

# **Authority, Identification and Nationalism: The Future of Freedom in Estonia**

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Authoritarianism was evident in Estonia when I was working in this country during the early 1990s (Bergquist and Weiss, 1994). It was manifest in the concern for reestablishing traditional and hierarchical models of authority – in the passivity of Estonian men and women as learners and as architects of their own personal and collective futures. Like many Eastern European countries (and many other countries for that matter) Estonia has traditionally been ruled by authoritarian hierarchies imposed from outside.

Some of the structural elements of communist ideological thinking are not far from traditional habits of mind in Estonia: authority (manifested in hierarchy), a strong positive valence placed on rational thought (scientism) and a tension between the rational/higher elements (associated with the West and Europe) and the dark, mysterious East's impulses. I now turn briefly to the tensions inherent in these structural elements.

## **Authority and Freedom of Thought**

Some of the Estonians I interviewed commented on feeling a new sense of freedom of thought after the liberation of their country. The thought police no longer controlled the public dialogue. The reality, however, is that the way in which people think and what people think about are influenced by forces more numerous and subtle than just the presence or absence of thought police. The cumulative history of habits of thinking precede the Communist era by at least four hundred years in Estonia. The historical narratives of this country are shaped by repeated invasions and occupations from both East and West.

These narratives, in turn, have a profound impact on the way in which political and societal discourse takes place and the content of this discourse. I asked the following question: Has your life changed since the political changes? The response was often: How much do you know about our history? And then our interviewees would often provide a brief summary of their history. The historical roots go so deep that they take on mystical and mythic overtones. Estonian thought is saturated with Estonian history-- as is the case in many (if not all) societies.

While history and thought are often intertwined, I would suggest that there is some irony embedded in the Estonian narratives. They contain the seemingly contradictory themes of both individualism and collectivism.

### **The Irony of Individualism**

There was always an authoritarianism residing in the history and blood of Estonia. Nevertheless, Communist authoritarianism and the efforts of communists to build a governmental system ruled by the "workers" were always alien to Estonians. A strong Protestant emphasis on individuality and individual relationships with God (Weber, 1958), has always been dominant in this country.

Yet even with the strong emphasis on individualism and the Lutheran disdain for truth mediated through formal authority and hierarchy, there is still a solid tradition of authoritarianism in Estonia. A social critic, Tiit, whom I interviewed indicated that "many years of socialism have led us as a people to look for authority outside ourselves." He also noted sadly how a Nobel nominee in his country sits passively in the Estonian legislature, relying on guidance of his political party leaders.

The tradition of authoritarianism can also undoubtedly be traced back to the frequent occupation of Estonia by other countries and cultures that are strongly authoritarian: Germany, Poland, and Russia. This is where history and thought intermingle in Estonia. While the Estonians I interviewed have long desired to be left alone to tend to their farms and families, they are accustomed to invaders who bring authoritarian structures with them. The invaders often provide the stable and efficient government and public services that Estonians themselves – with their dislike for collective action – appreciate.

Estonians have seemingly been glad to delegate authority to outside people – though obviously they would much prefer to delegate these tasks to their countryfolk rather than invaders with foreign customs and values. An outside observer, Alexander Theroux (2011, p. 37), put it this way:

Estonians, arguably, were – are – shyly obedient. Dutiful. Highly serious. Earnest beyond words. The concepts all tend to merge. . . . May one suggest that as a nation, the

people [of Estonia] are too regulated, too orderly? The restlessness is certainly there, the pride, no question about the anger, but what about the concentrate discipline to *revolt*?

I would take some exception to Theroux's conclusions regarding revolt. The Estonians obviously did revolt during the early 1990s. But it was a gentle revolt – the singing revolution. There was exceptional discipline (and collective courage) in the widespread disregard for Soviet rule when singing the songs of Estonia at the song fest and on subsequent occasions (collective actions that I have described in other essays in this series). However, I think Theroux was correct in assessing the Estonian people as orderly and highly regulated – whether it be in their adherence to the old town plan in Tallinn, or their admiration of the choral arts.

While working in Estonia I was intrigued by the similarities I saw in this country regarding orderliness and what I observed in Finland (a country located just to the North of Estonia) and Switzerland. In more recent years, I have observed a similar commitment to order in Singapore. Clean streets and social courtesies are abundant in each of these countries. As I note later in this essay, the messiness of democratic rule that began when Estonia declared its independence must have been (and perhaps still is) difficult for the Estonians to accept. The pull toward order that the Soviet Union successfully imposed for many years must have been strong – and in some Estonian quarters might still be strong.

The lingering desire in Estonia for order and restraint was countered during the 1990s by the perspectives and actions taken by some countrymen. "Outliers" like Tiit tried for many years to keep alive an alternative to authoritarianism. Tiit fought against authoritarian regimes in both his own country and in Central America regardless of the prevalent ideology. Such courageous and idealistic anti-authoritarians often find themselves unappreciated by both the old order and the new order of leadership in a changing world. They often grow tired of always being on the outside looking in, with disdain and disillusionment. Still, we found several Estonians, like Tiit, who continue their oppositional stance. As one of these courageous warriors declared: "I was in the opposition in the last regime, and I'm in the opposition now!"

### **East versus West: Rationality vs. Passivity**

In my Estonian interviews, I heard a strong concern voiced about and critique sounded regarding the authoritarian tradition in their country. These expressions came from those who

were hoping that Estonia would use the Soviet collapse as an opportunity to move toward more democratic ideals and less hierarchy in their political and social systems. This idealistic dream of a truly equitable and nonhierarchical system is rooted, perhaps, in the collective residual memory of a social system that existed in some pre-Christian European communities: *Old Europe*). These remarkable partnership-dominated (and pre-patriarchal) communities were described several decades ago by Eisler (1987) in *Chalice and the Blade*. The ghost of Old Europe might have lingered in the social unconscious of many Estonians during the early 1990s. At the very least, the desire for greater equality and participation by all citizens was viewed by some Estonians as a movement from an Eastern to a more Western mode of thinking.

Rightly or wrongly, the East (and Russification in particular) was often portrayed by Estonians as irrational, primitive, unconscious, and authoritarian. By contrast, the West (Western Europe and North America) was perceived as more rational, civilized, conscious, and nonauthoritarian. There was a long, esteemed history regarding the major universities that flourished in Estonia – notable the University of Tartu. In existence since 1632, this university has served as home for many major researchers and is still rated among the finest universities in the world.

There was the thoughtful and knowledgeable appreciation of the arts that is found everywhere in this country. Rarely, do we find the arts flourishing as much in other countries. Along with this unique artistic heritage was profound hatred among many Estonians for the flamboyant architecture of the Eastern Orthodox churches that came to Estonia from Russia. As I walked through the towns of Estonia with my Estonian guides, they would point to these ornate (and often very large) structures with disgust and detailed critique. The simple, clean lines of native Estonian buildings were preferred. There were the very practical buildings of the Hanseatic league (of which the Estonian city of Tallinn was a member). I was able to appreciate the carefully laid out plan for Tallinn with each social unit of the city being provided with its own location and church.

Here is where I found the irony of Estonian freedom. The yearning for a more Western perspective was matched by a subtle form of authoritarianism that was manifest in the daily actions taken by the Estonians. While there was a dream of equity and reform in Estonia when I was working there, a propensity for authoritarianism was evident in the passivity of many Estonian men and women I interviewed or observed in action (or inaction).

As an “impatient” American, I was surprised to discover how willing Estonians were to listen to speeches that droned on and on for several hours, whether in person or on television. The “talking head” was apparently widely found and tolerated in most of the Eastern European countries before and after collapse of the Soviet Union. This willingness to listen, be persuaded by and follow the directions of a single leader (whether from the old regime or the new one) seemed to be a lingering ghost of Soviet rule and the rule of many other repressive and occupying regimes prior to the Soviet invasion.

There was a search for and designation of wise leader in Estonia, based on the assumption that somehow a great person will lead citizens of this embattled country out of their troubles. In a previous essay on authoritarianism (Bergquist, 2020b), I wrote about the pull toward the wise leader (as well as courageous leader and visionary leader) as identified by Wilfred Bion (1961). There seemed to be a hunger in Estonia for new heroes: visionaries, wise leaders, warriors. The new leaders, in reality, may have been merely the old leaders, or their descendants, in new clothing (much as we find today in the Putin-led Russian government).

Turning to the old leaders probably appealed to an authoritarian need for structure and continuity—that was dominant in Estonia (and other Eastern European countries) during the early 1990s. While the Estonians were provided with a new image upon which can be projected new societal needs, these needs are often only met with a return to old structures. As Bion and other object relations theorist have noted, when there are high levels of anxiety in an individual or group, there must be structures and procedures (“containers”) that can hold and this anxiety—so that it can be “metabolized” (converted from anxiety into acceptance and, hopefully, action) (Bergquist, 2020a).

I appreciated the willingness of Estonians to listen to other people, for this is certainly a failing of many Americans, who seem to tolerate nothing more than a ten-second sound bite and are more impatient to express their own opinion than truly to listen to someone else. Yet I was concerned that there was little evidence of much interaction between the speaker and listener. There was little in the way of any collaborative discovery among the citizens—which is a critical way of knowing in any learning-oriented society (Belenky and others, 1986). It was never quite clear whether these passive listeners were really taking in what was being said by the speakers or just showing deference to authoritarian leaders and structures. Does true freedom require

interaction among peers, or is this just an American bias? Is dialogue required for any community to discover something that rings of truth and credibility (Gergen and Gergen, 2004) or is this just a naïve vestige of old fashion American town hall meetings (for we have our own historical ghosts)?

## **Distorted Identification**

There is much more to be said about the nature of authoritarianism. As Edward Shils (1954) suggested, authoritarianism is quite complex. He reminds us that political movements and authoritarian regimes are never made up of people with specific personalities. Rather, they are constituted of people with many different motives, aspirations, and personal characteristics. This is particularly important to bear in mind when examining Estonian society, for many Russians were exported to Estonia after World War II. By the early 1990s, they considered Estonia to be home--though they were still loyal to Russia and brought Russian culture to Estonia, including the Russian language (which was the official government-imposed language to be spoken in Estonia). This complex interweaving of cultures might account for some of the contradictions and sources of ambivalence I noted among Estonians during the early 1990s.

I suspect, however, that the ambivalence and contradictions I witnessed went beyond the competing perspectives of diverse constituencies. I believe that there were many intra-psychic contradictions at play – some of which I have just identified in turning to the work of Wilfred Bion. There was profound irrational swirling around Estonia at every level during the early 1990. The container for diffuse anxiety, that I identified earlier, was not consistently present. Even with a wish, at some level, for the old Soviet structure and security, there was the reality of a collapsing Soviet system.

### **Identifying with the Aggressor**

Nothing was making much sense. Uncertainty reigned supreme. Conditions were ripe for an even deeper ambivalence regarding the Russian “aggressors.” This was not just because Estonians might have ultimately preferred Russian occupation over complete chaos – and may have historically preferred Russian occupation over German occupation (a difficult choice they had to make – who is the best “occupier”?). It goes much deeper than this. There may have been a psychological process in place that is known as *identification with the aggressor*. This very

disturbing process has been described by Victor Frankl (2006) and others who have tried to make sense of the experiences of concentration camp survivors.

Under conditions of high stress and anxiety (such as existed in concentration camps), victims learn to identify with the person who is oppressing them and are grateful when they are no longer being oppressed; the former victims then replicate the aggression with other people (A. Freud, 2018). The concept of identification with the aggressor seems to be just as applicable in trying to understand why people who were battered by their parents tend to batter their own children as it is in trying to understand why some concentration camp inmates were recruited for the secret police in some European countries during the Second World War.

When we apply this concept of identification with the aggressor to the citizens of Estonia, we find its mundane manifestations in the passivity I mentioned above. We also find its softer form in the uncritical allegiance to the leader that was found not just in Estonia but also in most other countries with an authoritarian legacy. This process will become harsher under conditions of profound stress and anxiety – such as that brought about by the invasion and occupation by a foreign country (in this case, Russia). The victims (occupants of the invaded country) may begin to identify with the aggressors (invaders). At the very least, the victims will often begin to mimic the behavior of the occupiers – replicating the form of leadership and governance imposed by the occupiers. Speech mannerism of the leader are replicated by citizens, as are the words being conveyed by the leader and the occupying country's media.

It can soon move beyond mimicry. Members of the occupied country will soon begin working with the occupiers and may even join with the enforcing agency of the occupiers (as occurred during the Second World War). We find this play out in the dramatic, fictionalized portrait of a German-occupied United State in Phillip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (Dick, 2007) – which inspired a cable TV series with the same name. In this hypothetical enactment, much of the enforcement of the Nazi-regime was being carried out by American citizens (who often had been enforcers of the old American regime – led by J. Edgar Hoover, long-term director of the American FBI).

This harsh version of identification with the aggressor is the extreme form of the projective identification process I presented in an earlier essay (Bergquist, 2020b): one reassigns one's own unique strengths and potentials to the leader and, as a result, diminishes or even destroys one's

own sense of self-worth and one's own distinctive identity. The leader's persona is assumed by all those who are under this person's power. The old realities are confiscated, and the leader's new "truth" becomes normative as the dominant social construction of reality. The identity of the aggressor thus become the identity of those who have been oppressed by the aggressor. This *hard authoritarianism* might have been operating in Estonia during the early 1990s – and perhaps is still operating in Estonia. This very ugly hard authoritarianism is certainly operating in many other societies today – especially those in which there is profound personal and collective stress and uncertainty.

### **Identifying with Consumption**

It is not only the aggressor to which we are often pulled when living under conditions of societal stress. We are also pulled to a much less harsh, but ultimately just as alienating, form of identification. We are absorbed into the world of goods and services. We come to identify ourselves with what we own and turn to authoritarian rule if this rule promises that the goods and services will continue to arrive at our front door. This is *soft authoritarianism*. We lose ourselves while shopping. Our sense of self is shrunk, via marketing, to the size of a touted box of cereal or new, miracle cleaning fluid.

What about in Estonia? Was soft authoritarianism prevalent in the 1990s version of Estonia and is it still present? As Berne Weiss and I noted in our 1990s assessment of life in Estonia and Hungary (Bergquist and Weiss, 1994), this type of soft authoritarianism seemed to be manifested in the Estonian (and Hungarian) valuing of very concrete and highly tangible goods and services.

Given the elusive character of truth during the Soviet era, men and women in Estonia and Hungary seemed to rely on the goods and services that they could see, feel, and taste. They looked for the purchase of products manufactured in the West – having been lured to these products by the radio and television broadcasting that emanated from non-Soviet countries (despite Soviet attempts to block this communication). Freedom now meant that goods could actually be delivered and consumed rather than just promised via the latest five-year Soviet plan.



What about contemporary Estonian life? I suggest that this soft authoritarianism still exists –and might have grown even stronger. I arrive at this conclusion not by observing actual consumer behavior in Estonia, but by noting that this form of authoritarianism seems to be prevalent throughout Europe, North America, and Asia. It is even prevalent big time in China (Ma, 2019). Obviously, I might be wrong specifically about Estonia; however, I wish to justify my conclusion by turning once again to the analysis of social systems offered by Erich Fromm. As early as 1960, Fromm noted this pull toward the valuing of goods and services as a mode of subtle authoritarianism. Specifically, he was focusing on this marketing orientation in *The Sane Society* (Fromm, 1960).

Fromm turns to the theme of alienation when describing the impact of a marketing orientation on the human psyche – as he had done before in describing the alienation associated with Nazi rule in Germany (Fromm, 1941). His focus, however, is now on the United States rather than Germany. He portrays a self-alienation of modern American man that results from “man’s physical energy . . . becoming a commodity, hence man has become a thing.” (Fromm, 1960, p. 255). Fromm is referring to the primary interest of workers in earning wages so that they can purchase goods and services.

The product of their work is no longer primary – rather consumption is primary, and workers are nothing more than intermediaries (“things”) between the workplace (production of goods) and marketplace (consumption of goods). In this orientation toward consumption, contemporary members of a society can escape from freedom. They are told how to be successful workers and what to purchase (via marketing). Difficult choices no longer are required. The agony of freedom is exchanged for a much more “blissful” life that is devoid of major challenges or any purpose other than consumption.

We are promised a life filled with tangible benefits rather than realized dreams. We are successfully convinced that meaning is to be found in the tangible consumption of goods and services. At the very least, we are told (via massive marketing campaigns) that success in life (or at least happiness is achieved) when we are in possession of the best that money can buy.

Perhaps this is one of the collective myths that we should add to Gross’ (1980) list of collective myths – a list that I identified in a previous essay on freedom. We are told not only that there is an open market for the exchange of ideas in our society, that great leaders will look after our

collective interests, and that the “little people” will ultimately rise up if there is injustice – we are also told (and are convinced) that there is no reason to rise up, for the great leader is ensuring that there is a free market for the exchange of goods and services.

Even if ideas are unlikely to be shared freely in a soft authoritarian society, there is always the new pair of shoes and vacation in Spain that await us. Furthermore, we have learned to embrace consumption at an early age. Beginning during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, our teenagers found meaning and camaraderie in hanging out together at shopping malls. Now, during the second and third decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they are learning to virtually hang around together on the Internet and to consume via the click of a mouse or tap of a finger on the mobile device.

Is it possible that Estonians are immune to this pull? As members of a now prosperous European community, are citizens of this country different in any important way from those living in other prospering countries around the world? Have their teenagers embraced a different orientation? I don't think this is the case--but I invite the assessment of my Estonian colleagues.

### **Escape into Nationalism**

Freedom can be escaped in many ways. It is not just a matter of identification with an aggressor or identification with a commodity. It is also a matter of identifying with a specific nation and culture. Consequently, we can look to another fundamental mode of escape from freedom. The threat of freedom can be ameliorated by turning to external sources of threat. Other countries become the enemy and loyalty to one's own country become the coin of the land. Nationalism flourishes. It is one of the tracks of thought that has been well worn by history – so it is easy to slip back into it.

As with individuals who assume familiar roles within their families, so, too, groups of people and nations seem to fall into characteristic modes. Think of the American "rugged individualist." In Eastern Europe, nationalism seems to be the homeostasis to which group thinking returns. Perhaps this has been useful historically, creating a group identity within which individuals could create a cultural continuity. However, recent historical events now raise new challenges. Nationalism seems to be flying in the face of a flat world (Friedman, 2007)

in which national boundaries are readily crossed. Yet, nationalism is still quite powerful and is on the rise in virtually all parts of the world – including the United States.

Is the world really becoming flat or is it a world in which enemies stand intimately close to one another, ready to defend their turf (both physical and virtual) at any cost? Are global crises (such as virus outbreaks) a cause for countries to come together or do they only cause greater anxiety and a regression to nationalism and authoritarian rule? The question becomes: What do we need to learn about nationalism if we are to build a world in the future that is less dangerous and destructive of the human spirit – and true freedom?

### **Nationalism and Xenophobia**

Nationalism, in some of its manifestations, belongs with anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and other nonrational habits of thinking. Through these often habitual, fastidious modes of thought (Kahneman, 2011) people can explain troublesome and complex social events, such as economic depressions. Quick, manageable explanations reduce levels of anxiety (Bergquist, 2020b). But these habits of thinking are not only about simplistic explanations. Nationalism, at least, is also about one's identity, about linking one's identity with something larger than oneself. It includes membership, but it also includes a sense of birthright, homeland, ancestral ties.

One is not free to choose the ethnic group into which one is born. And within that group there are certain characteristics that are also beyond choice: skin color, mother tongue, how the rest of the world relates to that ethnic group. These are some of the limits of individual freedom. Then there is the experience of feeling gripped by some primeval demands of one's ethnic identity. Perhaps when an ethnic group is smothered and receives minimal recognition and acceptance from its neighbors, then the craving for recognition gets distorted and becomes the central ingredient in the pursuit of identity.

For some, ethnic or national identity seems to be a compulsion. The great experiment in social planning that subsumed the cultures and nations of Eastern Europe after World War II was a bit like a freeze-drying process. The cultural life that existed on limited rations below the surface needed only this thing called freedom to revive during the early 1990s. The revival of freedom signaled not only the ability to travel once again but also renews nationalism, xenophobia, street crime, and economic insecurity. Revived with nationalism were the historical wounds that

scarred the region. With the intensity of siblings, each of the nations of Eastern Europe chronicled the wrongs inflicted on it by its neighbors over the centuries. Inter-nation hatred was alive and well!

In the wake of socialism's collapse, dissolution of the Soviet Union, and cold war's end, the rise of nationalism was hardly surprising – much to the chagrin of political progressives and centrists. No one objects to expressions of love of country or a positive national identity. Those are essential ingredients of self-esteem. Concerns arose during the 1990s because the baggage that typically accompanies such patriotism includes xenophobia, aggressive posturing toward neighboring countries, and an updating of the catalogue of historical wrongs.

The possible outcome of such a dynamic is a quasi-amicable divorce, such as the one that occurred late in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century between the Czechs and the Slovaks, or a descent into barbarism, such as the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina (and many countries in Africa and more recently in the Mid-East). Once a process of nationalism is set in motion, it often takes its own course. People who have been denied any expression of national pride may well be carried to extremes when the prohibition is lifted. The paradox here is that freedom is the element that allows the revival of dormant passions; once revived, the passion of nationalism has been known to drown out the rational, slow thinking (Kahneman, 2011) that is essential for freedom.

### **Nationalism and Identity**

National identity and autonomy were extremely important in Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The citizens of this country were concerned about recognition by other countries and about the establishment of a clear and distinctive national identity. Self-esteem for men and women in this country was directly linked to national recognition. During my interviews, Estonians talked about the frequent invasion of their country and about other people's lack of respect for their boundaries, their deep cultural roots, and their intellectual resources. They felt like they were on the outside, looking in, when being considered on the world stage. These concerns have continued to be voiced by Estonians during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as they have established their place in the European community.

This lingering concern for recognition in Estonia may be quite legitimate, given its long history of being overlooked and dismissed as a legitimate country, Estonia and its Baltic neighbors,

Latvia and Lithuania are indeed located on the "outskirts" of Western Europe, and their inhabitants view their country as isolated and peripheral to major European events. I offer the following example from the 1990s of this overlooking of major affairs in the Baltic states by the rest of the world (or at least the American press).

In 1991, over half a million citizens of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the egregious German-Russian (Ribbentrop/Molotov) agreement that gave these three countries to Russia in 1942 by forming an unbroken human chain across the three countries. This was a major event, both symbolically and in terms of the enormous effort and devotion it required. Yet virtually no one in the West heard much about this event, even though communications with the West by this time were vastly improved. The invasion of Crimea was covered extensively in the American press – would this also be the case today if Estonia were invaded once again by the Russians?

I personally witnessed the impact of ignorance and overlook on one of my colleagues from Estonia who was a successful physician. During the late 1990s, she decided to attend an international health care conference held at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. I accompanied her as she was checking in to the conference. The conference planners thoughtfully assigned participants to rooms at nearby hotels by nationality and first language (so that participants could easily communicate with one another in the evenings and at breakfast). Unfortunately, my colleague was assigned to the Russian group – since Estonia was once a part of the Russian-dominated Soviet Union.

My colleague was upset – quite angry – and was about to leave the conference and return to Estonia. I talked to those assigning the rooms and provided a brief history regarding the animosity among many Estonians about the Russian occupation of their country. Subsequently, my colleague was reassigned to rooms in a hotel that was populated by a group of English-speaking physicians from several Western European countries. She and I talked for a long time about how this ignorance of history and politics is to be found even among educated conference planners. The lingering sense of being ignored and being considered unimportant on the world stage was (and I suspect still is) a major concern in Estonia.

While Estonians have been concerned about this situation, they don't seem to have done much about it and their inaction might contribute to the isolation and ignorance. At a fundamental

level, the Estonians with whom I met during the 1990s, wanted most of all to be left alone. Unlike my colleague, Berne Weiss, who met a highly extraverted culture in Hungary, I met a culture in Estonia that was highly introverted (Bergquist and Weiss, 1994). The "Estonian dream" has long been to own and live on a farm that gives them the opportunity to devote most of their attention to their family and a few neighbors who live at a reasonable distance from their farm.

As Leili, a seventy-year-old former work camp inmate, observed, "Estonians are inclined to live inside themselves [and] always hold themselves back." This introversion is coupled with the unique culture of Estonia to create a pull toward isolation and a defense of national boundaries. The Estonian culture is very old, and Estonians are particularly concerned that their deep cultural heritage and language may be lost or at least ignored. This is particularly the case if Estonia is occupied once again by outsiders who insist on imposing their own culture and language on the Estonian people.

It is also important to note that the isolation of Estonia and outside ignorance regarding its history and heritage might be exacerbated by the challenge of language. Estonians speak a language that is spoken by very few other people in the world. During my interviews, the question of language was often posed: how do we get people to understand us if they can't speak our language? Do we abandon our own distinctive language and always speak their language in order to communicate?

This concern was quite legitimate, given that Estonians were required to speak Russian during the Soviet era--which was very offensive to everyone. Alternatively, they could speak English—especially if they were to interact with their neighbors in Latvia and Lithuania. In what much of the world refers to generically as the Baltics, these three countries have languages that are quite different from each other. National identity was (and still seems to be) very important to Estonians because of their distinctive language, as well as their rich history and heritage (as conveyed through such venues as their music, dance, dress and architecture).

## **The Future of Authoritarianism and Nationalism in Estonia**

It is becoming increasingly clear in Eastern Europe that the Iron Curtain was set up and sustained as much by the West as by the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries. As seems to

have been the case with many other aspects of twentieth-century world economics and politics, the Iron Curtain appears to have been a tacit collusion between two major power blocks. The West benefited from the loss of competition from such countries as Hungary and Estonia that have had periods of economic prosperity and that embrace a strong work ethic. The Soviet Union benefited from the presence of these economic resources to counteract the less ambitious men and women from republics without a strong work ethic. Both countries in the West (Western Europe and North America) and the East (Soviet Union) were interested in a universal community and the elimination of national identities. They only disagreed on who dictates the terms of this universality – and countries such as Estonia and Hungary were caught in the middle of this disagreement.

### **Europeanism or Nationalism**

The tension between East and West was apparent in the psyche and perspectives of the Estonians I interviewed during the early 1990s. Many of the Estonians (and Hungarians) were initially hesitant to leap into another identity-diffusing scheme, such as the European Community (later evolving into the European Union: EU). Citizens of both these countries had to struggle during the 1990s with the issue of membership in the western European community.

Because they have just recovered their individual national identity, citizens of both countries may have been hesitant to sacrifice it in favor of a broader European identity. Are we now Estonians or Europeans? Where will be our primary allegiance: to Estonia or the EU? The EU raised the possibility of a meta-identity as "European," which either threatened (and provoked) nationalism in Estonia or creates a real alternative and a real opportunity for the citizens of this country to no longer be locked out of Europe. The tension was being played out between the rationalists and the nationalists.

The rationalists won out. The hesitation fell away during the years following the Soviet collapse. Concerns about the loss of national identity took a back seat with the prospects of protection and economic benefits. Currently, both Estonia and Hungary are members of the European Union. In both countries, however, there is still ambivalence about the trade-offs between nationalism and Europeanism. The same ambivalence is to be found in virtually every other member of the European Union. With the immigration issue becoming a point of major

contention and with Brexit disrupting the finances and coherence of the EU, we are witnessing a Europe-wide shift in favor of nationalism.

This shift represents a major source of irony in contemporary European politics and culture. While European countries have been engaged for the past three decades in an elaborate dance to lower the barriers between nations and have successfully laid to rest centuries of inter-nation antagonism, they have also rediscovered or reinvented nationalism—especially with the threat of massive migration from the troubled Mid-East. Right-wing and xenophobic politics is to be found in all European countries. Some people seem to covet the right to express ill will toward their neighbors. After forty years of being in a superimposed alliance with historical adversaries, like being bound to a chain gang, people are venting their frustration in nationalistic rhetoric.

### **The Russian Question**

The Estonian community is certainly not immune to this nationalist and often racist pull. For Estonians, however, this pull is more complex than is the cases in most other European countries (especially those in Western Europe). As in many other Eastern European countries, Estonia was filled with those from other countries who were assigned to work in Estonia by the Soviet regime. In particular, there was the large Russian population in Estonia—primarily located in Tallinn. What was to be done with these men, women and children? Are they Estonian citizens or should they be considered unwanted interlopers (and even invaders)?

These former Soviet citizens often did not migrate to Estonia on their own free will, but were coerced, complying with the Soviet master plan of workforce reassignments. For many of these migrants, Estonia had become home by the time of Estonian independence. Their children were fully enculturated (though often still taught to speak Russian and learn about Russian history). At least 500,000 “Russiophones” lived in Estonia following the Soviet collapse—this in a country with not much more than one million residents.

The issue of citizenship and political participation on the part of the Russian population in Estonia was complex and subject to major controversy. In the midst of this controversy we see the interplay I described earlier between nationalism and distorted identification, on the one hand, and thoughtful, compassion rationality, on the other hand. Both were operating in this re-



established country following the Soviet collapse and came to the foreground in Estonian politics of the early 1990s. The issue was citizenship. Should those who came from Russia (and other former Soviet countries) be granted citizenship?

As in many other countries around the world, there was an excluded population (the “other”) that had no political power. While in some countries, such as Israel, the “other” population is the original occupant of the land, for Estonians (as well as many other Eastern Europeans) the “other” are people who “invaded” their homeland. Nationalism can flourish when this narrative of invasion is conveyed on a consistent and persuasive basis. The narrative can become one of the dominant myths identified by Gross (1980) – only it is a narrative that is specific to Estonia and other Eastern European countries.

### **Politics and Policy**

For Estonians, the boiling point came in 1993, when a law was passed that regulated the status of noncitizens (mostly Russians) in their country. Russians in Estonia declared that the new law was discriminatory. Their outrage was shared by leaders of many other Western countries (including the United States and other members of the European Union). A Nationalities Roundtable was established with some outside funding. Thoughtful, compassionate deliberations were to overturn irrational, xenophobic nationalism.

Unfortunately, the roundtable had little impact. It was irrational political pressure that led to overturning of the law. It seems that political pressure has often won the day in Estonia (and many other Eastern European countries that have re-invented themselves after the Soviet collapse). While democracy is solidly established in Estonia, there is a great deal of volatility in the Estonian political process with the creation and dissolution of many political parties and shifting alliances among the parties that do exist. In part, this volatility resulted initially from the successful engagement of many young, inexperienced citizens in Estonian politics.

Leadership was provided by 30 something women and men. While these young leaders brought in radical and often refreshing ideas about the environment and social justice, they also came to governmental services with little political acumen.

A flourishing economy might also have played a part: chaos is always a bit more tolerable if a country’s businesses are flourishing and if politics is at least temporarily secondary to economic

prosperity. It is to the Estonian people that we must look for the source of many technological innovations – including the invention of Skype. Since the 1990s, Estonia has become a mighty-economic midget, often being rated among the top 20 countries in the world regarding economic strength. We might even suggest that this prosperity reinforces the commodity identification I identified previously. A market orientation might prevail over a political orientation. If the young people are bringing new, Western Europe-oriented business practices and a technological focus to Estonia, then maybe they can also bring in Western European ideas about politics. Perhaps these young entrepreneurs and technological wiz-kids are more qualified to run our country than are the old-timers who controlled life in Estonia during the Soviet era and immediate post-Soviet era.

Putting all of this together, we should not be surprised that the Estonian political process has been compared to the game of “musical chairs.” Repeatedly, political inexperience gives way to old-time political knowledge and there is a frequent return to established political practices. Expedience and frequent realignment of societal values and principles prevail: “What do I have to do and what laws do we have to pass for me to stay in office?” It is little wonder, therefore, that an unpopular law regarding citizen status was overturned – not because it was a bad idea but because it risked the loss of political power by the government officials who passed this law. It seems that democracy is often quite messy, Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why authoritarian rule can sometimes seem quite attractive.

With a rescinding of the restrictive law, Russians living in Estonia could now vote – though they have tended to remain a minority political force in Estonia even up to the present time. The one change in recent years has been the refocusing of much xenophobic attention on the threatened “invasion” of the homeland by displaced refugees from the Middle East. The Russians now look pretty good when compared to those “other” people who come from a culture that is completely unknown to Estonians. At least Estonians know about the customs (and language) of their Russian compatriots.

### **What is the Future for Estonians?**

We can step back a bit and reflect on what we now know and what we think we know about the future of authoritarian rule and nationalism in the country of Estonia (and by extension in many other 21<sup>st</sup> Century countries). First, it is important to note that nationalists are unabashedly

boosters, as anyone who has ever been a sports fan can fully appreciate. The commitment contains an element of loyalty-in-the-face-of a philosophical element of looking in the face of humility and seeing pride and valor, as well as doubt and fear. The nationalists tend to be less educated, less "cosmopolitan" (which carries a lot of baggage, including irrational fears of conspiratorial forces such as "International Jewry" and David Rockefeller's fabled Tri-lateral Commission). They are often not very articulate in expressing their emotional attachment to their country – they rely on their leader to be the articulate spokesman (another example of projective identification and the diminution of self). Power in this instance comes not from individual competence or knowledge, but from blind obedience and collective action: the irrational herd overwhelms the individual proponent of rational discourse.

While it is tempting to strike a pessimistic pose regarding the future of authoritarianism in Estonia and many other 21<sup>st</sup> Century countries (including the United States), there is some reason to hope for democratic success. As Hannah Arendt (1966) noted, authoritarianism and nationalism are incompatible with more entrepreneurial and internationally oriented middle-class values. Arendt's insights were affirmed by Serge, the purported Russian arms dealer in Estonia I interviewed in 1991.

Both Arendt and Serge suggest that the Soviets feared the emergence of a middle class precisely because of the competing international perspective that the middle class would offer. If Arendt and Serge are accurate, then we should expect a decline in nationalism with strengthening of the middle class in Estonia. While economic prosperity in Estonia might have helped to produce a messy political process, it also helped to ensure that this messy democratic process was not replaced by less messy authoritarian rule (as has occurred in Russia and many other countries).

Still, it is difficult to remain positive about democracy and the decline of nationalism in the near future. Given the threat of massive immigration caused by political upheaval in other parts of the world, nationalism and authoritarianism might prevail in the near future. This threat is coupled with and exacerbated by current health emergencies and the virus-influenced temporary (or long-term) collapse of European (and world-wide) economies.

If we turn again specifically to Estonia, there is further reason for concern. What about the seeming passivity and ultimate pessimism of Estonians – given that they are living in a country that has been invaded many times over the past two centuries? My own observations

previously in this essay regarding this psychological condition in Estonia have been echoed in much more poetic terms by Alexander Theroux (2011, p. 14) (whom I referenced earlier in this essay). He writes:

An Estonian as a [peddler] of positivism is in all instances a walking oxymoron. His recollections are far too extensive, his memory too long, his wounds too recent to put a tingle of optimism in his besieged and beleaguered heart.

Theroux (2011, p. 14) moves beyond this portrayal of pessimism to the core issue of freedom:

During an occupation, far more than a country is captured – a national soul is possessed. Brutalized. Mortified. Hurt. Made Inflexible. Freedom itself, the very idea of it, becomes victim, as well. More than self is lost, a soul harmed. There is the loss of the sense of adventure.

Under such conditions, is it likely that freedom will remain a victim of lingering pessimism and a fear of yet another invasion by Russia or eventually by yet another superpower? A remarkable social observer and futurist, Fred Polak (1973) observed many years ago that a society without a clear and compelling sense of its own future is either in decline or will never thrive if newly created or re-created. Polak extensively documented the history of many societies and carefully analyzed the state of future-images in each society. A society will hold together and thrive while there is something toward which citizens of this society can strive – an envisioned frontier that is compelling to which people can collectively commit. Sacrifice on behalf of a greater good is prevalent. Individual aspirations are secondary to collective aspirations and goals. Polak asserted that a society will decline in power and capacity without this shared image of the future.

What about Estonia? In reflecting on his own country's history an Estonian colleague talked about parental aspirations for his own son. I am paraphrasing and recalling a conversation from almost 30 years ago – yet what he said still haunts me (especially when thinking about the aspirations I have for my own children and grandchildren). He said:

I don't have any aspirations or hopes regarding my son's future or the future of this country. The Estonian future has always been in the hands of powerful people from

outside our country over whom we have no control. How can I think about the future for my son, when he will have little to say about the status of his future!"

If there is no future for Estonia, then what will be the fate of this country? Are those living in Estonia left with only short-term hopes--that might often be aligned with the immediate consumption of goods and services? Are Estonians vulnerable to the soft form of authoritarianism that Erich Fromm described? Are they also vulnerable to a more virulent form of authoritarianism that is activated by a search for national identity and perhaps even continuing identification with aggressive forces?

What then are we to conclude? What are the implications of predictions I have made (and other observers of Estonia have made) regarding life in this country during the coming 10 to 20 years? Is nationalism on the rise or on the decline? Does this mean the rise or decline of authoritarianism in its various forms? What about identification with commodities and the market orientation I previously identified? Will soft authoritarianism that is sprinkled with some xenophobic hard authoritarianism prevail in Estonia (and other European and North American societies)? What about the enduring relationship between Estonia and other Western societies? Is Estonia truly free of the Eastern influences that were accelerated during the period of Russian occupation?

More generally, the question remains open regarding the future of democracy and nationalism in other European countries (and many countries elsewhere in the world). The path of the EU in Europe is hardly clear at this moment, even after years of political and psychological preparation. For Estonians, the many sources of ambivalence are great. As one of the Estonians I interviewed during the early 1990s noted: "If I had the experience of a hundred years of democracy coupled with consistent national autonomy and identity [as is found in many Western European and American countries], then I could be a cosmopolitan and an internationalist, too." Which will be the outcome in Estonia? Will we find cosmopolitans or nationalists? Consumers or reformers? Those who embrace true freedom or those who seek to escape the profound challenge of freedom? Stay tuned . . .

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