

## Chapter III Singing together: the case of Estonian Songs Festivals

Estonia represents an interesting case of borderland identity located at the intersection of different political institutions and cultural traditions that contain both inclusive (border–unlocking) and exclusive (border–locking) potentials. Estonian identity–making was historically interconnected, in both positive and negative senses, with Europe and Russia, and thus dependent upon the state of relations between the two.

Estonia’s identity relations with Europe are rather ambiguous. Being institutionally part of the EU, Estonia eagerly joined a group of “new Europeans”,<sup>240</sup> thus demonstrating its greater political proximity to the America than to “old” EU Member states, especially in regards to its security commitments. The president of Estonia, Toomas Hendrick Ilves, grew up and graduated in America. This is a further example of the importance of America as a key reference point for Estonian independence. In the context of the Eurozone crisis, Estonia portrayed itself as an “anti–Greece”, thus pointing not only at the purely economic side of the story, but mainly at identity. Estonians, along with other Baltics peoples, claim to play the role of “proper Europeans” immune to the temptations of flirting with Russia and thus destroying European unity.<sup>241</sup>

Yet identification with Europe does not make impossible other forms of cultural affiliation. On the whole these other identities are complementary to Estonia’s European identity. One of them is the concept of the Finno–Ugrian world, which creates a fertile ground for fostering cross–border relations beyond current politically divisive lines, including those with countries like Hungary and Russia whose governments are not committed to liberal democracy. Another pathway for cultural identification lies through articulating Estonia’s attachment to the Baltic Sea region, which is widely considered “the nation’s historical space”.<sup>242</sup>

---

240 *Mälksoo*, Liminality and Contested Europeanness: Conflicting Memory Politics in the Baltic Space.

241 *Repeckaite*, Why Are Baltic States Posing as Anti-Greece.“

242 *Pääbo*, Constructing Historical Space: Estonia’s Transition from the Russian Civilization to the Baltic Sea Region, P. 187.

What complicates national identity making is cultural intermingling with the “Russian world”. Estonia, on the one hand, purported to capitalize on its engagement with Europe for “negotiating with its eastern neighbour”.<sup>243</sup> Yet on the other hand, a significant part of Estonia’s Russian speaking population sympathizes with the idea of a “great Russia” able to protect its compatriots living abroad, which often translates into their disloyalty to the Estonian state. Our interviews taken after the annexation of Crimea did not support the claim that “Russian ethnic solidarity was weakened and the mobilizational potential of the diaspora issue for political purposes was diminished”.<sup>244</sup> Estonia which is home to a sizeable ethnic Russian minority feels its national security is being directly affected by conflictual relations with Russia. The example of the Bronze Soldier and Moscow’s alleged reaction of cyber attacks on the Estonian government emphasises the potential for animosity. Therefore Estonia has often appealed to major EU Member states to take a stand of solidarity against Russian revisionism. Different security priorities and institutional affiliations alienate Estonia and Russia from each other and thus deepen the security-driven rift between the EU and Russia, actualized by the growing neo-imperial momentum in Russia’s foreign policy.

The potential for bargaining with its eastern neighbour evanesced with Russia’s legal questioning of Estonia’s independence from the Soviet Union and the sentencing of Estonian security officer, Eston Kohver, for espionage at the Russian–Estonian border in 2015. Estonia, as Russia’s neighbour, finds itself under the threat of Russia’s sway and domination, and is in a deep political conflict with Moscow. For Estonia, Russia is an external Other who promotes “the Russian world” concept that transcends borders and represents a biopolitical tool to protect and take care of Russia-loyal groups of population. That is why Russia is viewed in Estonia as the inheritor of Soviet colonialism,<sup>245</sup> while the Russian speaking population is “an immigrant community”.<sup>246</sup>

---

243 *Lamoreaux and Galbreath*, *The Baltic States As “Small States”*: Negotiating The “East” By Engaging The “West”, P. 1

244 *Kolsto*, *Beyond Russia, Becoming Local: Trajectories of Adaption to the Fall of the Soviet Union among Ethnic Russians in the Former Soviet Republics*.

245 *Annus*, *The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics*.

246 *Smith*, *Woe from Stones: Commemoration, Identity Politics and Estonia’s “War of Monuments”*.

Geopolitically, Estonia is on NATO's "border–threshold",<sup>247</sup> "a border country of the free world",<sup>248</sup> and thus, as a British journalist puts it, "must prepare for the storm".<sup>249</sup> In view of the dangers coming from the Russian side, the Estonian government is fortifying border infrastructure<sup>250</sup> and welcomes a greater military presence of NATO troops on its territory as a guarantee of NATO's article 5, which is enacted in case of direct military confrontation. Estonia's Western security partners, however, take seriously the fact that NATO's security guarantees could "entail going to war with a country that possesses the world's biggest arsenal of nuclear weapons".<sup>251</sup>

It is the current context of Estonia, –EU, –Russia trilateral relations that influences the most symbolic, meaningful and sacral representation of the Estonian nation,<sup>252</sup> the tradition of the Estonian Song Festivals (*Laulupidu*). The social practice of singing together as a form of spontaneous yet ritualized and institutionalised human activity is of course not a unique experience of Estonians. The whole idea of holding song festivals in Estonia is rooted in the culture of Baltic Germans and dates back to the middle of the XIX century. But only Baltic nations have used the practice of song festivals as powerful tools for awakening national consciousness during their occupation by Tsarist Russia, Germany and the USSR, as well as during times of independence. The famous "Singing Revolution" of 1988 and the "Baltic chain" of 1989 demonstrated the political power of peaceful performative actions of mass social mobilization that presaged the collapse of the Soviet system. In 2003 UNESCO proclaimed the tradition of Song and Dance celebrations in the three Baltic countries as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which can be considered a global recognition of its cultural significance.

The sacral meanings of choir singing as a pillar of national identity are particularly momentous for Estonia. Statistically, the share of performers and spectators in the three most recent major Song and Dance festivals in

---

247 *Minca and Vaughan-Williams*, Carl Schmitt and the Concept of the Border, P. 769.

248 *Marko*, Estonia Needs a More Active Foreign Policy.

249 *The Economist*, On the Border, P. 22.

250 *Gazeta.ru*, Estonia Namerena Ustanovit' Bolee 700 Pogranichnykh Stolbov na Granitse s Rossiei.

251 *Blaire*, How Do We Protect the Baltic States.

252 *Raudsepp and Vikat*, The Role of The Phenomenon of Joint Singing in the Development of National Identity in Estonia.

a country of 1,3 million is steadily growing. It was 100,000 in 2004, 200,000 in 2009 and about 160,000 in 2014.<sup>253</sup> In comparison, in Latvia with 2 million inhabitants, there were 40,000 performers and between 150,000 and 200,000 visitors at the 2013 Song and Dance Festival.<sup>254</sup> In Lithuania with a population of 3 million, the 2014 Song and Dance festival brought together 37,000 singers and dancers and 50,000 visitors.<sup>255</sup>

Estonian opinion surveys also emphasise the deep emotional involvement of the whole nation in the song and dance celebrations. As Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vihalemm demonstrate in their research of 1008 Estonian speakers in 2013, 96 per cent of respondents, aged 15–74, confirmed the significance of this tradition. Furthermore half of them had their own experiences as *Laulupidu* participants.<sup>256</sup> The overwhelming majority consider song and dance festivals “an expression of Estonian identity” (84 per cent) and “national feelings, not entertainment” (82 per cent), a domestic “ritual, not tourist attraction” (74 per cent), and “a unique sacred celebration of Estonian people, not a media event” (77 per cent).<sup>257</sup> Such supposedly conservative, but consolidated national opinion, meanwhile, is just the tip of the iceberg of debate on this topic. After all since the 1990s the festival has represented more of a battlefield of meanings than a symphony of voices.

Estonian identity discourses of the last twenty years, as mirrored in narratives on *Laulupidu* celebrations, is exactly what we are going to look at in this chapter. In our interviews with conductors, managers, singers and dancers, both Estonian and Russian speakers, in Tallinn, Tartu, Narva and Washington, DC between 2014 and 2015, as well as in the analysis of some Russian language Estonian media discourses, we were trying to find answers to two groups of questions.

---

253 *Estonia.eu*, Estonian Song and Dance Festivals; To Breath as One, Song Celebration more popular than Michael Jackson’s last concert in Estonia; *Laulupidu2014*, Press materials.

254 *Dziesmusvetki.tv*, Fact Sheet – The Latvian Song and Dance Festival 2013.

255 *Dainusvente.lt*, Next Lithuanian Song and Dance Celebration will be held in July 2018 in the honour of Lithuanian Independence 100th anniversary.

256 *Lauristin and Vihalemm*, Sustainability of Estonian Song and Dance celebration tradition. P. 5-6.

257 *Lauristin and Vihalemm*, Sustainability of Estonian Song and Dance celebration tradition. P. 6.

*The first* concerns the social form of the festival as a ritual, whose century-long function of cultural resistance to foreign oppressors and occupants<sup>258</sup> seemed to lose relevance after Estonia gained independence in 1991.<sup>259</sup> Yet if protesting against foreign cultural impositions is no longer an issue, then how should Estonia's own cultural identity be celebrated? How close is this celebration to a festivalized form of global cultural events, such as international song contests (for example, Eurovision) or global sporting events with torch relays, participant parades and other boosters for the spirit of national solidarity?

*Second*, Estonian identity is deeply linked with and embedded in the concept of Europe, which remains a dominating reference point for the construction of the national Self. Yet the hegemony of Estonian nation building discourse is not total, and always contains elements of contestation and meaning-making. Before EU membership the level of Euroscepticism in Estonia was one of the highest among accession countries. This could be explained by widely spread concerns about preserving the nation's independence and sovereignty.<sup>260</sup> Besides, the Estonian nation-rebuilding narrative from the outset was grounded in accepting a monolingual national space, which could be in conflict with more inclusive and liberal European approaches to human rights, multiculturalism and pluralism, especially concerning the integration of Russian minorities.<sup>261</sup> The question we address is how these discussions have been reflected, or had a chance to be reflected, in the repertoires of the Song and Dance Festivals?

The chapter is structured as follows. The first section focuses on Estonia's identity-making through song and dance festivals in terms of

---

258 *Brüggemann and Kasekamp*, Singing Oneself into a Nation? Estonian Song Festivals as Rituals of Political Mobilisation; *Smidchens*, The Power of Songs. Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution; Raudsepp and Vikat, The Role of The Phenomenon of Joint Singing in the Development of National Identity in Estonia; *Waren*, Theories of the Singing Revolution: An Historical Analysis of the Role of Music in the Estonian Independence Movement; *Mälksoo*, Liminality and Contested Europeanness: Conflicting Memory Politics in the Baltic Space; *Ruutsoo*, The Perception of Historical Identity and the Restoration of Estonian National Independence; *Person*, Resisting Hegemony: Transformations of National Identity under Foreign Occupation.

259 *Areleid-Tart and Kannike*, The End of Singing Nationalism as Cultural Trauma.

260 *Kuus*, Sovereignty for Security?: The Discourse of Sovereignty in Estonia, P. 395.

261 *Hogan-Brun and Wright*, Language, Nation and Citizenship: Contrast, Conflict and Convergence in Estonia's Debate with the International Community.

cultural connections with the European idea. On the one hand, elements of a branding strategy are discerned, as manifest by the increased numbers of international participants and the functioning of the festival's PR department. Yet on the other hand, as we have mentioned above, the majority of Estonians doubt that the festivals should be commercialized.

The second part of the chapter addresses the debates on *Laulupidu* from the viewpoint of Russian speaking Estonians. This dimension of the research can be related to the "Russian world" discourse that grew in importance in the aftermath of the crises in Crimea and Donbas in 2014.

*Suguvõsa kokkutulek*<sup>262</sup>: Estonia's "singing nationalism" in a global(ized) world

The concept of "singing nationalism"<sup>263</sup> has been introduced to academic discourse as an attempt to understand the nature of the Baltic states' drive for independence in the late Soviet period. The practice of singing together, established by Germans in the XIX century and then essentially transformed by the Soviet regime in terms of its content, is considered as the pivotal element of Estonian collective identity-making. The ritual mostly addressed a domestic audience, yet has consistently contained strong international effects through appealing to issues of wider European resonance, with such reference points as, being for instance, peaceful resistance to external rule.

"Singing nationalism" faced new challenges after Estonia regained independence in 1991. One of them was globalization, which opened a whole spectrum of neo-liberal opportunities for international promotion and trans-border communication, as well as for blending different identities transcending traditional East-West divides. For independent Estonia to sing about its identity meant ceasing to reproduce previous practices of cultural protest and commence the celebration of its collective Self. What

---

262 In Estonian it stands for "family reunion".

263 *Brüggemann and Kasekamp*, Singing Oneself into a Nation? Estonian Song Festivals as Rituals of Political Mobilisation; *Smidchens*, The Power of Songs. Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution; *Waren*, Theories of the Singing Revolution: An Historical Analysis of the Role of Music in the Estonian Independence Movement; *Arelaid-Tart* and *Kannike*, The End of Singing Nationalism as Cultural Trauma.

became evident for the Estonian cultural elite is that the idea of a neoliberal performance, applied to the song and dance festivals, could transform the festivals into standard consumer-oriented events as described by the concept of "disneyization".<sup>264</sup> It denotes "the process by which the principles of the Disney parks are coming to dominate more and more in sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world",<sup>265</sup> thus bringing elements of MacDolnization (efficiency, calculability, predictability, control)<sup>266</sup> into the sphere of cultural production and tourism. As one of our interviewees noted,

"There was a huge discussion...whether the festival should be like Oktoberfest with beer, food and drinking areas. Should it be more about quantity or quality?"<sup>267</sup>

This new challenge also raised new issues about independence:

"We got our independence again, it is great, but a few years later we've sadly realized that we are economically dependent. We hate the [Soviet] kind of mentality, but the other danger is consumerism, Coca-Cola and all this stuff, including the religion of shopping. After the liberation we didn't fight against it. I don't want us to shut down McDonald's like Russia does...but I am against the philosophy of consumerism."<sup>268</sup>

Language and equality were also among major issues:

"It is dangerous...to sing in English since initially we have performed in Estonian. Of course, we are open to foreigners, but the festival should not become a replica of multilingual Eurovision. Foreigners don't care about this singing so much; they can...watch it recorded...The other thing is the so called VIP section with expensive tickets of 50 euros, which contradicts the song festivals initial idea of accessibility for everyone...The organizers have to think about this critical issue and reserve some room for ordinary people."<sup>269</sup>

Other informants have raised another sort of inequality, the inner one, which undermined the requirement for the highest professional quality of performing skills at the festivals. On the one hand, this might create

---

264 Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society*.

265 *Bryman, The Disneyization of Society*, P.26.

266 *Bryman, The Disneyization of Society*, P.26.

267 An interview with an Estonian speaking organizer of the song festivals and a singer, Tartu, 2014.

268 An interview with an Estonian folk musician, a singer and an organizer of the Estonian national festivals, Tartu, 2014.

269 An interview with an Estonian speaking author of the song performed at the Song Festival in 2014, Tartu, 2014.

inequality, since many choirs from the Estonian provinces are not able to pass the selection process and thus to participate in the main event. On the other hand, the quality requirement is seen as a necessary high threshold to promote Estonia worldwide.

Thus, song festivals are considered by Estonians as a basic element of their nation building and identity-making. As a PR-manager of the XXVI Estonian Song and Dance Festival points out,

“we’ve been discussing for probably 10 years what should be an Estonian trade mark. In 2011, the year of Tallinn as the Cultural Capital in Estonia, I worked with the Youth Song Festival. It was the first time we tried to do something...There are no commercial or promotion strategies for the Song Festivals because they are so popular that don’t need more viewers. Estonians completely constitute the entire audience. We invest our efforts in communicating Estonia’s image...Festivals are good pictures for foreigners who can come and experience these emotions...It is not about promoting Estonian identity, but about popularizing the country. It is a sort of cultural diplomacy or soft power.”<sup>270</sup>

This idea of promoting the country through the event, but not the endorsing the event itself as such, was shared by almost all Estonian speaking experts. From this perspective, the global(ized) practices and rituals (torch relay, parade participants, promo actions, media coverage and sponsorship) that are typically used by organizers of international mega-events did not negatively affect the basic meaning of the festivals:

“People didn’t feel that someone makes money on their culture. The festival becomes better organized from year to year. For example, Estonian food and products are presented. So I don’t feel that people were against this commercialization. If you are a visitor, you would like to buy some food, drinks, souvenirs...The main problem is commercial sponsors, they have to be very transparent.”<sup>271</sup>

In this context, even seemingly small things matter:

“We’ve had serious discussions about having beer at songs festivals or not...Drinking is a problem in Estonia, nobody denies it, but prohibiting beer at the Laulupidu ground during two days doesn’t change anything.”<sup>272</sup>

---

270 An interview with a PR-manager of the XXVI Estonian Song and Dance Festival, Tallinn, 2014.

271 An interview with an organizer of the promotional events during the preparation of the XXVI Song and Dance Festival in 2014, Tartu, 2014.

272 An interview with a manager of the organizational committee of the XXVI Song and Dance Festival, Tartu, 2014.



Most of our Estonian speaking experts agreed that national song and dance festivals were an issue on which Estonian society, above all its Estonian speaking majority, have reached a consensus:

“It was Lennart Meri (president of Estonia between 1992 and 2001 – A.M., A.Y.) who said that the ‘Song Festival has never been in fashion because it is not a matter of fashion. It is the matter of heart like the Estonian language and mind and love’. And it stopped all discussions”.<sup>273</sup>

As mentioned by one of the organizers of the recent Song and Dance Festival and a veteran of the singing tradition, it is a ritual-based event, aimed at sharing communal experience of togetherness:

“For Estonians the song festivals are a kind of religion, as opposed to a brand. This doesn't mean that we are not churchgoers however. But in Estonia any person somehow meets others while singing, rehearsing and performing. Songs festivals substitute religious functions for us. The question is still the same - what does connect us? Money? No. Only culture. So our main idea is to keep our culture alive. The song festival is a practical outcome of this.”<sup>274</sup>

A PR-manager of the Estonian XXVI Song and Dance Festival adds:

“Actually the celebration as such is only the tip of the iceberg with numerous rehearsals and a set of preparatory events happening beforehand. It is a sort of big foundation that always is there no matter what kind of show is performed. The show is for the audience, and there are a lot of new developments in technical and commercial terms, but that is not the case in terms of the core values.”<sup>275</sup>

Most Estonian speaking experts particularly emphasized an emotional character of *Laulupidu* against the backdrop of its growing international visibility:

“This song and dance celebration is a kind of tribal experience nowadays. It's similar to what you would probably see in some African tribes: they sing about rain as if they believe in it, and it's a real thing for them. So for Estonians the song and dance celebration is a real thing. People are putting in a lot of effort to get real national costumes. They make them by themselves, they buy them from people who can do handicrafts and so on... We don't do it as a show or mega-event in the sense of a football championship or Olympic Games. We do it because one nation really feels that they need it, and they do

---

273 An interview with the director of the Song Festival Museum in Tartu, 2014.

274 An interview with an organizer of the promotional events during the preparation for the XXVI Song and Dance Festival in 2014, Tartu, 2014).

275 An interview with a PR-manager of the XXVI Estonian Song and Dance Festival, Tallinn, 2014.

it by heart. At the same time it covers like 92 per cent of all Estonians, they all have some kind of connection with each other. In this sense it is a mega event.”<sup>276</sup>

Estonian speaking experts see the family metaphor as the best expression of their identity feelings:

“I don’t agree that it is a brand. It is like inviting strangers or a TV crew at your wedding. In that case it is not a wedding any more but a show. Nobody will watch such a show for eight hours<sup>277</sup>. It is important only for those who are emotionally or personally involved...The Song [and Dance] Festivals are a sort of family event. Everyone [here] has a grandmother, or a granddaughter, or an uncle, or a neighbour...We have an expression [in Estonian], *suguvõsa kokkutulek*, which means a “family reunion”. It refers not simply to some relatives, but to a community of relatives.”<sup>278</sup>

Yet there are still groups beyond this strong “family” who seem to be neither “theirs” nor “ours”, who are “in-between” cultures, or even “inner other”, and whose inclusion in the national identity construction needs further analysis. They are Estonian Russian speakers, a community that in 2015 constituted 330,258 ethnic Russians, or 369,069 when including other ethnic minorities (Ukrainians, Belorussian, Tatars and Jews).<sup>279</sup> In total they make up about 30 per cent of the overall population of the country.

*‘Our strangers’<sup>280</sup>: Russians beyond the celebration*

The questions of how such a substantial part of Estonia’s residents could be culturally represented on the national level and whether Russian songs might be included in the repertoire of *Laulupidu* has remained a topic of contestation during the whole 25 years of Estonian independence. These are rearticulated in the aftermath of each festival. Our analysis of local

---

276 An interview with a manager of the organizational committee of the XXVI Song and Dance Festival, Tartu, 2014.

277 An average duration of the TV coverage of Song and Dance festivals.

278 An interview with the art director of the Estonian Theatre and an organizer of the XXVI Song and Dance Festival, Tallinn, 2014.

279 *Põder and Loode*, Eesti statistika aastaraamat, P. 60.

280 A concept used by Yuriy Lotman to describe “internal other’s”, i.e. those groups that are only marginally integrated in the collective Self and whose identity does not fully correspond to the hegemonic one.

Russian media <sup>281</sup> suggests that in many aspects, discussions on this topic were for years marginal and usually not taken seriously in the mainstream discourse. However, in 2007 on the wave of the Bronze Soldier conflict, the national authorities made s efforts to integrate ethnic Russians into the cultural frame of the national song and dance festival. These attempts included Russian language coverage of the festival and a lottery with 5000 travel grants for Russian speakers in Estonia to visit the National Youth Festival, the second most important after the nation-wide *Laulupidu*. At that time the Minister of Education of Estonia claimed:

Our singing festivity is our common value included in the UNESCO world cultural heritage list...This is about integration in deeds, not in words...We should candidly say to good Russian speakers: do partake in the lottery, do come in and feel yourself part of your country. Do become part of all the best our state can give to the world. Do be proud of living here in this land. <sup>282</sup>

In 2008, after the Russian–Georgian military conflict, some Estonian bloggers called on the need to devote the coming song festival to war victims. In response, a member of the Centrist Party, Evelyn Sepp noted:

It would be foolish to ignore or deny the fact that for many in Estonia, as well as in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the aggressor is Georgia. In this sense there is not much choice: either the forthcoming festival deepens the divide, or we manage to use this event as an attempt to involve all the people living in Estonia without making them face a choice between third parties.<sup>283</sup>

The mayor of Tallinn and the leader of this party, Edgar Savisaar, seconded this notion by saying that “the song festival ‘Time to Pay Attention’ fell short of its title, since organizers disregarded the Russian speakers of Estonia”<sup>284</sup>. In 2011 he continued this reasoning:

“The song festival is a symbol of our unity and continuity, a business card for our culture. This festival is an exemplar of the way Tallinn as Europe’s cultural capital wishes to expose itself to Europe.”<sup>285</sup>

---

281 We have analysed key local Russian media sources—Rus.delfi.ee and Rus.postimees.ee for the period 1990–2015 on the “Song festival” tag.

282 *Sikk*, 5000 russkikh — na pevcheskiy prazdnik.

283 *Rus.delfi.ee*, Sepp: Pevcheskiy prazdnik ne dolzhen uvelichit' raskol v obschestve.

284 *Rus.delfi.ee*, Savisaar: organizatory prazdnika ne obratili vnimaniya na russkikh.

285 *Rus.delfi.ee*, Savisaar: dlya estontsev Prazdniki pesni i tantsa imeyut osoboe znachenie.

On the contrary, ex–minister and vice–speaker of the Estonian parliament, Riigikogu, Laine Randjärv, expressed her negative opinion on the possibility of including a mixed Russian-Estonian choir in the *Laulupidu* programme:

“Today we live in an absolutely different society with no ideologically calibrated correlation of Russian and Estonian choirs, Russian and Estonian music, or pre–approved songs about the party, the army, or Lenin. We have different landmarks and selection criteria and hence a different song festival.”<sup>286</sup>

*Laulupidu* which was held in 2014 in Tallinn rekindled these debates. The rector of the Estonian Art Academy, Signe Kivi, claimed: “it was sad that yesterday I did not see performers in Russian national costumes next to us”.<sup>287</sup> Other high–ranking Estonian speakers, such as the art director of the XXVI Song and Dance Festival, Hirvo Surva, and the director of the Foundation of the Song and Dance Festival, Aet Maatee, were ambivalent on the issue. On the one hand, they were open to the idea of including Russian pieces in the repertoire; yet on the other hand, they assumed that “as soon as it comes to traditions, one should go ahead without damaging them”.<sup>288</sup> Some of our experts also shared the idea that Russian songs could be included into the *Laulupidu*’s repertoire since this might contribute to a decrease in tension between ethnic Estonians and Russian speakers. This issue occurred in our interview with a former representative of the Estonian government and a current EU employee, November 2015. Others emphasized that

“It is important to understand what kind of Russians we are talking about. Are they Russians who speak Estonian or are they Russian speakers? It could be discussed. If a composer is Estonian who writes music in Russian it could be doable.”<sup>289</sup>

---

286 *Kornysheva*, Eks-ministr kul'tury schitает diskussiyu o svodnom russkom khore neumestnoy.

287 *Rus.delfi.ee*, Video Delfi: Signe Kivi: mne bylo grustno, chto ya vchera ne uvidela russkikh natsional'nykh kostyumov; *Rus.delfi.ee*, Organizator Prazdnika pesni ne isklyuchaet, chto sleduyuschiy raz mogut prozvuchat' pesni i na russkom yazyke.

288 *Rus.delfi.ee*, Organizator Prazdnika pesni ne isklyuchaet, chto sleduyuschiy raz mogut prozvuchat' pesni i na russkom yazyke.

289 An interview with an organizer of the promotional events during the preparation for the XXVI Song and Dance Festival in 2014, Tartu, 2014.

Experts from the XXVI Song and Dance Festival PR and managerial team, noted that it was very important to popularize the Festival among Russian speakers in Estonia. Translating information into Russian on the Festival's official website and a special PR programme for Russian language media are examples of this policy. Yet as a PR manager of the Festival pointed out,

“of course, we understand that communication with the Western and Russian media has to be different. We used a message like “it is 25 years of a new era, a kind of anniversary of Independence”, basically for Finland, Sweden, Germany and in English. When we have communicated with Russia, we tried to be more neutral and emphasize more the cultural core of the event, choir singing. We had choirs from Russia that participated, so we used messages about choir singing as a strong cultural tradition, which is the most important part of Estonian culture. We didn't think that Russia should be addressed with messages about the independence movement or the ‘singing revolution’.”<sup>290</sup>

However, in our interviews criticism of a more inclusive model of song festivals was quite strong. As one of organizers of the 2014 *Laulupidu* pointed out,

“We should not mix the Estonian song and dance celebration...and daily policies...If we try to put (Russian songs. – A.M., A.Y.) there only once and don't do anything else to win Russians' hearts and minds in Estonia, then I think we are going the wrong way. We can't...cure problems over there in a couple of days.”<sup>291</sup>

Others are even more sceptical:

“The question of whether the Russian language can be used for singing is not essential, but this is not because there is any particular opposition to multiculturalism. People in Estonia pretty much realized that it is a multicultural country and there are lots of possibilities for cultural expression for all cultural groups. Yet song festivals are particularly Estonian events. It is not some kind of multicultural, multinational choir festival. It is the purpose of the Estonian song festival to revitalize Estonian identity. The question of language is very sensitive for many people...The discussion we've had on how Estonian and Russian speakers are related to each other has made clear that the Russian speakers are extremely diverse groups in terms of political profiles, Estonian language skills, and integration into the Estonian society... Estonia makes headway towards building a multinational state, a growing

---

290 An interview with a PR-manager of the XXVI Estonian Song and Dance Festival, Tallinn, 2014.

291 An interview with a manager of the organizational committee of the XXVI Song and Dance Festival, Tartu, 2014.

percentage of ethnic Russians have become citizens of Estonia. But song festivals are not meant for state–building representations. This is an Estonian event held under different states during the last 150 years... We are so small and hence are not interested in becoming a completely multinational country. Estonia has survived only because its culture has survived... now we have our own state and language that we can speak, so it makes sense that we build our identity on an ethnic basic.”<sup>292</sup>

It is an identity gap, often formulated in cultural or even civilizational terms, that divides the Estonian majority and the Russian speaking minority. High social and professional status and fluency in the Estonian language can’t so far bridge this gap:

“Local Russians for years have been aware that there are many people around Estonia for whom nothing can equalize a Russian and an Estonian, neither perfect Estonian language, nor a high social role. Neither can financial resources or even Estonian citizenship make someone Estonian in this perspective. It is only a matter of time when someone from an authentic Estonian family makes clear what your social status is: you are from an alien’s family, of the second–rank, you are not one of us, and you are supposed to be very careful.”<sup>293</sup>

Here is a further similar voice of discontent:

“This festival is for Estonians. Russians do not belong there... All that leads to integration undoubtedly has its merits, but we feel ourselves to be at the margins. We are not allowed a seat at the master’s table, even if we have the full rights to achieve that. From childhood ethnic Estonians know very little about those ‘others’ who live next door and who will keep living next door tomorrow.”<sup>294</sup>

What these critical narratives reveal, apart from a particular kind of blame speech, is the resilience of Soviet cultural practices, which more than two decades after the collapse of the USSR still remain a key reference point and a dominant cultural frame for a significant part of Russian speakers:

“There were times when song and dance festivals were perceived with joy and happiness in the whole of society. Most likely, the bulk of Russian choirs have taken part in them. Yet today nationalist policies don’t bother to boost the festive mood among Russian speakers; on the contrary, discrimination, humiliation, deprivation, along with the tantalizing language torture cultivates hate, repugnance and denial of everything related to national identity. Thanks

---

292 An interview with an Estonian speaking author of a song performed at the Song Festival in 2014, Tartu, 2014.

293 *Karaev, Nikolay Karaev: põliseestlase poeg vs syn immigrant.*

294 *Kornysheva, Vernite na Pevcheskiy prazdnik svodnyy russkiy khor!*

to unskilled politicians a Berlin wall of misunderstanding, segregation and alienation between ethnicities was erected."<sup>295</sup>

In this type of discursive field the Kremlin's version of history finds fertile ground, from the denial of the Soviet occupation of Estonia <sup>296</sup> to the questioning of the legality of Estonia's secession from the Soviet Union:

"Many came here because they were incited to raise industry (in Estonia. – A.M., A.Y.) from scratch, not because they wanted to occupy someone's place. They were promised housing and decent jobs. We did all kinds of work. People were wonderful... They were doing mining here, all sort of dirty construction stuff, building power plants...and then suddenly these people were pushed out of their jobs and deprived of any respect. This is how the wind of freedom blew – as if they (Estonians. – A.M., A.Y.) didn't have freedom before."<sup>297</sup>

In their discourses local Russian speaking residents don't distance themselves from Soviet times, but on the contrary, they gladly associate themselves with it:

"The "Baltiyets" factory in Soviet times was known all across the country... People from all of Estonia came to share our experience... We were able to take children in groups to Moscow to see the Bolshoi Theatre... And there were funds for all this... When komsomol<sup>298</sup> was in charge, everything was easier... Yet, then Estonia seceded... Estonians first didn't know themselves what to do with their freedom. They asked for economic autonomy, but Yeltsin gave them freedom."<sup>299</sup>

This phenomenal combination of Soviet cultural stereotypes and historical diletantism contravenes one of the core arguments in Russia's mainstream discourse on Russia being a victim of the Soviet regime to the same extent as other Soviet republics.<sup>300</sup> A significant number of Russian speakers in Estonia prefer to look at the post-war period as an era of industrialization rather than colonization. They expose a surprising insensitivity to Estonian concerns about the erosion of Estonian majority during the Soviet

---

295 *Kornysheva*, Vernite na Pevcheskiy prazdnik svodnyy russkiy khor!

296 *Simonian*, S pozitsiy mezhdunarodnogo prava, sovetsoi okkupatsii Pribaltiki ne bylo.

297 An interview with a representative of an NGO on national minorities, Narva, 2015.

298 Young Communist League during Soviet times.

299 An interview with a member of the Russian cultural society, Narva, 2015.

300 *Nikitina*, Russia and the Baltic States: Problematizing the Soviet Legacy Discourse.

times.<sup>301</sup> They deny the objective factors that ultimately led to the decomposition of the Soviet Union, and don't see any reasons to regret the mass deportations, Russification and subjugation to Moscow's rule, which all constitute a major pivot of the Estonian national narrative.

*Alternative spaces of the unrooted 'tradition': the case of the Slavic Wreath*

The *Slavic Wreath* (*Slyaviansky Venok*) cultural project is an example of an alternative festivalization based on ethnic grounds. The roots of this festival date back to Russian singing festivities held in 1937 and 1939 in Narva and Pechory.<sup>302</sup> This Soviet era legacy was retrieved in 1991 under the title of *Slavic Wreath*,<sup>303</sup> which appeals to the authentic tradition of a Russian-language choir singing in Narva.

The *Laulupidu* and the *Slavic Wreath* thus are two different cultural spaces that exist independent from each other and epitomize two distinct cultural traditions. In the meantime, from the Estonian viewpoint, the very existence of a Russian-language cultural event, which is regularly held, is a practical means to strengthen a homogenous nation building policy incorporating aspects of Russian culture into a wider Estonian identity.<sup>304</sup> Among supporters of this festival are several Estonian municipal organizations and foundations like "Eesti Kultuurkapital".<sup>305</sup>

The integrationist discourse in Narva is well articulated in the following interview:

"My children are fully integrated...and I never feel any alienation...We (Russians and Estonians. – A.M., A.Y.) mutually respect each other...It is impossible to expect here anything like in Ukraine...Culture erases tensions and discards the challenges of making political choices...We play Estonian

---

301 *Person*, Resisting Hegemony: Transformations of National Identity under Foreign Occupation, P. 14.

302 *Rus.delfi.ee*, V Tallinne spleli "Slavyanskiy venok".

303 *Adashkevich*, Festival' pesni i tantsa "Slavyanskiy venok" otkrylsya v Talline.

304 *Stolitsa.ee*, "Slavyanskiy venok" zavershilsya gala-kontsertom; *Rus.delfi.ee*, Yanes: my sokhranili podderzhku kultury natsmen'shinstv na dokrizisnom urovne.

305 *Kolobova*, Sillamyaeskie "Rusichi": po-russki dlya russkikh i ne tol'ko.



music and love it a lot... We are connected to the whole Estonia...We hold joint contests, festivals. All doors are open to us."<sup>306</sup>

In Narva this logic sustains a “business—as-usual” approach to the wider spectrum of issues related to liaisons between Estonia and Russia. The Estonian government intends to inscribe the Narva–Ivangorod partnership in a set of trans–border projects supported by the EU, such as the Estonia–Russia–Latvia programme, or the “Two Cities–Two Friends” children festival that is a part of the European Cooperation Days. This trans–border interaction is expected to boost Estonia’s role as the leading partner in projects such as “United by Borders”, which is aimed at creating a unique Estonian-Russian fortress ensemble as a single tourist product composed of two fortresses located at 150 metres from one another.<sup>307</sup> Cultural arguments strongly resonated in our interviews as well:

“The strength of the Narva musical school is the aggregation of post-Soviet cultures and our positioning between St. Petersburg and Tallinn. Mutual fertilization and hybridity is the key advantage.”<sup>308</sup>

This narrative can be interpreted through the prism of two interrelated concepts. One boils down to Yuriy Lotman’s idea of boundaries as *membranes*, which filter out external impacts and domesticate them. Another concept is the idea of the *suture*, as stated in post–structuralist literature and having analogies in cultural semiotics. Both approach borderlands from the vantage point of their specific function of integrating a fusion of cultures and languages, aimed at knitting together those on the inside and their “other”.<sup>309</sup> To quote Slavoj Žižek, suture means that “self-enclosure is a priory impossible, that the excluded externality always leaves its traces within”.<sup>310</sup> Suture denotes “a mode in which the exterior is inscribed in the interior” to the point of erasing substantial differences and forming “a consistent, naturalised, organic whole”. From this perspective, Narva indeed can be viewed as a space suturing Estonia (and Europe in a wider sense) with Russia. In terms of urban landscapes, Narva is a palimpsest: many street signs are in English and Estonian, some plaques in Swedish, while most of commercial areas, for practical reasons, are in

---

306 An interview with a musical school director in Narva, Narva, 2015.

307 See [forttour.net](http://forttour.net), [tourism.narva.ee](http://tourism.narva.ee).

308 An interview with a musical school director in Narva, Narva, 2015.

309 *Salter*, *Theory of the / : The Suture and Critical Border Studies*, P. 734.

310 *Žižek*, *The Fright for Real Tears. Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, P. 58.

Russian and Estonian. From the cross-border mobility perspective, Narva-Joensuu is known as an area of spa tourism, basically designed for Russian clients, which for Estonia might become an important element of securing good-neighbourly relations with Russia.

Arguably, the deeper integration of Russian speakers into Estonian society might be conducive to their alienation from Russia and ultimately question the practicability of the suturing function:

“I went to Russia a couple of years ago, everything there is alien, and I thank God for living here...I do watch Russian TV and take this information into consideration, but I don't identify myself with it.”<sup>311</sup>

Respondents who deny communicative or linguistic problems with ethnic Estonians (“*when we try to say something in Estonian, they say – speak Russian, don't bother*”)<sup>312</sup>, are in the meantime less prone to culturally suturing the two countries. As our interviewee the director of the choral school in Narva stated “*When I go for class reunions to Russia, I do see how I have changed ... and how I differ from them*”. It is typical that assertions about “support from Estonians” and “many rights given to us here” are accompanied with scepticism toward sustainable connections with Russia. This was epitomised in an interview with a director of a boys’ choir in Narva: “*Submitting documents for Russian visa is awful, so much time consuming and complicated... We would better go to Europe*”.<sup>313</sup>

Hope for support from Russia are often scarce in Narva (“Moscow lacks forces to tackle its own domestic troubles”), which leads Russian speakers to deny any possible politicization of identity cleavages: “*there is talk about some kind of ‘fifth column’, allegedly made of Russians living beyond Russia. Some say they are capable of making unfriendly moves towards countries of their residence. Simply come to the Slavic Wreath and see: these people are unable to betray or do nasty things, I am convinced*”.<sup>314</sup>

Organizers of the *Slavic Wreath* prefer to publicly avoid any political connotations, characterizing this festival as a feast of dance and songs that illuminate “the breadth of soul”, a metaphor that is widely used for

---

311 An interview with a musical school director in Narva, Narva, 2015.

312 An interview with a conductor of the boy’s choir in Narva, Narva, 2015.

313 An interview with a director of a boys’ choir in Narva, 2015.

314 *Turpakova, Igor' Sklyar*: "Ya ne znayu, chto takoe ruka Moskvyy".

describing one of the distinctive elements of the Russian mentality. For many Russian speakers, not only the *Slavic Wreath* but also *Laulupidu* boost “the comprehension of unity” and consolidation.<sup>315</sup> Yet these politically loaded categories are understood in very different terms between the Estonian majority and the minority of Russian speakers:

“I can’t express my fascination, pride and respect that I feel to all participants of this grandiose beautiful show. Comparisons with my motherland Russia immediately came to my mind: unforgettable Olympic Games or a military parade in Moscow. I think that these events, with no political content, strengthen patriotism”.<sup>316</sup>

Indeed, some managers who worked on the Sochi Olympic project were invited to the Slavic Wreath in Estonia. However Russians don’t perceive this “awareness of unity” as their own, self-sufficient practices of “singing together”. The two festivals differ not only in size, *Laulupidu* is much larger in scope, but also in content: the *Slavic Wreath* starts with an Orthodox service which not only underlines its Russian identity, but also deploys it within the framework of the Russia-sponsored conservative discourse in which religious components play a major role. The obvious connection with Moscow is demonstrated by the raising of the Russian flag during the event<sup>317</sup>.

Links to Russia as the most meaningful reference point for the whole project stretches far beyond cultural or linguistic domain. In 2007 the organizer of the festival, the Union of Slavic Educational and Charitable Societies, was renamed to the Union of Russian Educational and Charitable Societies. This was driven by the expectation that the organisation could get some funding from the Russian state. “It goes without saying that the finances provided by the Estonian government are insufficient. Estonian policy boils down to feeding those who are considered as ‘real Estonians’ and sidelining all others”, a former head of the Union contended.<sup>318</sup> In the meantime, the renaming of the Union “does not mean that Ukrainian, Belorussian, Polish and other Slavic groups ought to be excluded. Members of the Union are certain that to avoid dividing lines we need to conduct a very well-thought policy within the organiza-

---

315 *Konysheva*, Itogi oprosa: Etot prazdnik dlya estontsev, russkie tam lishnie.

316 *Konysheva*, Itogi oprosa: Etot prazdnik dlya estontsev, russkie tam lishnie.

317 *Bublik*, Uchastniki "Slavyanskogo venka" ustroili krasochnoe shestvie

318 *Rus.delfi.ee*, Soyuz slavyanskikh obschestv stal "russkim".

tion”.<sup>319</sup> The neo-imperial momentum of this logic is not the renaming from Slavic to Russian as such, but the incompleteness of this semantic shift that betrays a metonymic distortion in the fabric of representation. The Union intends to sell in the cultural market it’s newly born Russian identity, yet at the same time maintain in its orbit all other Slavic ethnic groups as satellites or junior partners, who have to accept the new Russian umbrella as a cultural framework for distinguishing non-Estonian minorities from the dominant Estonian cultural majority.

The self-reproducing neo-imperial attitudes and sentiments give a clear political effect in the case of Ukraine whose identity, especially after the anti-Russian consolidation of the Ukrainian society as a reaction to the annexation of Crimea and militant separatism in Donbas, remain problematic. Therefore they cannot be inscribed into the pan-Slavic cultural framework dominated by Russia. A perfect illustration of this ambiguity was an incident that occurred in Sillamäe at the 2014 *Slavic Wreath* festival. This event was held on the Day of Slavic Writing and Culture, which dates back to the canonized brothers Cyril and Methodius. During the parade some of viewers were noticed to exclaim “Glory to Ukraine!” This was the slogan of Ukrainian nationalist movements, which were widely involved and known for their presence during EuroMaidan. This slogan, like in EuroMaidan, was followed-up with the slogan “Glory to Heroes!”. A Russian speaking member of the local city council, Oleg Kultaev, has appealed to the Estonian media and law enforcement agencies to react to this incident which, according to him, evoked shock among local Russians, due to the close association of these slogans with the “events in Ukraine”.<sup>320</sup>

This incident explicates the securitized context in which Narva and other Russian-speaking localities are deployed. Even some of the population most loyal to the Estonian state expressed their approval of Russian policy in Ukraine. A respondent made a strong case for the lack of discrimination in Estonia, stating that “*We as a Russian choir were invited to sing in front of the Estonian President – what kind of inequality are you talking about?*”.<sup>321</sup> Then the informant continues,

---

319 *Rus.delfi.ee*, Soyuz slavyanskikh obschestv stal "russkim".

320 *Rus.delfi.ee* (2014) Na "Slavyanskom venke" v Sillamyae neodnoznachnuyu reaktsiyu vyzval lozung "Slava Ukraine, geroyam slava!".

321 An interview with a choral conductor and festival organizer, Narva, 2015.

“it is abnormal that in Ukraine, the Russian language is banned...We all watch Russian TV, and see all the hoop-la from the other (Ukrainian. – A.M., A.Y) side.”<sup>322</sup>

Paradoxically, this double-edged identity gives many ethnic Russians a feeling of security. People feel relatively protected being citizens or residents of Estonia, but in the meantime find it acceptable to identify themselves with Russia and even welcome some sort of protection from the Russian side. Most Russian speakers would intentionally or unwittingly reproduce the basic tenets of the Kremlin's Ukraine discourse and share the perception of Ukraine as an artificial state with contingent borders. Many would project the conflict in eastern Ukraine as a legitimate struggle of Russians for speaking their own language onto themselves:

“Russian speakers here support the rebels. The secession of Crimea is quite normal to us. It all used to be Soviet”<sup>323</sup>

An incident with the flag of the Donetsk Peoples Republic in Narva during the Victory Day celebration of May 9, 2015,<sup>324</sup> was reported by local journalists, and was perceived to serve as a gesture of symbolic solidarity with “Novorossiya”. A local resident, interviewed by a journalist, confirms pro-Russian sympathies in Narva:

“I guess most of the folks here are on Russia's side. In Ukraine, something tough is going on there...This is basically what we talk about among ourselves...Estonia doesn't cover this much, while Russia does. Since we are Russians, we watch news from Russia. The First Channel is the most popular here.”<sup>325</sup>

The high resonance of Ukraine-related matters in the cultural discourses in Narva and other Russian-populated areas made clear that the emancipation of Russian cultural identity is possible only in its neo-imperial form. This unveils a structural problem whose importance stretches far beyond Estonia. Due to the geographical dispersal of Russian-speaking communities across all the post-Soviet territory, the revival of a Russian national collective Self inevitably spills over Russian borders and thus ignites imperial sentiments, be it in a neo-Soviet, civilizational, the Eurasianism

---

322 An interview with a choral conductor and festival organizer, Narva, 2015.

323 An interview with a member of the Russian cultural society, Narva, 2015.

324 *Rus.delfi.ee*, Muzhchina rasskazal, pochemu prishol na prazdnovanie Dnia Pobedy v Narve s flagom DNR.

325 *Filatov*, Prigranichnoe sostoyanie.

doctrine, or biopolitical, a trans-border community of Russian speakers solidified by the allegedly common norms of religion and socially conservative bonds, forms. This irremovable imperial momentum inscribed in Russian nationalist projects distinguishes it from Estonian, as well as Ukrainian and Georgian, nationalisms aimed at recreating national cultures and political institutions and protecting them from obtrusive Russian encroachments.

\*\*\*

In this chapter we argued that the song festival became a toolkit for awakening and legitimizing Estonian national identity in the late Soviet times, which contributed to the reestablishment of Estonian statehood. But once the dream about an independent Estonian state had materialised, the country has faced new challenges. As a symbolic representation of the idea of the Estonian nation, the Song Festival has been criticized for not being sufficiently inclusive in regard to non-Estonian speakers.

In this context Russia plays an ambiguous role of an inner actor that supports a culturally kindred population, and simultaneously Estonia's external "Other" that needs to be contained. Against this background, the major impediment for the successful cultural and societal integration of Estonia's Russian speaking community into the dominant majority highlights the drastic issues in building an inclusive Estonian identity. The *Laulupidu* festival is one of the best examples of the search for cultural authenticity that is absolutely central for the Estonian nation-rebuilding project. On the contrary, the cultural strategy of most Russian speaking groups boils down, by and large, to bringing into Estonia a variety of Kremlin-controlled discourses, which divests them of originality, autonomy and hybridity. In many cases the intentional projection of Russian, often Soviet-nostalgic, narratives reproduces a situation of a post-Soviet culture war, and impedes domestic integration in Estonia.