the legacy of Soviet-era atheism:

[...] religion has been a powerful policy and a dangerous weapon of ruling circles throughout history. It is downright devastating if we give greater advantages to the promotion of one ideology, be it Christians, communists, or whomever else. At the same time, I am convinced that an intelligent and educated person must have an overview of the history of nations and the most important religions. However, the dogmas of any faith cannot be taken as the only true truths of life. (Parm, 2000; {2000_L_POST_08060})

In history textbooks, religion is portrayed positively when it supports national culture, education, and ties to Western (especially Protestant) traditions, notably through Lutheranism.

It appears negatively when linked to forced conversion, social control, and the suppression of indigenous beliefs and cultural practices.

Christianity played a decisive role in the development of Estonians from a pagan people living on the periphery of two worlds to Europeans in the Western sense of the word. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 54; {2000_T_ADAM_01530})

The victory of Lutheranism set the preconditions for the emergence of the printed word in Estonian and school education. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 57; {2000_T_ADAM_01700})

In general, most of Estonian society became distanced from institutional religion and no longer maintained a strong connection to traditional religious practices:

We now live in a world where all the truths and moral rules that the Bible and faith in God gave us have been forgotten. (Kuus, 2000; {2000_L_POST_07810})

At times, the strategic invocation of religion by government ministers – whether in positive or negative terms as a symbol of cultural identity – was critically examined:

Estonian politicians have given up most of Setomaa. They did it without asking the Setos. [...] Foreign Minister Ilves considers the Setos,⁸ who belong to the Orthodox Church with their rich and lively folklore, to be inferior than the serfs of the Baltic Germans who had learned to read in the Lutheran way. (Sarv, 2000; {2000_L_POST_14060})

Conservative identity discourses address, on one hand, contentious moral issues such as abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, homosexuality, pornography, prostitution, and sexualised advertising. On the other hand, they emphasise broader societal and cultural themes, including concerns over cultural permissiveness, the preservation of tradition, the family unit, traditional gender roles, and the maintenance of public order through strict penalties for both serious and minor offenses.

For some individuals, the increasing societal visibility of homosexuals was perceived as a threat to their own identity:

If the activities of people who currently consider themselves sexual minorities expand, this development may take on dimensions that will make us a minority in our country. (Oja, 2000a; {2000_L_POST_00500})

Others reinforced traditional gender roles, suggesting that women should primarily focus on homemaking and child-rearing while simultaneously advocating for higher salaries for male teachers:

The maintenance and preservation of the home are a woman's main contribution to the survival of the homeland and nation. From time immemorial, protecting his family and home has been a man's inheritance. [...] I think that there should be separate places for male and female teachers in schools. Let there be fewer

⁸ The author of this letter references the foreword written by Foreign Minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves in 1999 for the Estonian translation of Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. In a 1999 foreword to the Estonian edition of *The Clash of Civilizations*, Foreign Minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves argued that Estonia's democratic and economic success was rooted in its Lutheran heritage – particularly its emphasis on personal responsibility and unmediated faith. He claimed this legacy made Estonian businessmen more law-abiding than their peers in other post-communist states. Ilves also contrasted Lutheranism's demanding, paternal image of God with Orthodoxy's more forgiving and maternal religious culture (Ilves, 1999, pp. 16, 19).

men's positions but with higher salaries. (Tammepuu, 2000; {2000_L_POST_04570})

Several letters stressed that the perceived decline in moral values was weakening the nation's vitality and called for corrective action from the government:

[...] to develop attitudes in society that would restore the instinct of self-preservation in the Estonian people, raise the level of morality, and increase the vitality of the nation. (Laidre, 2000; {2000_L_POST_10150})

One proposed solution for restoring public moral order was the implementation of strict penalties for criminal offenses.:

Why are you, police officers, so soft with thugs? (Saar, 2000; {2000_L_POST_08760})

The category **courageous/militant** comprised of identity discourses that express national memory as an eternal and popular struggle for freedom, the valorisation of heroism and martial ethics, and critical reflection on national militarism.

One recurring theme in history textbooks is the enduring struggle for freedom, portrayed as a dynamic interplay between resistance, rebellion, and political self-awareness woven together throughout the nation's history:

Here, we could refer to a couple of characteristic features of the peasant uprisings of that time: riots followed the promulgation of laws regulating agrarian conditions and the life of the peasantry, even if they brought significant relief, as there was always hope for more [...] (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 94; {2000_T_ADAM_03300})

The peasantry reacted to the new laws as they always did – they began to rebel. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 99; {2000_T_ADAM_03680})

The ultimate symbolic manifestation of the military heroism was the Estonian victory in the Battle of Võnnu (the Battle of Cēsis) over the *Baltische Landeswehr* in 1919:

For the Estonians, this conflict turned out to be a reckoning for centuries of oppression, and the soldiers went into battle with enthusiasm. The Germans were defeated in the Battle of Cēsis [...] (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 156; {2000_T_ADAM_06160})

Furthermore, the textbook presented guerrilla warfare as an integral part of the national historical tradition:

Estonia has a very old tradition of guerrilla warfare. All the wars and uprisings waged by Estonians in their homeland have been guerrilla wars in terms of their tactics. The men have always gone into the woods when the enemy invades or in the event of a conflict with foreign powers. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 206; {2000_T_ADAM_07940})

Lastly, but no less significant, was the example of guerrilla warfare carried out by the Forest Brothers (*metsavennad*), who resisted the Soviet regime between 1940–1941 and again from 1944 to 1978:

Despite the defeat, the fight of the Forest Brothers was not in vain. Their long guerrilla war has the same effect on Estonians as the Winter War had on the Finns. [...] This shows that Estonians did not suffer defeat without resistance and refutes the myth of Estonia's voluntary accession to the Soviet Union better

than any legal evidence could. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 207; {2000_T_ADAM_08060})

On the individual level, narratives of militant heroism glorify a personal sense of mission and portray military service as a rite of passage into manhood – central elements of the soldier's identity. One letter, for instance, conveys a belief that real men faithfully fulfil their military obligations:

It is the mama's boys who buy themselves commutation from military service. The right men serve the allotted time without complaint and come home as men who can withstand the storms of life. (Neuhaus, 2000; {2000_L_OHTU_00370})

Finally, military service and civic military obligations were also subject to critical assessment. Although the significance of the struggle for freedom was not disputed, concerns were raised regarding resource allocation, ethical considerations, and the role of education. For instance, public debate included questions about the justification for high national defence expenditures:

[...] From the small budget of a small country, defence spending amounts to more than a billion kroons a year. From whom and how do we protect ourselves with this money? Perhaps we could also protect our national intellectual wealth from ourselves in the form of the [Academy of Sciences] academic library? (Ant, 2000; {2000_L_POST_13060})

The **educated/prudent** category centred the crucial historical and cultural importance of education, literacy, science, and locally rooted pragmatic wisdom in shaping and nurturing Estonian national identity, while also revealing the vulnerabilities of the education system, which was viewed as underfunded, subordinated to market forces, and guided by short-sighted policy.

The textbook asserts that, at least historically, high levels of male literacy positioned Estonian men amongst the ranks of the most culturally advanced nations:

The great and valuable legacy of independent Estonia from earlier times was the high popular literacy rates. Of the Estonian boys recruited into the Tsarist army at the end of the 19th century, 98 percent could read and write. This already was several times higher than that of many of the older cultured nations [i.e., those with capacity for statehood]. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 175; {2000_T_ADAM_06660})

During the Soviet occupation, education served as a crucial tool for preserving national identity and sustaining the commitment to an independent nation-state:

Despite the occupations that lasted for half a century, Estonians preserved their national feeling and desire for statehood largely due to the contributions of the University of Tartu to our national consciousness. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 175; {2000_T_ADAM_06670})

In everyday social understanding, education is often regarded as a metaphorical form of national capital:

Has the importance of education as the main capital of Estonia been misunderstood? (Novek, 2000; {2000_L_POST_04790})

For centuries, education has been seen as a cornerstone of Estonian national identity. As a result, there has been strong opposition to both its persistent underfunding and the closure of small rural schools with low enrolment:

Estonians have valued education since the era of serfdom. [...] The War of Independence was still ongoing when Estonian-language schools were being founded. Farmers helped in the construction of the schoolhouses. [...] If the closure of small rural schools can be justified by the lack of students, then how can we explain the merger of two upper secondary schools with students of different nationalities in Valga? (Rõigas, 2000; {2000_L_POST_08180})

The **self-destructive** category frames alcohol abuse, drug addiction, the spread of HIV, and suicide as widespread social pathologies that threaten not only individual lives but also the moral and demographic foundation of the Estonian nation. In 2000, drug addiction emerged as a growing concern and was perceived as having more severe consequences than alcohol abuse:

If an alcoholic destroys himself and worries his loved ones, then drug addiction is a threat to the whole society. A positive correlation can be expected between drug dealing and other serious crimes, including robberies. (Oja, 2000b; {2000_L_POST_01490})

Statistical data show that during the 1990s, HIV infections and drug abuse were on the rise, and the proportion of children born outside of wedlock increased steadily.⁹ Male suicide rates and divorces peaked around 1995 but had declined by the year 2000.¹⁰ Nevertheless, public perception continued to reflect a belief in persistently high levels of suicide and divorce, despite the downward trend in official statistics:

We are going downhill at full speed, against chaos, crime, drug addiction, AIDS and plain starvation. (Halling, 2000; {2000_L_OHTU_03340})

Unfortunately, we also have a lot of other kinds of records in our hands. Staying on the Olympic wave, it could be said that Estonia already has the gold medal in divorces, silver in both men's and women's heart attacks, and bronze in men's suicides. (Ernits, 2000; {2000_P_POST_01910})

Self-destructive behaviours, often normalised as part of everyday life, were understood to arise within a broader context of structural neglect and societal failure to address the challenges of the time. In 2002, political scientist Rein Taagepera noted that approximately one-third of Estonia's population was struggling with the demands of daily life, engaged in joyless and exhausting labour "for its own sake" and described this segment as "overworked, embittered, and tired" (Taagepera, 2002, pp. 253–254). For many in this group, habits of self-harm functioned as coping mechanisms:

When a native Estonian says, "Let's sit down and have a little drink," it means at least a litre of whiskey. (Muska, 2000; {2000_L_OHTU_02420})

Although the **environmentally-friendly** category is not among the most salient identity discourses, it reflects an idea that living in harmony with nature is central to what it means to be Estonian – whether expressed through ancient beliefs, environmental stewardship as a contemporary ethical imperative, or a lifestyle choice.

According to the history textbook, living in harmony with nature reflects an ancient worldview deeply rooted in Estonian traditions:

⁹ Children born outside of wedlock doubled from 27 percent in 1992 up to 54 percent in 2000 (Kutsar *et al.*, 2012, p. 174).

¹⁰ Male suicide rates exceeded 40 per 100,000 persons during 1990-1995 and declined by 31.1 percent by 1999 (European Commission, 2001, p. 7).

[...] the Estonian tribes were quite peaceful like most sedentary peoples living in harmony with nature. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 15; {2000_T_ADAM_00300})

President Meri entered the public debate on how to strike a balance between the economic use of natural resources and the resultant environmental pollution, emphasising a need to manage these resources wisely as responsible stewards:

Let us be masters of our own land and not colonists who, out of greed for money, leave the plundered land behind. Nature cannot be measured in monetary value alone. The export of raw forest is a sign of a weak master. If we add to these devastated areas a damaged ecosystem, we have gambled away our advantages. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_01060})

The narrative of Estonia as a **small** country focuses on the country's size as a both a source of marginalisation and existential fragility and a moral strength, as well as cultural and political asset.

In the novel *Abnormal*, the protagonist experiences the marginality of his small-country origins as a form of non-existence – his homeland, national language, and even his nationality feels effectively non-existent:

You like that the Turks think you are Italian, the Italians think you are Jewish, and the Jews think you are Turkish. But you don't like that you're none of them, that you're a nobody. A non-existent land, a representative of a non-existent nation. Speechless at that. This is a conspiracy. (Kender, 2000, p. 112; {2000_N_KEND_00970})

Estonia, as a small nation, is portrayed as being in a state of existential uncertainty – unable to place its full trust in any major power yet equally incapable of surviving in complete isolation:

I don't think that small nations should see a messiah in the Russians or the Slavs. The messiah cannot be sought in the West either, as they too are constantly fighting for their own interests. Independence is not a constant living in happiness or bliss. We can see this in our country as well. (Adamson, 2000b; {2000_L_POST_00220})

We alone cannot resist Russian expansionism, which, sooner or later, will reappear. (Sepp, 2000; {2000_L_POST_01750})

Another challenge tied to the size of the nation is striking a balance between vulnerability and marginalisation on one hand and the assertiveness and resilience of identity on the other. Political leaders – President Lennart Meri and Prime Minister Mart Laar – have urged the nation to move beyond the self-pity and the inferiority complex associated with being a small state:

[...] Estonia is capable of more than just survival: we are capable of overcoming forces that are far greater than our own. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_00150})

I would like to emphasise that receiving guests is also a job that can be done better than it is now. It sometimes seems to me that when distant guests arrive, we are struck by a Finno-Ugric masochistic attack of self-pity, which forces us to talk mainly about what is bad – or if not bad, then very bad. (Laar, 2000; {2000_S_LAAR_00810})

In national identity discourse, the category of **youth** claims a particular significance, as young people have historically shown marked courage in defending the nation, sustained its political

consciousness, and represent a crucial resource for its future. Thus, a scene in the film *Names in Marble* portrayed the bravery of schoolboys to whom, after they had confronted the Red Army on their own, an officer asks: “Are these the boys [who managed to cope with the Red Army]?” (Nüganen, 2002, 1:13:59; {2000_M_NIME_03700})

The youth also played a crucial role in preserving national identity during the 1960s during Soviet rule:

Young people who began to believe in the possibility of change because of the thaw years¹¹ became more active in social life. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 216; {2000_T_ADAM_08360})

President Lennart Meri emphasised that the ideas and contributions of young people are a valuable resource the nation must not allow to go to waste:

We have to be open to younger people and their ideas. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_00760})

Economy and Justice

Reflecting a broader global trend – where the general public tends to be more critical of markets and neoliberalism than elites (Hopf & Allan, 2016, pp. 221–222) – the current dataset similarly reveals that popular discourse placed a greater emphasis on concerns such as poverty and unemployment while showing less enthusiasm for the market economy, elitism, and (meritocratic) inequality.

In the **poor/unemployed** category, the narratives highlight specific social groups (such as beggars, persons with disabilities, pensioners, and professionals like teachers, doctors, and nurses, as well as the homeless), broader social categories (including those living in rural areas or small towns, and populations lacking food security), and general social conditions (such as high costs of living, low standards of living, and insufficient minimum wages or average pensions). This discourse emerged during the turbulent transition from a command economy to a free market in the 1990s, a period that “left behind” roughly a third of the population – many of whom felt disillusioned, overworked, and believed they were worse off than they had been “under the Soviets” (Taagepera, 2006, p. 79).

It was argued that those professions requiring a higher education degree should at minimum offer a decent salary:

From the point of view of social justice, is it right that teachers and other specialists holding degrees receive a salary that does not guarantee a decent life? (Voltri, 2000; {2000_L_POST_05960})

For many, constantly increasing prices, along with higher taxes imposed by the state, were the cause of a decline in the standard of living:

At the same time, life is becoming more expensive every day and the increase in wages will never catch up with the rising cost of living. (Voltri, 2000; {2000_L_POST_05980})

[...] The same leaders of our state represent a country where nearly half of the subjects live below the poverty line and only about a hundredth of the

¹¹ The term “thaw years” refers to the period of Nikita Khrushchev’s leadership of the Soviet Union (1953–1964), which was marked by relative liberalisation, expanded freedom of expression, and a loosening of cultural restrictions in areas such as art, cinema, and literature.

population dares to consider themselves wealthy. (Laks, 2000; {2000_L_POST_06670})

The unemployed were considered a particularly vulnerable group, especially when they had children to care for:

At least 100,000 people are unemployed, men and women in their prime are crying that they have no food or shelter, and most of the unemployed have small children to care for at home. (Meschin, 2000; {2000_L_POST_09780})

Prime Minister Mart Laar acknowledged both the hardships faced by the most vulnerable social groups and the widespread poverty affecting the entire country:

Firstly, looking at contemporary Estonia, we must honestly admit to ourselves that Estonia is still a very poor country in comparison with its Western neighbours. (Laar, 2000; {2000_S_LAAR_00080})

The predominant attitudes regarding the **market economy** were two-fold. On one hand, capitalism and economic liberalisation were perceived to have brought along suffering, injustices, increasing the social cleavages between rich and poor, and a loss of values. On the other hand, the rough and tough market economy had achieved a state of permanence and therefore was required for Estonian independence, progress, and international competitiveness.

From a critical perspective, concerns about social injustice were most commonly expressed through a perception that rising prices placed an unfair and disproportionate burden on the common people:

... The cost of living has risen and continues to rise. Water has become more expensive; heat and electricity have become more expensive. The prices of milk, meat, and bread are constantly being raised, and the prices of manufactured goods are rising. Medical drugs are terribly expensive. (Lõks, 2000; {2000_L_POST_11640})

President Lennart Meri offered a nuanced critique of Estonia's post-Soviet embrace of capitalism, warning that rapid liberalisation without ethical safeguards risked moral and social disintegration. Drawing on Max Weber's theory of the "Protestant work ethic," Meri argued that Estonia's economic development must not rely solely on market forces but be tempered by ethical responsibility and qualities associated with the Protestant tradition:

The problem with Estonia's short tradition of democracy is the contradiction between the crude capitalist greed for money and a model of sustainable development. Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_01090})

The spirit of capitalism must be underpinned by Protestant ethics if we try to adapt Max Weber's expressions to our context. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_01110})

The development of our economic life and society must be subordinated to the spirit of capitalism, which means adherence to the basic principles of the market economy, but they must be applied in a spirit of honest conservatism, which I consider to be the Protestant spirit here. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_01120})

The discourse surrounding Estonia's **development** and **modernisation** is largely shaped by elite narratives that portray the country as successful, progressive, and developing – particularly through urbanisation, digitalisation, and technological innovation. Consequently, aligning with technological progress was societal expectation that became an assumption:

No person will be hired if they do not know how to use a computer. (Kägu, 2000; {2000_P_OHTU_00870})

The advancement of digitalisation in e-governance was significantly facilitated by the adoption of the electronic identity card from the beginning of 2001:

In 2001, the passport will be accompanied by an ID card, i.e., an electronic identity card, which can also be a health insurance card, a bank card, and much more. (Ideon, 2000; {2000_P_POST_00480})

Although Estonia experienced relatively successful economic growth and technological progress in the 1990s, there remained a strong drive to catch up with the more advanced countries of Western Europe in these areas. According to Prime Minister Mart Laar:

We have made rapid progress in recent years, but we do not see the living standards around us develop to the standard that is common and normal in Europe. (Laar, 2000; {2000_S_LAAR_00100})

The narratives in the **elitist/unequal** category illustrate the ongoing social debate wherein increasing inequality fuelled resentment toward authorities while doubts persisted over whether the elite's legitimacy stemmed from merit or their mere wealth and influence. In particular, resentment over wealth and income inequality highlighted a divide between people and those in power:

[...] In Estonia, the difference between the income of the first and tenth decile of the population is 12 times. (Margus, 2000; {2000_L_POST_01350})

Or do we have timocracy (i.e., not power of the people, but the inexorable power of money)? (Käämbre, 2000; {2000_L_POST_03220})

At times, it was suggested that the wealthy either exerted influence over the justice system or received preferential treatment from it:

[...] And so far, no one has wanted to find the culprit and no one has been punished for their actions. The proverb probably does not lie much when it says that whoever has power and money also has influence over the courts. (Mäe, 2000b; {2000_L_POST_05560})

Some attributed deepening of social stratification and the impoverishment of large segments of the population directly to governmental policies:

After all, sermons about rapid economic growth are in sharp contrast to the constant impoverishment of most of the population. The government has not been able to put a stop to its senseless waste of people's money, corruption, and the incitement of social stratification. (Palla, 2000; {2000_L_POST_13470})

At the same time, the President advocated for a more meritocratic approach, urging the disproportionate allocation of resources toward the most talented – particularly in regard to education policy:

So real education, not fake education. So real science, not pseudoscience. So instead of three professors, one professor, but with three times the salary. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_00770})

A similar sentiment was observed among the public toward non-political and non-economic elites, as top performers in arts and sports were widely admired and did attract the same criticism:

Erki Nool ran like an arrow in the grand final and won the Olympic gold. He made history and brought ESTONIA back on the world map. (Ave, 2000; {2000_L_OHTU_03080})

The **social welfare/societal security** category combines two types of discourses –expectations and critiques regarding the state's responsibility for providing basic social protections and ensuring economic dignity for its citizens while the debate over societal security simultaneously highlighted the perceived erosion of public safety, legal order, and moral norms, often tied to rising crime, substance abuse, and the state's inability to respond these problems effectively. These dimensions were united by a belief in a paternalistic state. Therefore, whenever welfare fails or public safety collapsed, national belonging itself was questioned.

The state was blamed for failures in the provision of welfare by some people aggrieved by the perceived contrast between official rhetoric and their lived experience:

There is already talk of 100,000 unemployed people in the country who receive only a few hundred kroons of subsistence benefits. We have more than 300,000 pensioners who also fluctuate between coping and not coping with the conditions of their life. The people expect the government to take measures so as to ensure that the differences in people's living standards are not so great. The salaries of ministers and members of the Riigikogu, which are up to ten times higher than the pensions of ordinary citizens, has led to justified resentment. (Mõtsnik, 2000b; {2000_L_POST_14270})

For some, the Nordic countries represented not only a regional point of reference but a socio-political ideal towards which Estonia should strive:

At present, Estonia's gross domestic product per capita is about eight times lower than the corresponding indicator in the Nordic countries. The same relationship applies to salaries, pensions, and the most important social benefits. It is correct to compare ourselves with this region, because it has the most comparable expenditure on housing, clothing, food, and other necessities. (Udam, 2000; {2000_L_POST_13950})

Prime Minister Mart Laar, often seen as the chief architect of the neoliberal market reforms, acknowledged the normative appeal of the Nordic welfare state, albeit with certain caveats:

The government is working to transform Estonia from a country undergoing reforms into a normal country that has completed its reforms. If not a welfare state, then it shall at least be a country in a good mood. (Laar, 2000; {2000_S_LAAR_00700})

In public discourse, crime and social disorder were not merely portrayed as political challenges but as indicators of systemic dysfunction and institutional weakness, highlighting the failure of state leadership, ineffective law enforcement, and moral decline:

A crooked Estonian state will not survive if it relies only on [...] illicit liquor, prostitutes, and drug dealers. (Kortspärn, 2000a; {2000_L_POST_06970})

In addition, three respectable points: fifth in murders, female suicides, and types of murder committed. Estonia ranks also in the top ten in terms of people in prison, cases of thrush, and environmental strain. (Ernits, 2000; {2000_P_POST_01950})

Significant Others

With respect to the four identified Significant Others – the West, Russia, the European Union, and Northern Europe – there were both broad alignments and discursive convergences between elite and popular perspectives.

Within the **West** category, the most frequently discussed topics centred on NATO accession, relations with the United States, and the appeal of American (pop) culture. Both NATO and the United States were occasionally positioned in contrast to Europe and the European Union:

By joining the European Union, our homeland will become the backyard of Europe, where only negative experiments are to occur. If you are looking for friends and investors, then you need only look to the USA. (Mertsin, 2000; {2000_L_POST_00260})

Joining NATO is as necessary for us as air is to breathe, but when joining the European Union, we must negotiate conditions that leave Estonians as a nation with the opportunity to be masters of our own land. (Külvet, 2000; {2000_L_POST_13600})

While the notion of Estonia's borderland identity – positioned between East and West – was acknowledged as an integral part of its national self-image, the prevailing orientation and aspirations were clearly directed toward alignment with the West:

We stood and continue to stand on the border between two civilizations, the Occident and the Orient, and we received and continue to receive influences from both sides. This is reflected in our language and mindset. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 25; {2000_T_ADAM_00620})

Prime Minister Mart Laar recognised this ambiguity with a sober awareness of the country's distance from the conditions of Western prosperity:

Firstly, looking at contemporary Estonia, we must honestly admit to ourselves that Estonia is still a very poor country in comparison with its Western neighbours. (Laar, 2000; {2000_S_LAAR_00070})

Russia as a Significant Other is mostly negatively characterised as the source of historical injustices, political aggression, a backward contrast to “the West”, and a threat to Estonia's sovereignty:

Perhaps there are some obligations in Russia as well? [...] If Putin wants to be the democratic leader of a democratic Russia that emphasises its thousand-year-old continuity, it is his duty to apologise for all of the harm that Russians have done to other nations to normalise Russians' relations with their neighbours. (Sima, 2000b; {2000_L_POST_05860})

For Russians, other nations have been needed throughout history only for subjugation and exploitation. (Sepp, 2000; {2000_L_POST_01700})

A smaller cluster depicts Russia not solely as a geopolitical threat but also as a source of cultural wealth – particularly regarding literature, art, and personal memory. In the novel *Abnormal*, this is reflected in the protagonist's introspective yearning:

You want to lie in bed like Andrei Tarkovsky, hold a piece of paper in front of your eyes, and watch your unfinished films. (Kender, 2000, p. 94; {2000_N_KEND_00820})

In contrast, narratives of **European Union** are mostly positive, considering the EU vital for security and stability and membership in the EU both as a natural cultural belonging and a reward for enacting reforms on the basis of the shared European values. According to Prime Minister Mart Laar:

[...] this should undoubtedly make us proud of what we have achieved. For who, ten or even five years ago, would have taken the claim seriously that we were no longer aiming for the countries of Central Europe but were aiming for much higher standards and would take Europe as a reference point in everything we do, in everything we decide, and in everything we aspire to. (Laar, 2000; {2000_S_LAAR_00260})

President Lennart Meri strongly emphasised the urgency of integration with the EU as a means to ensure Estonia's long-term security:

People are thirsty for security, both at home and abroad. Our goal is to get into the European Union and NATO before it is too late. We should have this goal in mind every day, and it follows that we must also work towards it every day. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_00430})

There was a broad expectation that EU membership would bring significant economic benefits:

[...] so when will wages and pensions reach the European level? (Aaloe, 2000; {2000_L_POST_03590})

Although less dominant, critical perspectives remained notable, emphasising concerns over reduced sovereignty, excessive regulations, and a mismatch between EU standards and Estonia's own context and trajectory. One commentator even warned that EU membership would sharply curtail Estonia's independence:

We once dreamed of forging our own independent state. With the accession to the European Union, there is no hope that it will still be possible to make independent decisions on the issues that are important to the people. (Kägi, 2000; {2000_L_POST_01890})

Others articulated fears that EU membership would undermine Estonia's autonomy in significant economic sectors and expose Estonian agriculture to unfair market pressures:

Estonians are used to being masters themselves and do not like it when they are deprived of the right to make their own decisions, and we do not want to take our agriculture to the EU's unfair altar of profits. The export of our agricultural products has already had a negative balance due to the EU's unilateral restrictions and bureaucracy, but what will happen when Estonia has given up its independence? (Kinnas, 2000; {2000_L_OHTU_04880})

In 2000, **Northern Europe** was widely regarded in a positive light – as a model of effective governance, the ideal welfare society, and as an attractive destination for employment abroad. Comparisons most frequently referenced Finland and Sweden. While Estonia's position in such comparisons was often modest or disappointing, both the public and political leadership viewed the Nordic countries as aspirational benchmarks and as the most natural points of reference:

The salary of a Finn is about six times higher than that of an Estonian. (Hallas, 2000; {2000_L_POST_03110})

President Lennart Meri encouraged comparisons with Nordic countries, even if the contrast was sobering:

If we compare ourselves with our wealthy Nordic neighbours, it, of course, elicits far from joyful feelings. But it is also good that we compare ourselves with the countries with the highest standard of living in the world and discuss where we were ten years ago. (Meri, 2000; {2000_S_MERI_00790})

Critical voices expressed concern over the brain drain linked to the emigration of Estonia's most talented individuals and the failure of seasonal workers – especially young women – who would not return home:

If we send young, single Estonian women abroad for three years, it is clear that most of them will never return to Estonia. After all, they are at the age when a family is created. So, the family is in Norway. (Särg, 2000; {2000_P_POST_02700})

Historic Others

The dataset identifies three historically significant Others – the Soviet Union, Russia, and the Baltic Germans – of which only the Soviet Union functioned as a 'living Other' (Vucetic 2016, p. 207) while Russia and the Baltic Germans appeared primarily within the narrative frameworks of history textbooks without garnering significant connotations in regard to present identifications or future aspirations. Both historic Russia and the Baltic Germans followed a similar evaluative pattern: they were viewed positively when their actions were seen as contributing to Estonian independence, national culture, education, literacy, or the growth of peasant rights.

The **Soviet Union** was predominantly viewed in a negative light; however, over time, some of its historical injustices began to fade from public memory, while certain aspects – particularly in education and the economy – became subjects of nostalgic idealisation for some:

On the other hand, Soviet-era education was characterised by an improvement in its availability. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 221; {2000_T_ADAM_08500})

[...] it is sad to see letters in the newspapers in which people present their nostalgia for the life, conditions, and wages of the occupation period, when the most important thing is that all the injustices and horrors of the Red Terror are quickly forgotten, and people develop a nostalgia for the collective farming system. (Langemets, 2000; {2000_P_POST_01030})

The representation of historic **Russia** was mostly negative, although some significant achievements accomplished under imperial Russia were enthusiastically endorsed. Thus, the history textbook argued:

Kadriorg Palace, built in 1718 by order of Peter the Great as the summer residence of the Tsar's family, is the most beautiful baroque building in Estonia. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 91; {2000_T_ADAM_03200})

Additionally, the experience of Estonian peasants under Russian imperial rule was treated as both ambiguous and complex:

The peasants held the local landlords accountable for the repressions and continued to believe in a good emperor. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 103; {2000_T_ADAM_03800})

Ultimately, imperial Russia inadvertently fostered Estonian cultural nationalism as an unintended consequence of repressive measures that were aimed at stifling national awakening:

The pressure of Russification was another experience of why it is bad to live under foreign rule, and it gave an impetus to the emergence of ideas of independence. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 118; {2000_T_ADAM_04480})

The role of **Baltic Germans** in the development of Estonian nationhood is multifaceted, embodying both processes of cultural enrichment and political subjugation. On one hand, the Baltic Germans mediated European intellectual currents to the Estonians and contributed to the preservation of regional autonomy against the threat of Russification. On the other hand, their historic dominance had historically been a source of deep-seated resentment. Famously, one leader of the early Estonian national awakening, Karl Robert Jakobson, periodised the seven centuries of Baltic German domination as “the Dark Age of the Time of Submission to the Germans” to be followed by “the beginning of the dawn, when the power of the Baltic-German nobility would be broken” (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 113; {2000_T_ADAM_04200}). However, to some extent, Estonian national identity has consistently included some positive associations with Baltic Germans, their culture, and language:

On the other hand, the legal and administrative regime that differed from that of Russia also offered Estonians protection from Russification and preserved local distinctiveness. Through German culture, Estonians became part of a common European culture. The struggle for and against the Baltic special order was the most pervasive theme in Estonian history for the next two centuries. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 88; {2000_T_ADAM_03010})

All educated people, even those of peasant origin, used German as the language of communication until the middle of the 19th century. One of the reasons for this was a lack of an Estonian scientific and cultural language at the time. (Adamson and Valdmaa, 1999, p. 124; {2000_T_ADAM_04600})

3. The predominant discourse and its challengers

In 2000, the dominant discourse of Estonian identity was structured around themes of national continuity, cultural pride, and integration with Western institutions and values. It foregrounded sovereignty, historical perseverance, and cultural distinctiveness, which were symbolically reinforced through national emblems, the Estonian language, and pride in educational achievement. Elite narratives advanced an image of Estonia as a meritocratic, modern, and digitally progressive state – small in size but confidently European, oriented toward Nordic governance models and defined in part by a decisive break with its Soviet past.

This predominant discourse was anchored in a forward-looking nationalism, legitimised through historical references, cultural traditions, and collective memory. It was largely coherent across elite and mass perspectives in its affirmation of independence, national survival, and belonging to Europe. Key identity categories such as **National Culture**, **Independent Estonia**, and being **United** were sites of convergence.

However, several discursive challengers emerged – particularly from the site of mass discourse – questioning the legitimacy, effectiveness, and fairness of this vision. The **Poor/Unemployed**, **Self-Destructive**, and **Elitist/Unequal** categories revealed a strong undercurrent of social critique. These discourses expressed concerns about widening inequality, poverty, brain drain, and the moral consequences of neoliberal reforms. They questioned the elite’s celebration of this progress by highlighting structural neglect, the collapse of rural services, and diminishing social cohesion. However, they failed to offer any concrete or feasible alternatives of their own.

Critical perspectives – particularly among the common people – revealed ambivalence toward the traditional ideals of nationalism and patriotism. These views questioned whether appeals to loyalty to the nation, conservative moral values, and heroic historical narratives could meaningfully address the contemporary realities of social exclusion, economic injustice, and marginalisation. In this discourse, symbolic expressions of national pride were seen as insufficient when opposing the unfulfilled expectations of fairness, equality, and material security.

The discourse regarding **Russians in Estonia** also functioned as a site of friction. Elite discourse emphasised integration via language and loyalty while public voices often viewed Russophones with suspicion, reinforcing cultural divisions and fears of a potential imperial revival.

These challenger discourses reveal that while national identity in 2000 was largely cohesive, it was not uncontested. Rather, it reflected ongoing negotiations between historical continuity, aspirational modernity, and the unresolved tensions of a society in transition.

4. Conclusion

The discursive landscape of Estonian national identity in 2000 reflected a dynamic tension between continuity and change, pride, and insecurity. Dominant narratives portrayed Estonia as a sovereign, Western-oriented nation rooted in cultural resilience, democratic values, and historical memory – articulated through symbols, education, and language. Nevertheless, mass discourse revealed critical undercurrents: concerns over economic liberalisation, rural marginalisation, and rising inequality fuelled calls for accountable governance and a Nordic-style welfare state. Cultural anxieties over Russophone integration, language purity, and moral decline exposed fears about national cohesion. Ultimately, Estonian identity in 2000 was shaped by a dual orientation – anchored in narratives shaped by historical memory while projecting a forward-looking, progressive vision. It reflected both efforts to break from the Soviet past and a growing nostalgia for the welfare state as the country navigated the pressures of globalisation and continued its pursuit of recognition and full integration into the key Western institutions of the European Union and NATO.

Table 1. Raw counts

Category	Total codes	Speeches	Textbooks	Newspapers	Novels	Movies	Letters
HO: Soviet Union	403	17	178	24		10	174
Political elite	280	5	4	21			250
Poor/Unemployed	198	1	10	35	7		145
SO: West	193	7	51	27	30	1	77
Courageous/Militant	188	3	94	10	3	47	31
Religion	167	3	92	2	19	12	39
SO: EU	152	39	3	22	5		83
Conservative	151		7	22	14	14	94
HO: Russia	141	2	134				5
HO: Baltic Germans	129		104	2	1		22
Rural/Pastoral/Regional	124	1	57	25	1		40
SO: Russia	116	1	5	20	31	6	53
National culture	109	3	62	10	19	2	13
Market economy	107	11	8	25	1		62
Social welfare/Societal security	107	4		20		1	82
SO: Northern Europe	100	2	17	26	4	7	44
United	96	8	27	6	1	46	8
Independent	89	7	41	2	2	25	12
Elitist/Unequal	86	3	15	16	2	3	47
Russians in Estonia	85	1	3	27	3		51
Competent governance	81	13	1	21			46
Responsible government	79	13	4	19		1	42
Democratic	72	12	21	9			30
Educated/Prudent	70	5	34	3	4	6	18
Estonian language	69	1	26	6	8	1	27
Nationalist/Patriotic	65	10	25	7	9	1	13
Developing/Modernising	65	17	23	20			5
Indigenous/Protectionist	56	1	27	7	9	1	11
Self-destructive	53	2	1	9	13	1	27
Environmentally-friendly	45	3	11	6		5	20
Small	40	7	6	4	4		19
Youth	22	3	1	6	2	7	3
Totals	3738	205	1092	459	192	197	1593

Table 2. Topography of Estonian identity

	Speeches	Textbooks	Op-eds	Novels	Movies	Letters
<i>Identity and Belonging</i>						
National culture	+	++	+	--//~++	+	
Independent	++	++			+++++	
Nationalist/Patriotic	++	+	+	--/		
Russians in Estonia			--~+	+		--
Estonian language		/+		-/+		+
Indigenous/Protectionist		+		~~+		
<i>Political Elite and Governance</i>						
United	~++	+			+++++	
Political elite	+		--			-----
Competent governance	+++		++			++
Responsible government	+++		++			++
Rural/Pastoral/Regional		/++	-++			+
Democratic	++		+			+
<i>Values</i>						
Religion	+	-/~++		--~~++	///+	-+
Conservative			-++	--~~+	+++	--++
Courageous/Militant		//++	+	~	+++++	
Educated/Prudent	+	++		~+	++	
Self-destructive			-	--//~		-
Environmentally-friendly	+		+		++	
Small	+			-		
Youth					++	
<i>Economy and Justice</i>						
Poor/Unemployed			--//	--/		----
Market economy	--~+		-++			--
Developing/Modernising	~+++	+	++			
Elitist/Unequal			-+		+	--
Social welfare/Social security	+		++			++
<i>Significant Others</i>						
West	~+	-++	~++	--///~++		-++
Russia			--+	-///~~+++	/++	--
European Union	~~+++++		-++	/+		--~+
Northern Europe			-~++	-	++	+
<i>Historic Others</i>						
Soviet Union	----	-----/~	--~		-++	-----+
Russia		-----~+				
Baltic Germans		--//~+				

Salience 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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