

The Identity Discourse on Estonia's Integration into Europe: International Relations and Anthropological

Perspectives

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This paper grows out of research for my dissertation proposal in anthropology and my master's paper in international relations. I mention this only to admit that my approach to the discourse on Estonia's integration into Europe may require adjustment after commencing fieldwork in the next academic year. In other words, all the facts are hardly in. However, my work so far indicates that Estonia's identity discourse features a large number of cultural identities referring to the supra-national level rather in addition to an exclusive nationalist level. This phenomenon is particularly interesting given this small country's history of oppression from foreign hands and, at times, near cultural extinction. Both tragedies would suggest that ardent appeals to the core nation would dominate identity discourse in order appease national insecurities. However, the discourse on Estonia's identity must be understood in the context of this country's international relations and "successful" post-socialist transformation, signified by political stability, a rapidly growing economy, and minimal ethnic tension. This context forces us to ask whether and how European integration can ameliorate the discourse on exclusive national identities.

Estonia's success is largely a function of the economic and geopolitical interest that more powerful states and international organizations have in Estonia, and, conversely, of Estonia's ability to convert their interest into political stability and economic growth. Estonia's lack of economic resources, political capital on the international scene, and military strength are also

important to this equation as is the state's strong desire to ensure that it remains outside of the Russian sphere of influence. These factors preclude the Estonian state from dictating the terms of its international relations, and also reduce the state's authority over its own internal agenda, particularly on the issues of minority acquisition of citizenship, economic policy, and defense spending. Consequentially, they make problematic appeals to the uniqueness and superiority of the Estonian nation because it could have the counterproductive affects of alienating Estonia's Western benefactors and provoking Russia to take protective measure for ethnic Russians in Estonia. International relations in the Baltic Sea Region have blurred Estonian political and economic boundaries, and this situation has affected the identity discourse as well.

For purposes here, exclusive national identities are those constructed on the presumption of the nation's distinctiveness among other nations *and* its superiority over them. This paper explores how processes of European integration might encourage some of Estonia's leading politicians, administrators, and public intellectuals to align the Estonian nation with political and cultural groups at the supra-national level, and downplay the distinctiveness and potential exclusiveness of Estonian culture. I do not suggest that appeals to exclusive nationalism are absent, but that they do not dominate the identity discourse. Examples of supra-national identities include "Nordic", "Western", "European", "Baltic", and "Finno-Ugric".

I hasten to add that the degree to which any particular Estonian or group of Estonians internalizes these identities is beyond the scope of this talk. Here I focus on how European integration influences identity discourse rather than examine than how Estonians construct their identities through daily practice.

In this talk, I will first briefly review a significant anthropological approach to identity construction in post-socialist Europe. Second, I will provide a historical and political context for

Estonia's contemporary identity debate. And third, I will provide this debate's current economic and military context which demands an understanding of international affairs in the Baltic Sea region.

Anthropological research

The predominant anthropological explanation for post-socialist identity construction sets the explanatory framework within the borders of the nation-state. The argument first claims that the collapse of socialist structures leads to a cultural disorientation and re-emergence of ancient ethnic conflicts. This situation increases the discursive power of exclusive national identities, usually through references to past oppression from foreign invaders and to the glory of a mythical golden age. This cultural discourse, then, leads the group to regard "others" as naturally inferior, dangerous, and in need of sanitization lest the dominant nationality lose its last chance at freedom.

For example, Denich (1994) focuses attention on the "disjunctive moment" of history that Serb and Croat leaders have transported to the present in order to stir nationalism rooted in historic suffering. She also presents ethnic conflict in the Balkans as an eternal feature of political life implying that conflict is an ordinary part of the worldview with little analysis of international economic and geopolitical circumstance. Niedermuller (1994) argues that resurgent ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe, particularly in Hungary, simply reflects an anti-modernism ethos rather than considering how modernity may be marginalizing many Hungarians. Garcia (1993) contends that the lack of democratic traditions in Eastern Europe precludes the transition from an ethnic society to a civil society. Finally, Connor (1993) introduced a special edition of *Ethnic Studies* that exclusively examined rising Eastern European national consciousness in a

solely historical context with little attention to how post-socialist nations interface with the international political economy.

Anthropologists have used this approach to effectively demonstrate how cultural and historical themes are subjectively manipulated to essentialize national minorities as inferior and therefore legitimize their oppression. However, the primary shortcoming is that they do not examine fully enough the contemporary political, economic, and social factors, spanning across the nation-state, that also influence identity construction. It assumes that the collapse East Bloc meant the end of international relations, and that the relevant context for identity construction must exist within the state's boundaries.

Aware of the limitations of anthropology's current focus, Gupta (1992) explains that a two-fold process is required to understand nationalism. A lengthy quote is merited:

On the one hand, we need to study structures of feeling that bind space, time, and memory in the production of location. By this I mean processes by which certain spaces become enshrined as "homelands", by which ideas of "us" and "them" come to be deeply felt and mapped onto places such as nations. On the other hand, we need to pay attention to those processes that redivide, reterritorialize, and reinscribe space in the global political economy. Only then can we understand why the naturalized division and spaces that we have always taken for granted become problematic in certain circumstances, and only then can the "problem" of nationalism be posed adequately (p.76).

According to Gupta, anthropologists and other scholars have exaggerated the differences between cultures by means of uncritically accepting the notion that cultures are fundamentally different and unconnected. To better grasp the phenomenon of nationalism, the scholar must understand how the society in question is linked to the same global political economy as the researcher, which will thereby expose the reasons for the production of exclusive and unique nationalist tropes. The case of Estonia demonstrates in particular the merits of Gupta's approach because of the frequent appearances of identities that are inscribed in supra-national political and

cultural territories. This anomaly in post-socialist identity construction requires an explanation outside of Estonian territory. By means of comparison, the case of Estonia could suggest how the quality of international relations might encourage exclusive national identities as well.

The historical context of Estonia's identity debate

Let us set Estonia's identity discourse in a historical context from which I suggest that historic suffering does not necessarily result in a highly exclusivist discourse. Since the early thirteenth century, the Danish kingdom, the German Teutonic Knights, the Swedish Kingdom, the Polish-Lithuanian empire, and the Russian empire have all occupied Estonian territory and held Estonians in serfdom for most of that time. However, in the second half of the nineteenth century a Nationalist Awakening emerged premised upon Herder's notion of linguistic nationalism. This movement later inspired Estonia's independence campaign which was successfully realized when the Soviets and Estonians signed the Peace Treaty of Tartu in 1920. By 1922, this new nation-state was admitted to the League of Nations, but just 19 years later the outbreak of World War II ended the first Estonian independence. The war brought three years of Nazi occupation and ultimately annexation into the Soviet Union in 1944. Estonia, as well as Latvia, suffered the greatest losses as a percentage of its total population of any nation drawn into World War II, according to Velliste, former Estonian permanent representative to the United Nations (1995).

Since 1920, the percentage of ethnic Estonians in Estonia has slipped significantly. During the interwar independence, Estonians comprised roughly 88% of the state's population which totaled some 1.1 million individuals. Russians comprised 8.2 % of that figure, Germans 1.7%, and Swedes, Jews, and Finns forming the rest. These figures remained steady until the Second World War. Between 1939 and 1945 the population dropped to approximately 830,000

by virtue of wartime losses, emigration, and deportation (Raun: 1991). After the war, the Soviet Union instituted a policy of heavy industrialization in addition to militarizing the country in order to protect the USSR's Baltic flank. These policies involved a massive demographic shift which resulted in large numbers of ethnic Russians migrating to the new Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic to bolster the labor pool, serve in the Soviet military, and occupy the upper echelons of the Soviet bureaucracy. Between 1945 and the present the total population increased from 830,000 to 1,453,844 with Estonians now comprising 65% and Russians comprising 28% of the total population respectively (Raun:1991;Estonia Today: 1998). Considering these population losses and the decline of the Estonian majority, the fear of cultural extinction from conservative factions in Estonian society seems reasonable.

However, against this historical background, which certainly rivals the suffering of many Eastern European nationalities over the centuries, the question arises as to why so much of the discourse on cultural identity consists of supra-national references. One might more readily expect that the Soviet collapse would create a situation in which exclusive and chauvinistic nationalism would inflate the virtues of Estonian culture, re-awaken the cultural achievements of the past, and denigrate national minorities. The political and cultural shift to the right, that fueled independence movement from Moscow and re-established the state, has been moderated by a series of international and domestic forces which even call into question the validity of this distinction. To date, this situation has prevented such radical nationalism from taking control of the Estonian political and cultural discourse as the international presence has not been resisted. International ties are crucial to ensure that Estonia remains outside the sphere of Russian influence.

An important change largely effected by international pressures is the improvement of citizenship acquisition procedure by minorities. Now, both the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has been monitoring human rights in Estonia throughout the 1990s, and the European Union now endorse the Estonia's naturalization procedures. Currently, one-third of the Russian minority (or 150,000 people) are citizens rather than permanent residents. Citizenship confers the rights to participate in national level elections and run for political office. However, permanent residents are also entitled to the same social benefits as citizens. They may vote in local but not national elections. This arrangement gives permanent residents, mostly ethnic Russians, great control in local affairs because they are concentrated in northeast Estonia and in the capital city of Tallinn. Interestingly, in the March 7th elections, the Russian-led Estonian United People's Parties increased its number of seats in parliament to six, even though a majority of ethnic Russian citizens voted for Edgar Saavisaar's Center Party. For the record, the Center Party, which ran a populist and welfare platform, won the largest number of seats at twenty-eight but could not form a government. Instead, a three-party Center-Right coalition holds that barely holds the current government with 53 out of 101 seats in parliament.

The historical and political context adds several dimensions to the identity debate that appear in the comments of many of the countries leading figures. For example, Foreign Minister Toomas Ilves recently wrote that "Estonia's decision to conclude a border treaty with Russia was not merely necessary for the demarkation of Estonia...but was also the first step showing that Estonia is a responsible nation with *European-like* behavior" (1997). Ilves begins the same article by quoting the legendary Estonian poet Gustav Suits who stated eighty years ago that "Estonia should become *European* but remain *Estonian*" (Ibid). Marju Lauristin, leader in Estonia's Popular Front Movement and former Vice-Speaker of Parliament, asserts that Estonia's future is to rejoin the

Western world through the Northern, *Nordic* gate. In her opinion Estonia is currently resuming its place with *non-Byzantine* cultures that distinguish Eastern and Western Europe (1997). Historian Rein Ruutsoo claims that Estonia should stay aware of its historical association with Latvia and Lithuania as the Soviet's *Baltic* subjects despite these countries cultural differences. However, Estonia should also promote its cultural similarities with the *Nordic* countries despite the discrepancy in wealth (1997). Poet Jaan Kaplinski, 1996 nominee for the Nobel Prize in literature and 1998 winner of the Baltic Culture Prize, holds that integration should be seen as chance for creative exchange among cultures rather than cultural homogenization. However, he supports a cultural reunion of *Finno-Ugric* peoples since their traditions can make unique contributions to European cultures (plural). (Finno-Ugric is a language family distinct from Indo-European. The number of peoples speaking these languages were greatly reduced during Stalin's rule.) Kaplinski maintains that Estonia's nineteenth century "National Awakening" was uncritically built upon the German linguistic nationalism (1997).

These references, from highly influential Estonians, demonstrates that Estonia's identity debate stretches out from the core nation rather than condensing around it. True some of these identities can be interpreted also as a means of juxtaposing Russia-ness against a political-cultural entity of its own size, particularly Lauristin's distinction between Byzantine and non-Byzantine culture. Nonetheless, introspective and exclusive narratives about Estonian identity still cannot take firm control, thus minimizing its capacity to exclude non-Estonians.

Economy

When one looks at Estonia's economic policy, the desire to avoid segregating Estonians from other nations, particularly the country's main benefactors, becomes clearer. Estonia has

remained committed to radical market reforms implemented in 1992 that highly encourage foreign investments. Some features of these reforms include (Ilves 1998a):

- * The elimination of import tariffs.
- * A currency pegged at eight kroons to the Deutsche Mark.
- * The permissibility of foreign ownership of land.
- * The permissibility of 100 % repatriation of profits.

The 1993-94 fiscal years witnessed a hard depression with these policies. However, since 1995 Estonia's economy had been the fastest growing economy among the Central and Eastern Europe countries (CEEC) and Estonia has received the second highest amount of foreign direct investments per capita among the CEEC behind Hungary (Estonian Investment Agency: 1996). The annual growth rate of the Estonian economy has reached as high as 11.4% in 1997 (Estonian Foreign Ministry 1998). In Tallinn, retail and office space increased by 30% between 1996 and 1997, while the number of construction permits issued rose from 175 to 700 between 1993 and 1997 (Kinnisvaraekspert:1997).

Estonia's courting of foreign investment complements the desire of affluent Western states to establish economic control in the Baltic Sea region. Finns, Germans, and Swedes compete in Estonia not only for markets in the Baltic states, but also to develop a transit station to the large potential market in the St. Petersburg metropolitan area should that the Russian economy stabilize. Indeed, between 1991 and 1995, Estonia received over 500 million USD in foreign direct investments in comparison to 286 million for Latvia and 151 million for Lithuania. I would partially attribute Estonia success relative to its neighbor to be a function of the country high computer literacy (Estonia is among the top 20 country's world-wide in terms of internet

access per capita), the more difficult ethnic situation in Latvia, and the larger agriculture sector in Lithuanian economy.

Economic integration is seen positively, at least as far as the Nordic connection is concerned. For it is the Nordic standard of efficiency, cleanliness, and “civility” to which many Estonians adhere. In many ways, Estonians are more frustrated for having not yet reach the Nordic benchmark than they are for having achieved the most successful transformation out of Soviet rule than any other former Soviet republic. In other words being better than Russia is less important than being outside the Russian sphere of influence. I suggest that the absence of an inferiority complex from Russia also diminishes the degree to which an Estonian identity is constructed against Russian identity. For many Estonians being Nordic takes precedence over being “post-Soviet”.

Military

Estonia’s military needs also place the country in a multi-polar context which could tug the identity discourse away from allusions to the core nation. This context stems from a seemingly tacit agreement between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia to avoid the juxtaposition of each other’s borders. This agreement renders unlikely the probability of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania admission to NATO, despite their membership in the Partnership for Peace. However, it opens two other channels for military cooperation. Estonia has established its own security apparatus to Latvia and Lithuania in the form of the *Baltron* naval division, *Baltbat* battalion unit, and the *Baltnet* surveillance network. It has also increased its military ties to Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway.

I suggest this military arrangement helps moderate Estonian identity discourse in three ways: 1) NATO expansion in the Baltic states does not prompt hardened nationalism from

Estonia's Russian minority or Russia itself; 2) Russian compliance in the situation does not provoke hardened nationalism from Estonia; and 3) Regional involvement further allows Estonia to play up its Nordic and Baltic connections which is a more palatable arrangement for Russia than NATO expansion.

The Nordics

These developments described so far feature a prominent Nordic presence in Estonian affairs. It supports Waever's (1992) idea that a Nordic-led Baltic Sea regional identity should coalesce. As Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland lose their unique status in terms of their relative affluence, successful welfare programs, low-level of regional military tension, and high environmental standards, they must expand their reach across the Baltic Sea. The Nordic countries, he argues, could well be marginalized by Europe's major states, Britain, France, and Germany. In addition, Russian pressure upon Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania pushes the Baltic states toward the Nordic countries. Acutely aware of the importance such supra-national cooperation, Estonian Foreign Minister Ilves recent quipped that "Estonia should aim to become just another boring Nordic country" (1998b).

This comment underscores the issue that Estonia's viability, as a nation-state in post-socialist Europe, demands integration into international economic and political structures. If one understands European integration as accepting OSCE and EU norms for minority integration, as establishing liberal trade policies with affluent European countries, and as tying one's military with other countries who are not to the East, then Estonia is already integrated into Europe. The pertinent questions are: 1) to what extent do Estonians see themselves as European, and vice versa; and 2) how do we better use international relations, a la Gupta, to understand the

construction of identity. At least, the dichotomy between “international” and “domestic” should no longer be taken as a natural fact.

Analysis

Again, the question has arisen as to why a nation whom the Soviets brutalized, to say nothing of the seven centuries of foreign rule prior to 1920, permits inclusive identities during the dawn of re-independence. Why hasn't ethnic nostalgia, memories of collective suffering, and ethnic chauvinism monopolized the identity discourse? I have suggested that an international relations perspective can provide a valuable context to address these questions.

Estonia's post-socialist “success” is a combination of the economic and geopolitical interest that more powerful states and international organizations have taken in Estonia, and Estonia's ability to use that interest for carving for itself a niche in the international capitalist order. Furthermore, Estonia also lacks the economic resources, political capital, and the military strength to unilaterally dictate the terms of its international relations which requires European integration to mitigate the chances that Russia will not draw Estonia back into its orbit. In particular, international pressure has succeeded in facilitating minority integration, liberalizing economic policy, and tying Estonia's military to wider regional alliances. Appeals to the uniqueness and superiority of the Estonian nation, therefore, would both alienate Estonia's Western benefactors and provoke Russia to protect its minority population within Estonia. As such, references to the core nation and the virtues of Estonia culture seem to have diminished since Estonia regained independence from Moscow and re-established the Estonian state. Chauvinistic appeals to nationalism, though not absent, are simply less pragmatic in the contemporary political and economic context.

In the future, I suggest that macro-level international relations theories, the pluralist family in particular, can be combined with anthropology's ethnographic method to better understand how local processes interact with European integration to produce a mutually constituting dialect. A recent edited volume by Burawoy and Verdery (1999) addresses this dialect in post-socialist Europe via ethnography to learn how local social and economic relationships are restructured to cope with Western-imported macro-level economic policies. Their framework can be adopted for studies on the construction of identity discourse as well. Bureaucracies that mediate the local/global dialect offer an ideal ethnographic site to help understand how particular actors, bureaucrats, administrators, and other officials, produce identity both as practice and as text for public consumption. Several anthropologists are conducting ethnographic research in bureaucratic settings for the purpose of learning how bureaucratic power is distributed in mass society. In particular, Shore and others (1992, 1995; Shore and Black: 1992; Shore and Wright: 1997) have examined how European Union officials attempt to construct a European identity, and international relations theories can further contextualize this type of ethnographic research.

Political and economic viability in contemporary Europe world requires post-socialist states to increase its integration into Western structures. During the ensuing transformation, identity is negotiated between the poles of the core nation and more diffused notions of supra-national identities. Where the identity discourse falls on this continuum is a function of the unique relationship between each particular locations in post-socialist Europe and the macro-level processes in which they operate. Anthropologists employing the ethnographic method, assisted by international relations theory, are in a strong position to better understand how this dialect affects identity construction.

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