



Making Identity Count: Estonia 2010¹

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Introduction

The dominant narrative of national identity in 2010 centred on a form of indigenous and independent nationhood rooted in cultural nationalism, a sentiment embraced by both the elite and the general population. Democracy was also widely upheld as a normative ideal, which primarily served as a benchmark for evaluating the day-to-day political behaviour of both the elite and the masses. A shared criticism of the political class emerged across social groups, reflecting widespread disillusionment with the elite. Additionally, both elite and popular discourses conveyed a common desire for improved social welfare and a reduction in rural and regional inequalities.

Debates related to values generally reflected a pattern of elite-mass consensus. Both the elite and the masses consistently supported certain values, such as environmental sustainability, while they maintained a more ambiguous stance on others, including conservatism and traditional gender roles.

A specific elite-driven national identity project framed national resilience largely in terms of economic development, strict austerity measures as evidence of efficient governance, and digital modernization culminating in Estonia's adoption of the euro in January 2011. In contrast, mass discourses focused more on issues such as the Estonian language and the presence of Russians in Estonia. They also expressed heightened concerns over poverty, inequality, and elitism, while taking a more critical view of the market economy.

Key “significant Others” included the West and the European Union – entities with which the elite more strongly identified than the general public. As had been the case during the two previous decades, the Soviet Union and Russia remained prominent historical “Others,” generally viewed in a negative light. However, the Soviet Union was occasionally acknowledged for its high living standards and conservative social order, while Russia, in its more historical iterations, was sometimes seen as supportive of Estonia's national aspirations.

1. Text selection and classification of sources

For the 2010 archive (see ‘Sources’ below for the list), the sample of leadership speeches included the Independence Day Speech of President Toomas Hendrik Ilves (24 February 2010) and Prime Minister Andrus Ansip's speech on the Anniversary of the Republic of Estonia (23 February 2010). In 2010, Estonia was governed by the second government of Andrus Ansip, which held office from 5 April 2007 to 6 April 2011. Toomas Hendrik Ilves served as the President of Estonia from 9 October 2006 to 10 October 2016.

In 2010, the most popular daily papers were *Postimees*, with 59,800 copies in circulation, and *Õhtuleht*, with 53,900 copies in circulation (Eesti Meediaettevõtete Liit). Opinion pieces, editorials, staff articles, and signed commentary published on the 15th day of every month² in *Postimees* and *Õhtuleht* were examined for identity-related content. This selection yielded 156

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.

op-ed articles (114 from *Postimees* and 42 from *Õhtuleht*) and 518 initial codes (354 from *Postimees* and 164 from *Õhtuleht*), from which 466 codings were ultimately included in the final matrix of the most prominent categories.

The sample of letters consisted of submissions from readers that were published in *Postimees* and *Õhtuleht* throughout the entire year. *Postimees* published letters from readers in regular sections such as ‘Letter’ and ‘Reader’s letter,’ while *Õhtuleht* published responses from readers in sections like ‘Letter’, ‘Reader's letter’, ‘Response’, ‘Reader calls’, ‘Blogging’, ‘Tweeting’, ‘Writing to Stella’, and ‘Net comments’. In total, 458 letters were scanned (287 from *Postimees* and 171 from *Õhtuleht*), resulting in 625 codes (406 from *Postimees* and 219 from *Õhtuleht*) of which 400 codings were included in the final list of the most prominent categories.

Two movies were chosen based on viewership data (Estonian Film Institute): “Farts of Fury” (“Kormoranid ehk Nahkpükse ei pesta”) was the most-watched Estonian-produced film in 2011 (39,751 viewers), with “Red Mercury” (“Punane elavhõbe”) holding the same position in 2010 (27,235 viewers). “Farts of Fury” follows an ageing former rock group frontman who decides to reunite their old band and to return to the big stage. The fast-paced comedy depicts the ups and downs of this venture by people who, despite numerous setbacks, remain determined to achieve their goal. “Red Mercury” deals with the turbulent early 1990s in re-independent Estonia, when criminal groups competed for control over the export of non-ferrous metals, including the elusive “red mercury.”

The selection of novels was based on book sales data (Society of Estonian Publishers). “Paradise” (“Paradiis”) by Tõnu Õnnepalu was the best-selling adult fiction novel of 2010, with 2,968 copies sold, followed by “Shadow Theatre” (“Varjuteater”) by Viivi Luik, with 2,200 copies sold. “Paradise” is an autobiographic novel set in a small village on the west coast of Hiiumaa, located between the forest and the sea, during the years of transition to re-independent Estonia. The protagonist reflects on the present and archaic life of the locals, searches for paradise within and outside himself, and asks whether hopes and expectations have changed over the time or remained the same. “Shadow Theatre” is an autobiographical travel novel in which the author reflects on her journey to Rome, the Eternal City – a place she had longed to visit. The Eternal City becomes a vantage point for self-reflection, from where she observes herself and her surroundings, memories, and experiences.

The sample of Estonian history textbooks for secondary schools was limited to the only two books available (Laur *et al.* 2009, and Pajur and Tannberg 2006) for that calendar year. Unlike the standard *Making Identity Count* method, which suggests starting with the early 20th century (Allan 2016, p. 35), the content of textbooks was coded starting from the ancient period, as national identity discourses in post-Soviet Estonia have located the starting point of the Estonian struggle for independence in the era of ‘ancient freedoms’ preceding the thirteenth-century German-Danish conquest (Tamm 2008, p. 505).

2. Raw identity categories

To balance the unequal distribution of raw identity codes across genres, we calculated percentages normalized by genre to determine the relative prominence of raw codes within each of the six genres. Categories with an average prominence 1.01% were eliminated, resulting in a final list of 34 categories and 2,179 codings.

Table 1 (at the end of this report) presents the raw frequencies of the most common identity categories by genre for 2010. Table 2 maps the topography of identity categories based on valences (+ for positive and aspirational, - for negative and aversive, ~ for ambiguous, and /

for neutral).³ Final categories were organized 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 in the cells of Table 2 indicates the affective relevance of an identity category within each genre. Within each cluster, categories are arranged by the numbers of valence symbols assigned.

The four categories receiving highest scores of valence symbols were: **HO: Soviet Union** (22),⁴ **National culture/symbols** (18), **SO: West** (17)⁵ and **Religion** (16). The most prominent affective categories scored valence symbols slightly more from mass sources, except for National culture/symbols, which scored equally across elite and mass sources.⁶

Identity and Belonging

This cluster of identity categories reflects discourses surrounding independent statehood. Shared categories included **Independent**, **Indigenous/Nationalist** and **National culture/symbols**. Topics such as the **Estonian language** and **Russians in Estonia** were more prominent in popular discourse, while themes like the **Euro (currency)**, **Digital**, and **United** were more prevalent in elite discourse.

The category **National culture/symbols** included narratives highlighting the relevance of folk culture, cultural traditions (e.g., choir singing, art, theatre, literature, handicraft), traditional food (e.g., rye bread), national education, national press, the national movement, national symbols (e.g., the national flag), and subsidies from the national budget aimed at promoting cultural traditions.

The history textbook emphasized the patriotic significance of collecting Estonian folklore in the late 19th century:

Jakob Hurt's⁷ call for the collection of folklore in 1888 received a wide response in society. He was able to create an active network of correspondents all over the country. The collection of folklore was also treated in the press as "the important work of the fatherland". (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 156; {2010_T_LAUR_05040})⁸

Historically, the Estonian language and folklore reinforced the deep-rooted and ancient connection between the Estonian people, their land, and their independent statehood:

Folklore, which often preserves very old traditions, is valuable to draw upon. Even the Estonian language itself can hold important insights into ancient times. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 9; {2010_T_LAUR_00020})

³ 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).

⁴ HO refers to 'Historic Other'.

⁵ SO refers to 'Significant Other'.

⁶ According to the Making Identity Count methodology, leadership speeches, textbooks, and op-eds are considered "more elite" genres, while letters, novels, and films are categorized 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.

⁷ Jakob Hurt (1839-1907) was one of the leading figures of the Estonian National Awakening (from 1850s until 1918). Hurt was a folklorist and linguist, a Lutheran clergyman, and a social activist.

⁸ 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).

The 19th century national awakening of Estonians, which laid the groundwork for the later push for political independence, began with the recognition of shared cultural traditions – most notably marked by the first Song Festival held in Tartu in 1869:

The Song Festival – the first nationwide gathering of Estonians – increased the sense of national unity. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 153; {2010_T_LAUR_04790})

Accordingly, the independent statehood established in 1918 was grounded in cultural nationalism, which, in turn, played a key role in the flourishing of national culture:

The achievement of national independence [in 1918] had a positive impact on all spheres of life, but the greatest achievement of statehood was the development of a modern national culture and the rapid promotion of cultural life. (Pajur and Tannberg, 2006, p. 58; {2010_T_PAJU_01740})

In 2010, the nation's small size was seen as requiring inner resilience, proactive self-preservation, and the safeguarding of the national language as a vital component of state security:

The cultural code of Estonians says that when we are small in numbers, we must be great in spirit. In many areas, this requires active self-defence, i.e., conscious nationalism. We need language protection as much as we need national defence capabilities. We also need a positive national myth and unifying symbols. (Herkel, 2010; {2010_P_POST_01540})

The transmission of folk traditions – such as singing, dancing, and cooking – across generations was widely regarded as a lasting foundation of national unity and statehood:

A few years ago, it appeared that folk dance was facing a decline in young male participation [...] After this concert, however, it was a pleasure to see that young men and girls have rediscovered folk dance for themselves. (Iin, 2010; {2010_L_POST_02010})

The core narrative of **Independent** Estonia focused on the War of Independence (1918-1920). According to President Toomas Hendrik Ilves:

Our forefathers and mothers created this country 92 years ago because they wanted to decide for themselves, to do things for themselves, to stand for themselves. And they wanted the same for us, their children, grandchildren, and future generations. (Ilves, 2010; {2010_S_ILVE_00790})

Additionally, the principle of continuity with the pre-World War II Republic of Estonia – serving to confront and distance the nation from the Soviet era – was reaffirmed in 2009, when on the Victory Day (23 June) the War of Independence Victory Column was erected and opened in Tallinn. On Victory Day, celebrated in Estonia since 1934, Estonians commemorate their triumph in the Battle of Võnnu (Cēsis) over the Baltic-German *Landeswehr* Army in 1919.⁹

As usual, the history textbook traced the origins of the independence struggle to the 11th–12th centuries:

Relations with neighbours were mostly peaceful. From time to time, quarrels arose, and mutual raids and military campaigns were made. [...] Neighbouring military units were able to involve themselves in military campaigns and posed

⁹ In Estonian national mythology, Victory Day represents the ultimate triumph in ‘the Great Battle for Freedom’ against the Baltic Germans, following seven centuries of defeats (Tamm 2008, p. 506).

a threat to the independence of Estonians. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 34; {2010_T_LAUR_00920})

A significant historic event was the St. George's Night Uprising in 1343 – itself one of key battles of the 'the Great Battle for Freedom' (Tamm 2008, p. 506):

The St. George's Night Uprising plays a significant role in the national consciousness of Estonians. [...] On the political level, it is believed that the uprising was an expression of the conscious aspiration of the Estonian people for statehood, which places this event in the same line as the ancient fight for freedom and the War of Independence. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 57; {2010_T_LAUR_01540})

Another prominent event in Estonian cultural memory was the restoration of independence on 20 August 1991, which in 2010 served as a symbol for confronting the Soviet past. Viivi Luik in her autobiographic novel recalled:

On these two mornings in August of the ninety-first year, we said good-bye to each other, not knowing if we would see each other again. [...] The duty to be fulfilled involved standing firm in the cold for two days, undeterred by the clatter of tanks and the snap of handcuffs. It was in pursuit of a long-whispered dream – a free nation and independence – for which lives had been sacrificed in bunkers and trenches, camps, and prisons. (Luik, 2010, p. 16; {2010_N_LUIK_00200})

Although the period following August 1991 was later remembered with mixed emotions, the restoration of independence brought about a profound and sincere sense of joy:

Because at that time, freedom came and none of us knew what it really meant. Now we know that the old freedom was exchanged for the new, and the old slavery was replaced by the new, as is often the case. But if the new hasn't really come yet and the old one hasn't really gone yet, then it's a truly free era. (Õnnepalu, 2009, p. 51; {2010_N_ONNE_00550})

As Estonia joined the Eurozone in January 2011, the **Euro (currency)** was a frequent subject of public debate throughout 2010. Joining the Eurozone was a national identity project of the governing elite – both Prime Minister Andrus Ansip and President Toomas Hendrik Ilves were staunch supporters of the corresponding change in the national currency system.

President Ilves argued that the new currency would boost both confidence and a sense of security:

Of course, the euro will bring more investment and new jobs. But the euro alone will not solve any of our problems. It's like joining NATO and the European Union. The euro gives us confidence and a sense of security that our own money and the money invested here will not lose its value. (Ilves, 2010; {2010_S_ILVE_00480})

Prime Minister Ansip assured people that Europe will serve as "a quality mark of the Estonian economic environment, a clear signal to all investors in the world – come here, create companies and jobs, this is a reliable and safe place to implement your ideas and grow your money" (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00470}). Additionally, he employed figurative language, stating that the euro "will generate far more jobs than any national measure" (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00530}).

However, many people were “against the euro because they believe that life will become even worse” (Tooming, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_00530}). For others, the transition to the euro was viewed as merely a self-serving initiative driven by the elite:

If the Estonian kroon has served us properly for 18 years, then the euro is only needed for businessmen who wander around the world so that they do not need to change money. And to Ansip and his disciples, who have made this dire “common currency” their goal in life! (Tom, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_01220})

Following the Bronze Soldier riots sparked by the government decision to relocate the Bronze Soldier monument, a Soviet World War II Memorial, in April 2007 (Ehala 2009) **Russians in Estonia** became more distinctly recognized as a social group, further reinforcing ethnic cleavages in party politics. In 2009, the Centre Party – primarily backed by Russian-speaking voters – won both the European Parliament elections and the Tallinn city council elections.¹⁰ Simultaneously, renewed debates over the “real” history of the Soviet Union reintroduced the politics of memory in public discourse (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008, p. 246).

In previous decades, less attention had been paid to Russian-speaking people in Estonia. The history textbook describes the period when the nationwide movement to restore independence began in 1988 – with the Singing Revolution and the Baltic Chain on August 23, 1989 – noting that¹¹ “little attention was paid to the inclusion of non-Estonians at the time, which created alienation and later more serious political disagreements” (Pajur and Tannberg, 2006, p. 144; {2010_T_PAJU_03920}).

By 2010, full cultural integration of Russians was difficult to achieve without both fluency in the Estonian language and an understanding of Estonian history. In a letter to an editor titled “The trouble with the language barrier” (“Hädas umbkeelsusega”), an Estonian woman recounted a disappointing encounter at the War of Independence Victory Column with a Russian woman who was unfamiliar with both the Estonian language and the Estonian perspective on national history:

Completely unexpectedly, she came to me and said in Russian that you can’t put candles here. She cited the excuse that there was a lot of snow. This woman probably didn’t know anything about the War of Independence, and she didn’t know what kind of monument it was. She was not able to say a single word in Estonian. (Joost, 2010; {2010_L_POST_00060})

Raivo Vetik, a professor of political science at Tallinn University, acknowledged the significant ethnic inequality and its impact on the Russian-speaking population in an opinion piece, stating:

The pronounced ethnic inequality intensifies the sense of alienation not only among stateless individuals¹² but also among Estonian Russians toward the Estonian state. (Vetik, 2010; {2010_P_POST_02610})

For some, insufficient **Estonian language** proficiency among Russian speakers was seen as a threat to the vitality of the Estonian language:

¹⁰ The Centre party received 55.69% of the votes in Tallinn in 2009 local elections resulting in 44 seats out of 79. It also won 2009 European Parliament elections with 26,1% of votes and 2 mandates out of six reserved for Estonia.

¹¹ On 23 August 1989, nearly two million people from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania formed a “live chain” of people that extended for 670 kilometres from Tallinn to Vilnius.

¹² In 2010, the official number of stateless persons or persons with undetermined citizenship in Estonia was approximately 100,000 (UNHCR 2010).

Making Russian the second official language would give Russians the right to speak only Russian. That would be discrimination against Estonians, because for society to function, we, Estonians, would have to start speaking Russian. (Välja, 2010; {2010_L_POST_03620})

However, concern about the preservation of the **Estonian language** was not limited to the Russian-speaking population. Among Estonians, there was also a concern for the preservation of the correct use of syntax and grammar in oral and written communication:

If the Estonian language's characteristic syntax, word order, intervals, uppercase and lowercase letters, punctuation marks, etc., disappear, then the language will soon simply no longer exist. (Laidla, 2010c; {2010_L_POST_03860})

The **Indigenous/Nationalist** narrative of Estonian identity refers to those who are seen as having a unique connection to the Estonian land – metaphorically ‘indigenous’ to its territory and culture (Feldman 2001, p. 13). The commitment to preserving and protecting indigenous culture is also affirmed in the preamble of the Estonian Constitution, which declares that the state “must guarantee the preservation of the Estonian people, the Estonian language, and Estonian culture through the ages” (The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia). Therefore, when the national economy becomes dependent on foreign labour, it creates a sense of *ontological insecurity* (Kaufmann 2017, p. 12) among those groups that were concerned that the incoming immigrants would not share local cultural norms and values:

And most importantly, if all Estonian residents worked honestly and properly, we wouldn't need foreign labour anytime soon. It is obvious that Estonia has been in an existential crisis for a long time. Personally, I have nothing against a thousand Estonian-speaking Kurds. In addition, ten thousand Somalis in Estonian folk costumes would certainly help to bring Estonians' sense of history to the developed world. But what is the point of the Estonian state and what should we do with our constitution? (Kortspärn, 2010; {2010_L_POST_02680})

Viivi Luik's shared this “indigenous nation first” mindset when she wrote in her novel:

Today's middle-aged people do not want migrant workers to be brought to our tiny homeland and take away our jobs, which would mean that we, the natives, have to live in poverty and misery. (Luik, 2010, p. 10; {2010_L_OHTU_00910})

At times, the Estonian identity of expatriates born in Sweden or United States was called into question. When incumbent president Toomas Hendrik Ilves ran for president again, subsequently re-elected in August 2011, his expatriate origins were problematised:

He [Toomas Hendrik Ilves] does not say a single word in his biography about his origins, who were his father and mother, his grandparents. This is very important for a person in such a position. We don't really know anything about his origins or even his nationality. The country's first man should still be Estonian, right? (Leps, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_00870})

National pride and determination have been emphasised since the beginning of the national awakening in the mid-19th century, continuing up to 2010, when the country, under the leadership of Andrus Ansip's government, successfully emerged from the global financial crisis that spanned from late 2007 to mid-2009:

The involvement of Estonians in the national movement began primarily with national agitation, the essence of which was to instil in the people that “being Estonian is a source of pride and virtue”. Remaining Estonian began to be treated as an ethical obligation of the rural people. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 152; {2010_T_LAUR_04710})

Today, we can assure ourselves that despite the difficult times, we have maintained a sober mind and willpower as a country. We are a proud and dignified, healthy and smart people. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00330})

Both President Ilves and Prime Minister Ansip emphasised **unity** as a fundamental prerequisite for the Estonian nation in overcoming both historical and contemporary challenges:

In difficult times, we have been sticking together... (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00930})

Ever since our forefathers and mothers took it into their heads in the 19th century that we were equal to other nations, we have found obstacles in our way time and time again. We have surpassed them. We have often overcome higher obstacles than were placed on others. (Ilves, 2010; {2010_S_ILVE_00010})

Unity and consensus were likewise framed by the people as sources of national strength and antidotes to feelings of inferiority:

All humiliation and servility will come to an end one day, and for that we must be more united than we have been lately. (Leppmaa, 2010; {2010_L_POST_03040})

The virtues of **digital** transformation in education, economy, and public governance were emphatically proclaimed by the political elite. Prime Minister Andrus Ansip asserted:

Estonia’s path is to be a high-tech country with high employment. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00860})

However, the unequal impact of digital transition on different societal groups was also acknowledged:

Any digital transformation will be the winners first and foremost the technical actors of this revolution, as well as politicians who can boast of the digitalisation of Estonia anywhere in the world. (Juhtkiri, 2010a; {2010_P_OHTU_00790})

Political Elite and Governance

Within the cluster of identity categories associated to political elites and governance, both elite and mass discourses affirmed the value of **democracy** and **rural/regional** identity. They also expressed criticism toward the **political class/elite** and acknowledged widespread **depression** and **stress** stemming from the economic hardships affecting certain social groups. Compared to mass discourses, elite rhetoric placed greater emphasis on **responsible/efficient governance**.

Generally, the blame for these difficulties was placed on the political elite or the Ansip government:

In fact, it is the ruling parties that have turned our lives upside down. (Vana, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_01290})

I hope that the next Riigikogu elections will show whether our sanity is still in order when we re-elect the same people to Toompea who change the laws only

in the interests of their own enrichment, not in the interests of making the life of the state or the people better and safer. (Mäe, 2010; {2010_L_POST_00080})

Prime Minister Ansip was criticised for contradicting public opinion and making unpopular decisions, while Sven Mikser (chairman of Social Democrats from October to May 2015) was expected to embody a more rhetorically assertive, popular, and charismatic leadership style:

Ansip does not listen to the opinion of the people, because this is populism! Unpopular decisions must be made, and the opinion of the people must be contradicted. [...] Who is this country for? (Kelle riik?, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_01210})

Sharp language would only bring plus points, provide quotability, and make people talk about the party. Can anyone imagine Mikser calling the working people to the barricades or agitating at a speech meeting on Toompea Square? The party leader should first and foremost be a man of the people, an agitator and a propagandist. (Uudam, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_01340})

Whereas in the 1990s the rural-pastoral lifestyle of the ancestors was widely valorised as a foundation of national culture, by 2010 a growing **rural**-urban divide had become increasingly apparent – both in terms of lifestyle and quality of life between the cities and peripheral **regions**.

In his novel, Tõnu Õnnepalu noted that during the early years of the restoration of independence, a popular idea emerged: that people should return to live in the countryside, reconnecting with the land of their ancestors (Õnnepalu, 2009, p. 52; {2010_N_ONNE_00610}). In practice, however, the opposite trend prevailed:

They have a grandfather and a farm in the countryside, but they ran to the city for an easy life and took a loan to buy an apartment. (Eks ole, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_01550})

In 2010, President Ilves, too, acknowledged the continued disadvantages experienced by residents of underdeveloped and remote rural areas:

They suffer because the human principle enshrined in Estonian law – every resident has the right to a high-quality public service, regardless of their place of residence – has not yet reached every corner of Estonia. (Ilves, 2010; {2010_S_ILVE_00230})

Nevertheless, **responsible** economic policy of the government had earned a degree of public trust and support. As praised in an anonymous letter, the statesmanlike policy of the Estonian government had made the economy more resilient to the global financial crisis:

Estonia was better prepared for the crisis than many other countries. The state had accumulated reserves, of which 25 billion kroons still remain. Others do not have such reserves. The debt burden of the Estonian government is the smallest in the European Union. [...] I trust our government, and there is a reason for that. (Anonüümne, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_01390})

The Prime Minister, in turn, praised the Estonian public for recognizing that austerity measures were the only **efficient** response under the circumstances of the broader financial crisis:

How have we been able to increase reserves, avoid taking on debt, cut costs and carry out much-needed reforms in the process? We have been able to do this thanks to the understanding of the people. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00280})

Challenging economic conditions generated considerable **stress, depression** and a sense of hopelessness among certain social groups:

In these seemingly bad times, there is a great lack of positive energy. Many of us have lost our jobs, and it can be hard to see the way out. Fear, hopelessness, and sadness are clearly felt – it is reflected in any [media] channel. (Pöldma, 2010; {2010_L_POST_02700})

Democracy was generally affirmed as a normative ideal against which everyday political practices were measured. Democratic leaders were thus expected to be more attentive and responsive to public opinion:

In my opinion, those who do not ask voters or do anything to listen to them are mistaken. (Vaher, 2010; {2010_P_POST_02620})

The pluralist ethos of liberal democracy – rooted in the acceptance of difference – was articulated as a desirable social norm:

Estonians must learn tolerance, nothing else. We live in a democratic society, but this tends to be forgotten. In other words, don't stare, criticize others, but see for yourself how to live life better. (Aureelia, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_01850})

The responsibility for maintaining the quality of democracy was not only seen as falling solely on the elite but also extended to active, critical and constructive citizen participation in public debates:

The silent era threatens us not because of those in positions of power, but because critically thinking people are increasingly withdrawing from public discourse. (Veidemann, 2010a; {2010_P_POST_03430})

Values

Within the identity categories associated with the values cluster, both elite and mass discourses consistently highlighted **Educated, Environment/Nature-friendly**, and **Solidary** as the most positively viewed values. In contrast, **Religion, Conservatism**, and **Traditional gender roles** were treated ambiguously across both groups. Notably, **Environment/Nature-friendly** was the only value that the mass discourse prioritized more than the elite.

Historically, Estonians' alienation from ecclesiastical **religion** has been a perception of the Church as an instrument of colonization for seven centuries under German, Swedish, and Russian rule:

In the 17th century, the Lutheran faith was still alien to Estonians in many ways. In the Middle Ages, the ancient religion of Estonians was mixed with Catholic customs, and weaning from them was not an easy task for Lutheran pastors. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 117; {2010_T_LAUR_03190})

While Estonian society exhibits little overt anticlerical sentiment, many Estonians feel uneasy when confronted directly by religious preachers:

However, freedom of religion does not mean that anyone can walk through any door and start proclaiming their faith to others. I also don't like it when someone comes through the gate and wants to start reading the Bible to me. (Pagil, 2010; {2010_L_POST_01890})

The role of the church in the collective memory of Estonians is ambiguous. History textbooks nonetheless emphasize instances in which religious ministers and the church contributed

positively to European cultural development and to the advancement Estonian education and national identity:

The role of the church as a promoter of spiritual life remained very important until the end of the early modern period. It was the pastors who carried the most modern ideas to the Baltic States in the 18th century and, as mostly immigrants, acted as a counterweight to the conservatism of the Baltic-German native nobility. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 120; {2010_T_LAUR_03440})

In particular, the Pietist movement known as ‘Herrnhuters’ or Moravian Brethren, which spread across Estonian territory from the 1730s until its suppression in the 1860s, foster the use of the Estonian language, aligned with folk traditions, and helped crystallise a distinct self-consciousness for the Estonian peasants, as they considered it as their own church (Norkus 2007):

The keeping of diaries and correspondence accompanying the Brethren movement provided Estonians with enthusiasm for acquiring writing skills. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 121; {2010_T_LAUR_03540})

As a result, despite the highly secularized society and low levels of religious affiliation, religion retained a residual function in the civil religion of Estonian political community (Kilp 2009, pp. 71–72). As observed by Andres Põder, Archbishop of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church from 2005 to 2014:

Each sphere of life should be respected for its unique content, dignity, and role. Naturally, there are moments when these areas converge – such as during national and public holidays. On such occasions, our people also have honourable ecclesiastical traditions to display. (Põder, 2010; {2010_P_POST_01330})

Statements relating to national identity often invoked **conservative** perspectives on a range of social and moral issues, including declining birthrates, childlessness, liberal moral values, capital punishment, euthanasia, family structures, feminism, homosexuality, and extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples:

The question is no longer how many or how few thinkers there are, or how many gays there are who would like to marry in a bourgeois or even ecclesiastical marriage, but the question is a matter of principle: no matter how few of you there are, I do not support it, because it is contrary to the concept and idea of the institution of marriage: it is absurd. (By the way, there are still far fewer necrophiles than homosexuals—surely this is not an argument to legalize the possibility of marrying a corpse?) (Vahtre, 2010; {2010_P_POST_02450})

In part, the focus on conservative values reflected a sense of nostalgia, as societal attitudes had grown increasingly liberal since the 1990s:

In Estonia, which regained its independence in the early 1990s, it seemed to the press, as well as to a large part of society, that freedom equals permissiveness. Thus, many positive value systems supporting the development of society crumbled, and family values have suffered the most in this process, which unfortunately is the basis of society. (Valk, 2010; {2010_P_POST_03330})

There was broader consensus regarding the need to promote fertility for the sake of population growth:

In order to reproduce, there must be statistically at least 2.3 children per woman, otherwise we will inevitably disappear. [...] By using all means to preserve statehood, it is important to support mothers with many children. (Tiidemann, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_00290})

By 2010, the prevailing view was that conservatism was giving way to liberalism, as was reflected in a letter titled “Estonia is leaning towards liberalism”:

[...] calm conservatism in politics is what our small country needs right now. (Mertsina, 2010; {2010_L_POST_01530})

Political leaders claimed that Estonia’s ability to endure difficult economic hardship stemmed from the traits of its people – well-**educated**, intelligent, entrepreneurial and prudent:

Thanks to the determination and joint efforts of the people, Estonia is becoming a symbol of common sense and smart management – a positive sign not only for the European Union but also for the whole world. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00130})

Estonia is driven forward by enterprising and educated people who create new values. (Ilves, 2010; {2010_S_ILVE_00400})

Among the public, however, education was valued more as an institution that generated egalitarian equal opportunities:

Therefore, of all the innovations that we must face in this small republic, one of the main tasks is the availability of education for everyone, and in such a way that everyone gets the best education at the moment to develop their abilities and skills. (Lausma, 2010; {2010_L_POST_03010})

Student performance on the PISA tests – which evaluate the science, reading, and mathematics skills of 15-year-olds – ranked among the highest globally,¹³ despite education being perceived as underfunded by the state and that the teaching profession is was underappreciated:

If we look at the relationship between teachers’ remuneration and students’ achievements, one of the conclusions that the results of both PISA 2006 and 2009 refer to is that Estonia is one of the most cost-effective countries in the comparison of education costs, including teachers’ salaries, and learning performance assessed based on the PISA survey. (Trasberg, 2010; {2010_P_POST_03180})

Salary, the status of the teaching profession in society, and job satisfaction go hand in hand and should be valued throughout all educational policy decisions. (Trasberg, 2010; {2010_P_POST_03210})

Gender equality in the professional life was widely accepted as the societal norm:

I have not seen many men who expect their wives to sacrifice themselves. Quite the opposite – they drive you to school, to work – develop, develop, develop! Every man wants his wife to be the best in the village. At least. (Mäggi, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_01410})

¹³ According to the 2009 PISA report, Estonia's student performance exceeded the OECD average. The country's education system ranked among the best globally, alongside those of Finland, Canada, Japan, Norway, Iceland, and Hong Kong (Kitsing 2011, p. 5).

Professionalism in one's work does not depend on a person's gender, but above all on training and the desire to work in this field, to do one's job well, and to develop. (Veske, 2010; {2010_P_POST_02170})

Traditional gender roles were at times nostalgically invoked, often in response to perceived deficiencies in contemporary male behaviour – a lack of courage, decisiveness, or responsibility in familial or societal roles:

However, the army needs men. From time to time in my teaching profession, when I have encountered loose hedonists or excessively self-critical persons, I have understood one thing: if the axis of values in society itself is out of place (but it is so in Estonia, where personal freedom is treated as self-interest), if individualism has become the new idol, then we must be prepared for the day when genuine men are hard to find. (Veidemann, 2010b; 2010_P_POST_02070)

But why should the Defence Forces be a place where they are moulded into men, when the standards of masculinity (helpfulness, conscientiousness, sacrifice, dignity) could be clear and practiced in society itself? (Veidemann, 2010b; 2010_P_POST_02090)

The value of being **Environment/Nature-friendly** was described as an ancient tradition of Estonians:

The ancient Estonians did not consider themselves to be the rulers of nature at all. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 38; {2010_T_LAUR_01110})

This closeness to nature was believed to have been disrupted by the industrialization of the 20th century, which commoditized not only nature, but also eroded the habitual, close-to-nature mentality:

In the twentieth century, even animal sheds were called factories. Raising cows, chickens, pigs, and sheep was called milk, egg, and meat production. Poor and sick animals were burned. Trees were felled and the fields were poured with concrete. New parking lots and production buildings were built. Families became producers of new labour. (Luik, 2010, p. 116; {2010_N_LUIK_00820})

Sometimes it can be seen that the nest boxes of birds are attached to the tree trunk with thick iron nails. The tree is a living organism, and such behaviour is clearly unworthy. (Kuusk, 2010; {2010_L_POST_01740})

A **solidary** attitude was articulated itself in charity, in a willingness to help “those in need” (Šank, 2010; {2010_P_POST_00270}), state support to individuals with special needs, and in general willingness to do charity:

Compared to previous years, there is more caring and less up-and-coming egoism. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00940})

Although the needs of people with disabilities were not fully met, there was a growing sense that their presence and dignity were more widely acknowledged:

We don't expose ourselves, we don't have equal rights with others, we are forced into back rooms now, just like during the Soviet era. We are already known, but we are still being shamed. (Kukk, 2010; {2010_L_POST_00230})

War has held an enduring place in Estonian historical consciousness, but the only examples of victorious **militancy** come either from the War of Independence (1918-1920) or from the period of ancient resistance for freedom:

The years 1030-1061 were very remarkable in the entire history of Estonia: a serious attempt by the Russians to conquer was thwarted. Estonians had become a strong and organized force enough to defend their freedom and successfully fight against the aggression of a great power. The magnitude of the victory achieved is also shown by the fact that no Russian military expeditions to Estonia are known from the following half century. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 29; {2010_T_LAUR_00770})

Thus, throughout Estonian history, wars have functioned as tragic milestones woven into the Estonia's evolving narrative of identity and nationhood. In her novel, Viivi Luik writes that the true colours of Estonian history are not those of the national flag – blue, black, and white – but rather:

[...] red and white. Traces of blood on the snow. In memory of the fallen [soldiers], apple trees grow in Estonian gardens. They stand threateningly next to the ruins of burnt down or empty residential buildings, like living pillars of freedom. (Luik, 2010, pp. 287-288; {2010_N_LUIK_01540})

Economy and Justice

Across both elite and mass discourses, there was a shared aspiration for greater **social welfare**. However, elite discourse placed greater emphasis on the identity of an **economically developed** country, while mass discourse critically focused on categories such as **poverty, elitism/inequality**, and the **market economy**.

In 2010, the prevailing economic nationalism remained rooted in the neoliberal model established in the 1990s, which was characterized by openness to global capital and the adaptation of the economic system to the dynamics of economic globalization (Pickel 2003, p. 120). Estonia was excelling in **market economy** governance expertise:

We supported Georgia when it had problems, and I believe that now is the right time for us to help Greece as well. We have managed to keep the country afloat, now let's teach Greece as well. We could even create an NGO that would help Greece with knowledge. We have Mart Laar, who has given advice to other countries. Now give advice to Greece – they need it. (Kruuv, 2010; {2010_L_POST_02220})

Prime Minister Andrus Ansip saw a competitive economy in an open global market as the best and fairest way to promote social welfare:

However, jobs with high added value, well-paid, and offering self-fulfilment are still created primarily through investments. And believe me – the influx of new investments into Estonia has already begun. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00520})

Some viewed the meritocratic competition at the core of the neoliberal market economy as a form of inhumane social Darwinism imposed on society:

The notion that natural selection is best is a mirror image of today's predatory capitalism. (S., 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_00060})

[...] now we live in a time of shortage of humanity. When a person sometimes says in a public place with a full heart that “is this the kind of Estonia we

wanted”, they usually mean that an individual citizen is not important to the state or a large monopoly company. (Juhtkiri, 2010b; {2010_P_POST_03110})

Additionally, for some, the neoliberal economy began to be viewed as an inadequate approach for a nation to effectively address economic crises:

The crisis has shown that the ultra-liberal economic model [...] is not a wise choice in the current, changed circumstances. [...] as the crisis escalated and under pressure from their domestic voters, all governments would inevitably become protectionist, or rather, they would start to take care of the well-being of their people within the limits of their possibilities or the rules of the game. (Hallik, 2010; {2010_P_POST_01880})

Amid the economic recession and the government’s austerity budget policies, many people harboured nostalgia for a Northern European-style **welfare state** – and some even expressed admiration for the left-wing Greek government's welfarist approach, despite its severe government-debt crisis, criticizing the government for its perceived indifference toward ordinary citizens, the unemployed, and the limited scope of social security and pensions for retirees.

In my opinion, Estonia is a rather unfair country that does not properly care for its poor, sick, and weak. (Paju, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_00540})

Many of those who are not ready to look for a job and who do not register as unemployed are disabled people and many homeless people who the state treats as if they do not exist. (Tuus, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_01010})

The Greek emphasizes that he never wants to become an Estonian, because they do not sacrifice people for the sake of numbers. Unlike the Greeks, however, we are ready for anything. I wonder why? (NA, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_00700})

In 2009, the GDP had contracted by 14.7% compared to the previous year, but Ansip’s government resisted deficit spending. Rather than increasing public debt, the government froze or lowered wages, reduced pensions, reformed social benefits, and scaled back public sector spending – all of these policies were pursued in the name of economic development, which, according to the Prime Minister, was made possible by a strict austerity policy:

Estonia’s response to the crisis has become a success story in the world. “How did you do that?” both the Financial Times and CNN ask. The answer is: we saved money. In every sense. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00400})

The neoliberal free-market economy had been the engine of economic growth since the 1990s:

In any case, the situation in Estonia is not so bad [...] Take note of the fact that Estonia was part of the Soviet dictatorship for 50 years and this country has developed much faster than the one who held it under its boot has developed in the last 20 years. (Jokiuniemi, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_00130})

According to the Prime Minister’s approach, economic growth requires a balanced state budget, and everyone benefits from maximizing economic growth:

I see no serious reason to abandon the goal of making Estonia one of the wealthiest countries in Europe. It is prosperity that creates good conditions for a fuller, healthier, and happier life. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00680})

Poverty as a marker in the national identity discourse carried a relative dimension; an Estonian working abroad remarked that while he could return to Estonia, he lacked the motivation to do so because he felt insufficiently valued as a person there:

I'd like to go back, but pride doesn't allow it. It is unlikely that there will be many returnees before life in Estonia becomes more dignified and citizen friendly. The matter has long since moved out of financial and everyday problems. If the state doesn't need me at home, I live and work where I and my work are valued. In principle, money does not bring me to Estonia. (Prohvet, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_01500})

Some blamed economic hardship on the economic reforms of the first government (1992-1994) of Prime Minister Mart Laar:

When Estonia became free, I chose Isamaa [Fatherland], and Mart Laar became prime minister. Laar behaved like a stepfather when he was in power: he sold the industry and the assets we had accumulated over the years. The Estonian people remained poor without the war. Many were left homeless as the houses were returned. Many lost their jobs. (P., 2010a; {2010_L_POST_00800})

The perception of poverty was relative, as one could have perceived oneself as relatively wealthy compared to post-Soviet countries. In relation the wealthier societies Estonia aspired to, however, the country perceived themselves as (relatively) poor:

If Finland had been in the USSR for 50 years, they would be as poor as we are. We must now reduce this backlog, but it is not easy. (Rajaleidja, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_01430})

While the liberal meritocratic conception of justice – **Elitist/Unequal** in outcomes but justified by individual responsibility, equal opportunity, and merit-based system of rewards – was prevalent among the political elite, it faced critical reception among the broader population. Many questioned the liberal welfare regime's limited role in wealth redistribution beyond basic needs:

The motto in our society is to be successful. Success can be achieved in an ultraliberal society if the end justifies all means. It is a well-established practice that the few at the top own everything, the rest have what is left over. (Lausma, 2010; {2010_L_POST_03020})

The state helps the governments of other countries with millions, but only not its own people who are in difficulty. (P., 2010b; 2010_L_OHTU_00220)

When President Toomas Hendrik Ilves posed a rhetorical question about the country's future – whether to pursue a liberal, “entrepreneurial” welfare model or a Scandinavian-style “cradle-to-grave” (“providential”) system offering lifelong state support – he clearly expressed a preference for the former:

An honest foresight of Estonia's future and our opportunities requires a fundamental decision, or rather an answer to the question: what kind of Estonia do we want? Entrepreneurial or providential? (Ilves, 2010; {2010_S_ILVE_00360})

Significant Others

The key significant Others were the **West** and the **European Union**. The elite demonstrated a deeper and more fervent identification with the West than the general population.

According to President Ilves, deep integration into Western institutions had already given Estonians more confidence:

Estonia has never been so at the centre of Europe. Never. This gives us enormous certainty. ... This imposes an obligation on us to have a say if we want to be an active part of the heart of Europe. (Ilves, 2010; {2010_S_ILVE_00620})

Additionally, he argued that Estonia had become the most *Western* and *European* of the Northern European countries:

Because of the Northern European countries, only Estonia participates in all four integration programmes of Western democracies, which are the euro area, the common visa or Schengen area, the European Union, and NATO. (Ilves, 2010; {2010_S_ILVE_00570})

However, there was also some societal disappointment with the liberal-tolerant culture coming from the West:

The opening of borders and liberalization in the name of democracy brought us a range of new cultural and social phenomena, including pride parades celebrating LGBTQ+ rights under police protection, as well as increased visibility of issues such as drug addiction, prostitution, and paedophilia, and much more from Western culture. (Laidla, 2010b; {2010_L_OHTU_02160})

The West was associated not only to more productive employment and higher wages but also to a 'brain drain' of the skilled middle class:

I don't know or know a single doctor, teacher, driver, or other person who would do simple work in their new country of residence. The point is in specialists and skilled workers. Their departure and remaining abroad will be very painful for Estonia in the future. Those who have properly learned their profession in Estonia and do a good job will also receive a decent salary in Estonia. The most talented stay in Estonia, those in the middle emigrate permanently, and the rest are left behind, stagnating. (Leegionär, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_00040})

The elite held a more favourable view of the **European Union** than the general population, but for better or worse, both groups compared Estonia to other European countries. Prime Minister Ansip's national identity project was to make Estonia one of the leading countries in the European Union:

We should see Estonia among the three countries with the most innovative entrepreneurship in the European Union. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00790})

Jürgen Ligi, who served as Minister of Finance in 2010, regarded approval from Brussels as vital to the nation's reputation:

Brussels does not look at us with laughter, but with recognition because we have managed our finances wisely. (Ligi, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_00610})

Even those who were critical of the government based their criticism on comparisons with European Union member states:

From Europe, the picture of our unemployment is even worse. With our high unemployment, we are in the top three in Europe and even first in terms of the growth rate of unemployment. (Tuus, 2010; {2010_P_OHTU_01020})

Historic Others

In ‘communicative memory’ – i.e., in the patterns of collective memory manifested in the everyday communications (Assmann 1995, p. 126) – the **Soviet Union** and the **Russia** of the previous two decades dominated the cluster of historical Others, which included also Northern Europe and Baltic Germans/Germany.

The **Soviet Union** was viewed unfavourably due to its association with large-scale labour immigration:

Mass immigration of foreigners significantly reduced the share of Estonians. [...] In addition, the internationalisation of the Estonian population was supposed to ensure a more secure assimilation of the inhabitants of the annexed territory into the friendly family of the peoples of the USSR. (Pajur and Tannberg, 2006, p. 121; {2010_T_PAJU_03290})

However, the living standard and quality of life in the Soviet Union – especially in its first decades – was assessed ambiguously:

All in all, Soviet socialism did not ensure a decent standard of living for urban or rural residents for a long time. (Pajur and Tannberg, 2006, p. 122; {2010_T_PAJU_03300})

During Stalin’s time, at least there was work, although no wages were paid, but later life became very good. (74-aastane lugeja, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_00670})

Some of those who felt nostalgic remembered the conservative social order of the Soviet Union with a sense of warmth:

We have always had the opportunity to discredit the former Soviet Union and quickly forget everything related to it. We have forgotten how far benevolent relationships between people had developed: the militia even chased sexually ill slobs, even the biggest drunk didn’t rummage in the trash can, and there was a job for everyone. (S., 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_00640})

While the Soviet Union was generally viewed negatively, historical Russia was often perceived more positively, especially when it was seen as supporting national aspirations. For example, by the early 20th century, St. Petersburg, which had been the capital of the Russian Empire until 1918, had become a key centre of the Estonian national movement, with more than 40,000 Estonians living and making a career there in 1917 (Raun 1986, p. 354):

Even those Estonians who had managed to make a career in St. Petersburg, the capital of the empire, did not remain indifferent to the conditions in Estonia. The most prominent representative of this group, or in other words, of the patriots in St. Petersburg, was Johann Köler, who became the emperor’s court painter, and who in 1864 helped a delegation of Estonian peasants to reach the face of Emperor Alexander II with their petition. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 152; {2010_T_LAUR_04720})

Because the Russian state had repeatedly threatened the aspirations of national independence, President Ilves’ (19 March 2010) decision to participate in the May 9 Victory Day celebrations in Moscow was also viewed critically:

The president does not yet know how Estonians feel about his visit to Moscow. For example, I lost my father because of this “great holiday”. [...] What the Estonian people think about it does not seem to interest Ilves. Hardly anyone

could have expected such a step from Ilves during his election as president. (Laidla, 2010a; {2010_L_OHTU_01190})

Among the reasons present Estonia identified positively with the **Northern Europe** was the historic “Swedish era” (1561-1710), which Estonians have retrospectively regarded as a favourable chapter in their national history in comparison to subsequent “Russian era”:

[...] the “good old Swedish era”. This is perhaps an assessment not so much of the Swedish era itself, but of what came after. In any case, Estonians have longed for the Swedish era. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 100; {2010_T_LAUR_02600})

The sentiment to consider Northern European societies a model to follow was shared by the general population, though unlike the Prime Minister, ordinary people were more inclined to value the welfare state model of social justice:

Despite the difficult times, we have taken a step towards a decent Nordic society. (Ansip, 2010; {2010_S_ANSI_00920})

I would like to see a capitalism like in Sweden. (S., 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_01740})

Baltic Germans/Germany were evaluated positively when associated with contributions to Estonian language, culture and national aspirations:

The growing interest in exotic and small nations in Europe in the 18th century found expression in Estonia in the new century as the Estophile movement. Baltic Germans interested in Estonia – the Estophiles – studied the Estonian language and culture, published fiction, published newspapers and schoolbooks, and founded several scientific societies. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, p. 150; {2010_T_LAUR_04480})

The main ambiguity was that while German culture was a vital link with Europe, until the beginning of the 20th century the Germanization of successful Estonians inhibited the formation of a national cultural elite:

Estonians, who had risen higher on the social ladder of society, were often ashamed of their origins and tried to present themselves as Germans. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, 145; {2010_T_LAUR_04240})

It was also necessary to develop its own [Estonian] elite culture, which would have reduced the influence of German culture and prevented the Germanization of Estonians. (Laur *et al.*, 2009, 152; {2010_T_LAUR_04690})

3. The predominant discourse and its challengers

Estonia accession to the eurozone in January 2011 was a national identity project of the governing elite, reflecting a form of ‘neo-techno nationalism’ (Shim and Shin 2016, p. 199) – a state-led economic policy aimed at advancing technological developments by leveraging opportunities presented in an open global economic system. In line with this ‘neo-techno nationalism’, smart ID cards were made available with legally binding digital signature capabilities in 2002, and internet voting was used in the 2007 parliamentary election (a global first). Economic development was framed as a core national good by the political elite, and the euro was adopted as a currency at the start of 2011.

While this elite-driven national identity project encountered little overt resistance, it was nonetheless challenged by popular discourse, which voiced concerns over inadequate social

welfare, poverty, and inequality. Economic hardship – such as unemployment, insufficient child support, and inadequate pension security – produced depression and stress in vulnerable segments of society. Though rooted in concrete material deprivation, these grievances were sometimes projected onto the project of national identity itself:

I am absolutely sure that if history could be turned back to 1980, there would be no fear that anyone would want their own Estonian state. Sometimes freedom comes with so many things that you wouldn't wish on the enemy – terrible stress, unemployment, debts to banks, constant fear of losing one's home, non-existent pensions, non-existent child support, etc., etc. All the things that no one warned us about when we gathered at the Song Festival [...] (Julgen kahelda, 2010; {2010_L_OHTU_00240})

A conception of indigenous and independent nationhood grounded in cultural nationalism remained the dominant narrative. However, Russians in Estonia increasingly gained recognition as a social identity group worthy of inclusion. In 2010, the geopolitical 'reset' between the Russian Federation and the United States under U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev may have contributed to increasing support for the notion that Estonia could offer a welcoming environment for Russians who embraced liberal and democratic values:

Ideally, Estonia could become home to a liberal Russian-language forum involving democratic Estonian Russians – something that does not exist in Russia. (Masso, 2010; {2010_P_POST_00670})

4. Conclusion

In 2010, Estonian national identity centred on cultural nationalism, independence, and democracy – ideals broadly shared by both elites and the public. Despite widespread disillusionment with the political elite, there was also common support for social welfare, reduced inequality, and environmental sustainability.

Elites promoted an identity built around economic growth, austerity, digital modernization, EU integration, and technological advancement. Public discourse, by contrast, focused more on language, the Russian-speaking minority, and social issues like poverty and inequality, often criticizing market reforms and their impact, though without fully rejecting elite narratives. While some disagreement between elites and the general public over the neoliberal economy and 'neo-techno-nationalism' was to be expected – given that publics tend to be less supportive of markets, capitalism, and neoliberalism (Hopf & Allan, 2016, pp. 221–222) – the absence of a deeper values-based cleavage between the two groups was nonetheless unexpected.

The EU and West were idealized by elites, while the Soviet Union and Russia were typically seen negatively – though with occasional nuance.

Table 1. Raw count

Category	Total codes	Speeches	Textbooks	Newspapers	Novels	Movies	Letters
HO: Soviet Union	237		130	18	61		28
HO: Russia	124		117	1	5		1
Religion	123		87	5	13	9	9
National culture/symbols	107	1	30	14	19	13	30
SO: West	105	5	47	12	17	8	16
HO: Baltic Germans/Germany	96		88	2	3	2	1
Free Market Economy	82	2	9	17	24	2	28
Political elite	78	3	3	38	2		32
Welfare state	76	4	1	31	2		38
Rural/Regional	69	3	19	12	5	5	25
Independent	69	13	26	4	17	2	7
Indigenous/Nationalist	67	1	32	14	8		12
Traditional gender roles	65		11	30	3	3	18
HO: Northern Europe	63	1	52		9		1
Educated	62	11	13	19		4	15
SO: Northern Europe	61	6	11	9	18	3	14
SO: Russia	56			34	6	10	6
Euro (currency)	52	18		11			23
SO: EU	50	20	2	21	2	2	3
Estonian language	45		12	11	5	5	12
Elitist/Unequal	44	1	12	3			28
Environment/Nature-friendly	42		2	6	13		21
Russians in Estonia	41		3	10	7	15	6
Economically developed	40	9	20	5	3		3
Responsible/Efficient Government	36	17		7			12
Democratic	36		12	17			7
Militant	35		27	1	5	2	
United	35	8	13	7	1		6
Poor	33		1	8	12		12
Solidary	31	2	1	9			19
Digital	31	2		16	1		12
Depressed/Stressed	30	3	3	4	11		9
Small	29	1	10	10	3		5
Conservative	29	2		9		3	15
Totals	2179	133	794	415	275	88	474

Table 2. Topography of Estonian identity

	Speeches	Textbooks	Op-eds	Novels	Movies	Letters
<i>Identity and Belonging</i>						
National culture/symbols		++	++	//++	-////~++	++
Independent	~+++++	++		/~++	++	
Euro (currency)	~+++++		+			-~+
Russians in Estonia				/	--/////++	
Estonian language		+	+	~	//~	++
Indigenous/Nationalist		/~+	++	/+		++
United	+++	+	+			+
Digital	+		-+			+
Small						
<i>Political Elite and Governance</i>						
Political elite	~		---~+			---
Rural/Regional	++		+	+	---	-++
Responsible/Efficient Government	~~+++++		-			-
Depressed/Stressed	--			-~		-
Democratic			++			+
<i>Values</i>						
Religion		--//~++		//	/~~++	+
Conservative	+		+		-/+	++
Educated	~~+++++	+	++		-//++	++
Traditional gender roles			--++		~~+	-+
Environment/Nature-friendly			+	/++		++
Solidary	+		++			++
Militant		+		-	//	
<i>Economy and Justice</i>						
Market economy	+		-~	--/~	/+	--~+
Social welfare	++		+++			+++
Economically developed	~++	+	+			
Poor			-	--		-
Elitist/Unequal						---
<i>Significant Others</i>						
West	++	/++	/	/++	-//~++	-+
European Union	~~~+++++		-++		/~	
<i>Historic Others</i>						
Soviet Union		-----/~	--	-----//~		---
Russia		--~+	-	///~++		
Northern Europe	-++		+	//++	-/+	+
Baltic Germans/Germany		--/~++			~+	

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).

SOURCES

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