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CHAPTER 8:

# ESTONIA'S PATRIOTISMS IN CRISIS:
## THE CASE OF THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT 'MY ESTONIA TOO'

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## Introduction

The case of the social movement 'My Estonia Too' can be considered a counter-movement to the growing presence of far-right populist movements (cf. Roth, 2018). This chapter will focus on contemporary internal dynamics of Estonian society, a small nation-state squeezed between its big brother Europe, and its old foe Russia. A focus on the birth of this counter-movement in 2019, will shed light on several intersecting and layered crises: a crisis of national identity and collective memory based on a crisis of sociopolitical stability, of Estonian democracy and of European identity. All of these various crises will be touched upon in this chapter.

But first, we want to take you back to 2006, when our research in Estonia started. At that moment in time, patriotism was deeply felt and far from being critically discussed in Estonia also amongst young and open-minded Estonians. The first time we observed that was when we met in the world's highest beer pub, in university city Tartu, with a group of 30 Dutch and 15 Estonian students. We as Dutch anthropology students were very excited to discuss Estonian society with locals. We talked about what we had done on our study trip so far, about our hobbies, our international friends and our studies. At a certain point, the Estonian students on our dinner table stood up and started to sing

> *"the national anthem with a sincerity that made many of us Dutch students shiver. They asked us to sing the Dutch anthem, which we did while seated and we were not even able to sing more than the first line. At the time I recognized that national identity was of immense importance to them, and the essence of their being as individuals. We had felt so similar as students, yet so different in relation to our respective nation's pasts."* (Melchior, 2020, 17-18)

Since the start of our research in Estonia in 2006, we have been faced with displays of national patriotism and national suffering. We learned throughout the years that these two dimensions of Estonians' 'national story' are linked by a strong sense of insecurity. Insecurity about whether the Estonian nation state can persist into the future, as it lost its independence in the past. Insecurity about whether the Estonian people and culture will persist, as many are moving abroad and few children are born, which causes a shrinking population (there are currently only 1 million native Estonian speakers in the world). Insecurity about being accepted as equal partners in the world, as belonging to the European family rather than being considered East-European and backward (Melchior, 2020; Moes, 2017).

These observations stem from a long history of research on the Estonian case of both authors. Jeroen Moes conducted part of his comparative PhD research in Estonia, and was intermittently in Estonia between 2006 and 2019. He conducted interviews with Estonian speakers on their feelings of belonging to Europe. Inge Melchior conducted ethnographic research in Tartu in the same time span, and lived for 1,5 years in Tartu in 2010-2011, where she learned the Estonian language and participated in Estonian society as much as possible. She focused primarily on the relationship that Estonians have with their national history. The current chapter is based on our observations during recurrent summer visits, our remaining contact with our informants and our observations in the Estonian media.

In 2019 we observed something surprising. National and existential insecurity had been central in our research so far (Melchior, 2020; Moes, 2017). As Inge Melchior (2020) argued in her recently published book *Guardians of Living History*, a fundamental sense of insecurity is central to the strong national patriotism among a wide share of the Estonian-speaking population. This in turn significantly limits the space to be self-critical as an Estonian people, as the nation is still seen as very precarious. Of course, there have been some critical notes of intellectual and culture elite figures since the late 1990s, but those have been similarly subdued by the perceived duties they have inherited from the suffering of their (grand)parents (Melchior, 2020). The massive folk song (*Laulupidu*) and dance festivals (*Tantsupidu*) show how – especially highly educated and European oriented – Estonians unite and celebrate their nation in order to feel strong and more secure in an insecure world. In 2019, these highly educated and outward looking Estonians organized themselves into a social movement called 'My Estonia Too' *(Kõigi Eesti)*, to openly criticize the national order, rather than to celebrate its unity. The aim of this chapter is to unravel what kind of crisis is experienced from below, by those engaged in My Estonia Too, and how this new social movement is able to reconcile a nation-critical attitude with their sense of insecurity over the future of the Estonian nation.

This Estonian case study will provide us with a very particular insight into crises from below. Up until 2019, very few protests took place in democratic Estonia and few

social movements have been formed to hold those in power accountable for internal crises and uncertainty (see also Tarrow, 2011 on protests and democracies more generally). In the crises that Estonia faced since 1991, there was mostly an external Other (mostly Russia and Russian speakers as we will soon see) pointed out as 'responsible', which rather led to a people sticking together and little criticism on the national community (Melchior, 2020). The rise of My Estonia Too is therefore not surprising in a democracy as such; it is however surprising in the context of Estonia.

In accordance with anthropological theory on human security (Eriksen, Bal & Salemink, 2010), we will examine what kind of crisis this social movement responds to (what are the main factors that make its supporters feel insecure?), and what kind of security this social movement aspires to. In order to answer this question, we will first explore the kind of insecurity historically perceived by many Estonians, and how this has resulted in a people with a strong national identity that is not very critical of its national order. Then we will expand upon what happened in 2019 to disrupt this status quo. Why did EKRE become so popular suddenly and how did a social movement arise that is critical of its 'own people'? In the final part, we will analyze the factors that make the social movement supporters feel insecure about contemporary Estonian culture and society and the kind of security the movement is striving for. We will do so by analyzing the rhetoric they use and the topics they discuss on social media. We will collect the messages they shared online as a group in July-September 2020, by when the movement is already a year old and a certain discourse has crystalized itself. We will analyze those messages by means of two core questions: 1) What do they perceive is being threatened? What is at risk?, and 2) What do they want/strive for?

# Insecurity, Patriotism and Protesting in Estonia

As pointed out earlier, Estonians historically tend to close ranks in times of crises. Since they regained their independence in 1991, they have generally eschewed mass protest as a political tool (Ruutsoo, 2017; Uba, 2019). In order to understand this, we need to look at Estonia's history. The Estonian nation-state has a relatively short history. It was founded in 1918 and lasted for 20 years, when it was annexed by the Soviet Union. After one year of Soviet occupation, Estonia was occupied by Nazi Germany, and then at the end of the war, turned into one of the most western reaches of the Soviet Union as the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR) (Kasekamp, 2010). The almost fifty years of so-called 'Soviet occupation' that followed, are remembered in Estonia as a period of severe suffering, of not being able to 'be oneself' (Moes, 2017, pp. 151-156). In times of strict Soviet dictatorship, Estonian symbols, language and stories were prohibited. Under Stalin, many Estonian families – especially the highly educated, and those owning land and property – were deported to Siberia, away from their homeland, as dangerous elements to communist society.

A group of Estonian men who had fought in the War of Independence (1918-1920) and for independence during WWII, resisted the Soviet regime until the 1960s as 'Forest Brothers'. From the 1970s onwards, 'resistance' happened primarily in intellectuals circles, when young intellectuals became interested in forbidden topics such as capitalism and Estonian history. Though they did not unite themselves with the intention to resist or revolt, their secret circles discussing forbidden topics planted the seeds for the independence activism of the late 1980s (Bennich-Björkman, 2007).

According to Estonian scholars, Estonians were – compared to nowadays – active protesters in the late 1980s when they were trying to regain independence from the Soviet Union (Ruutsoo, 2017). In that time one spoke of "two Estonia's". The first Estonia was the political one: Soviet Estonia. The second Estonia were 'the people', who disidentified with the Soviet elite (Tulviste & Wersch, 1994). The second Estonia was led by independence activists, consisting of on the one hand Soviet dissidents and on the other a group of critical intellectuals (mostly historians). These independence activists were thus, as it were, a social movement that 'challenged the powerholders in name of the population' (Tilly, 1993, 7). Like in many socialist states, such as East Germany, Hungary, Poland and the other Baltic States, mass protests – in Estonia called the Singing Revolution – eventually led to the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the restoration of the Estonian nation-state in 1991 (Connelly, 2020). What was specific for the Estonian case is that the powerholders of that time were considered 'Others': Russians or Russified Estonians ("*yestonians*"). As such, they revolted against the Other, and it was the Other who was considered to bear sole responsibility for the repressive society in which Estonians had lived for so many years (Berg, 2002).

As the Estonian story goes, the independence activists managed to dismiss the first Estonia. That social movement representing 'the people' became the new political elite (Bennich-Björkman, 2007). Those first years of independence are remembered as a honeymoon: all Estonians were (perceived to be) on the same page, and nation and state were equal (Melchior, 2020). They needed each other to rebuild the nation-state. All Estonian citizens were asked to contribute; whether economically, socially or politically. They were asked to send in their life stories in order to write the new Estonian history. Political disagreements between those who wanted to restore pre-war Estonia (the former dissidents) and those in favour of establishing a new nation (the former intellectuals) (Pettai, 2004), were put aside. They did everything to overcome their differences and to make compromises, as they realized they needed to stick together, they needed to be united in order to persist as a people in the future. Not only the 'winners' of independence perceived these early 1990s as a period of unity and brotherhood, but also those who would later become 'the losers' (people in the countryside, the less educated, etc.) (Melchior, 2020).

It was in this time that the new nation-state was established, and that it was decided that Estonians needed to unite and "stick together" in order to survive in the future (cf. Ignatieff, 1999). They were too small to be divided. Russia was still their big neighbour and a quarter of the Estonian population were Russian speakers, so the threat of losing independence remained very real. The idea of there being dissonance between the people and the state was considered a threat to the nation-state. Besides that, the political elite were now their 'own people'. Estonians (mostly intellectuals) with no previous political experience, who had fought as common people for independence, now replaced the former Soviet elite (Bennich-Björkman, 2007; Pettai, 2004). Estonian historian Marek Tamm (2008) has referred to these early 1990s as the 'republic of historians', as the overall majority of the new political elite graduated from the History Department of Tartu University. The few critical people who started to speak up in the late 1990s, were easily labeled 'national betrayers' (cf. Klumbyte, 2010). This sense of national insecurity – of the need to stick together – is at the heart of why Estonians do not have a well-developed protest culture (Ruutsoo, 2017 & Uba, 2019). It is hard to be critical when the "wheels of communicative memory are [still] turning" (Kovács, 2003, p. 156), and the story of the nation is not coherent, but rather personal, sensitive and fragile (Melchior, 2020).

The few bigger protests of the last three decades are protests not directed towards the national government, as normally in democracies (Tarrow, 2011), but mostly against Russia and the Russian minority in Estonia, such as the Bronze Soldier crisis in 2007 (Melchior, 2011), the Georgian war in 2008 and from 2014-2017 the protests against the war in Ukraine. These events created a serious fear that Russia would also invade Estonia (Melchior, 2017). As a matter of fact, most recent protests in Estonia took place in front of the Russian embassy (Uba, 2019, 49). What is moreover telling is that most are no grassroots initiatives, but organized by political parties or local governments (Uba, 2019, 50). Especially the rise of EKRE since 2015 has increased the number of protests in Estonia. Before EKRE politicians were in the government, they used protests to voice themselves on migration, LGBT rights, etc. in the political debate (Uba, 2019, 52).

We do not aim to present an elaborate overview of Estonia's political situation here. Yet it is important to mention that, due to the political and historical processes we describe here, Estonia's mainstream political parties share a nationalist stance (Kasekamp, 2000; Björkman, 2012). Estonian scholar Trumm (2018, 333) has argued that "[t]he political space that populist right-wing parties in Eastern Europe can operate in is more limited as mainstream parties in the region have traditionally been willing to adopt aspects of radical right ideology". Auers and Kasekamp (2009) argued that especially in Estonia – compared to Latvia – the core message of radical right populists did not find much resonance in the population, as numbers of corruption were low and quality of democracy were high. In the following section, we will question

how radical right populism did get to power in 2019, and how this gave rise to the establishment of My Estonia Too.

# Estonia's Political Situation of 2019

EKRE (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* / Estonian Conservative People's Party) was founded in 2012. Its foundation was a marriage between the social movement 'Estonian Nationalist Movement' and the political party 'People's Union of Estonia' (Trumm, 2018, 334). As common to populist right wing parties in the CEE (Central and Eastern Europe), EKRE promised Estonians the protection of national values and interests. Four key issues characterized their agenda: an anti-Russia stance, Euroscepticism, promotion of family values, and anti-refugee sentiments (Kasekamp, Madisson, & Wierenga, 2018).

The rise of EKRE is not unique for Estonia, but fits within wider developments in the world. Since the 2010s, neoliberalism has increasingly been seen to increase inequality. In 2016 Donald Trump was elected and Brexit took place, both of which can be seen as the rise of 'those left behind' (Roth, 2018, 499). Populist and national conservative movements and parties have gained traction worldwide. EKRE meets the criteria of other European populist and radical right-wing parties with its anti-establishment rhetoric, its Euroscepticism, and its opposition towards immigration. Yet, it is also different from American and Western European populist parties. Petsinis (2019) argues that EKRE thanks its local popularity to its embedding in the pre-existing frame of Estonian restoration and decolonization nationalism. EKRE successfully evoked those old anxieties of being colonized again and has presented itself as Estonia's savior. Siim Trumm (2018) found in contrast to research on support for populist rightwing parties in West Europe, that it is not primarily Euroscepticism and anti-immigration rhetoric which made Estonians vote for EKRE. They voted for EKRE because (1) they are social conservatives, afraid of progressive change (such as multiculturalism, gay marriage); (2) they have economic grievances, and feel left behind (experience resentment and mistrust towards the political elite, and therefore have anti-establishment sentiments); and (3) they have certain demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, and national identity) and "see Estonian as their primary identity" (Trumm, 2018, 332).

In the elections of 2015, EKRE gained 8.1% of all votes, and increasingly gained more votes in the years after, with their resistance towards the refugee crisis and towards Estonia's new Cohabitation Act of 2016 and its provisions for LGBT rights. In the parliamentary elections of March 2019, they eventually made it into the coalition. As always, the Reform Party gained most votes (28,9%), followed by the Centre Party (23,1%). But when the Reform Party invited the Centre Party to a coalition, the latter turned down the offer and united itself with EKRE (17,8%) and the Fatherland Party

(11,4%). The final party that met the threshold of 5% was the Social Democratic Party with 9,8%.

Radical right populism presents itself in times of crisis, and is as such a protest against the political order (Betz, 1994). As argued before, in Estonia the notion of crisis can easily be activated when old fears of being colonized again are nourished. This frame of Estonian restoration and decolonization nationalism has, due to its history, legitimacy among a wide share of the Estonian population (see also Petsinis, 2019; Pettai, 2004; Melchior, 2020). From this perspective of insecurity and threat, it is not surprising that EKRE managed to gain a substantial amount of support. The question that rises is: Who were the people that established My Estonia Too when EKRE came to power and why did they not tie in to EKRE's discourse of insecurity and decolonization nationalism?

As to our knowledge, no scholarly works have been written on this new movement. It has been mentioned by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum's report of 2019 (Jõgeva, 2020). My Estonia Too was launched right after the election results of 2019, when a group of concerned Estonians stood up and joined forces. It started as a social media campaign. In just a few days, more than 27000 people joined the movement, of which 1400 people enlisted themselves as volunteers. The supporters were Estonians both inside and outside of Estonia, and foreigners living in or affiliated to Estonia. The supporters in one way or another wanted to explicitly distance themselves from EKRE. The first sentence on their website reads "We can't just sit by and watch in silence as our country gets derailed. Today's political situation is putting values at risk that are important to Estonia."[1] A social movement was born, that for the first time since Estonia regained independence, actively and publicly protested against the established national and political order; a progressive counter-movement (cf. Roth, 2018).

## Estonia's Crises in the Eyes of My Estonia Too

Our summer of 2019 in Estonia was more polarized than other years. We attended the National Song and Dance Festival with our young highly educated friends (in their 20s and 30s), who celebrated national unity but at the same time seemed afraid of the increasing polarization within the Estonian community since EKRE gained power. That same week we sat down at the office of the Freedom Fighters' Organization with a group of Estonian nationalists that Melchior befriended during her ethnographic research on commemorations. These old Estonian men were clearly happy with the power that EKRE had secured and voiced their fears about "those young Estonians who turn towards Europe and forget about their own nation." A few days later we went

[1] https://koigieesti.ee/

to visit a befriended Estonian family on the countryside. Father of the house was afraid of both camps and kept on dreaming of the Estonia of the early 1990s, when everyone was equal and when the countryside was still embraced and belonging to 'Estonia'. In the cities we saw stickers attached in public places "Yes to freedom, no to lies" (*"Jah vabadusele, ei valedele"*), spread around by another citizen initiative, proclaiming "the right to be yourself, protects liberal democracy and constitutional freedoms and helps everybody who the coalition-to-be could harm."[2] Estonian society was of course never homogenous, but now – with EKRE in power and several citizens' initiatives in response to that – people seemed to be aware of their different world views and polarization more than ever.

In what follows, we will look closer into one of these sub-groups: those who support the My Estonia Too movement and their fears, ambitions and actions.

# Fears

The website of My Estonia Too immediately reveals that they are afraid that "our country gets derailed". According to them, EKRE is putting Estonian values at risk: "democratic values, the rule of law and respect for all people, and steadfastly facing West." More concretely, EKRE endangers:

> *"The freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, freedom of the press, freedom of self-actualisation, artistic freedom, the freedom of doctors and teachers to do their work. The freedom to make decisions about your own body and mind. The freedom to feel at home in Estonia. The freedom to stand up for your rights. The freedom to be independent and different."*[3]

As Moes (2017) has argued, since Estonia regained its independence in 1991, Estonians have made an effort to frame themselves as being Nordic and as being an integral part of 'Europe'. In doing so, they explicitly distance themselves from being Eastern Europe, partly by using the 'Baltic' category as a liminal stage (Moes 2017). They do not want to be seen as 'backward', or associated with Russia or the Soviet Union (Berg, 2002). By the year 2000, during Estonia's economic boom, the country became recurrently framed in the international realm as a "post-communist reform tiger" (Berg, 2002, 111) or Baltic Tiger (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 2010, p. 13). That international image entails a transformation from a post-communist society to a technologically advanced, democratic society (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Reinsalu, 2009). The main fears of My Estonia Too are related to this image. They are

[2] www.Jahvabadusele.ee
[3] kõigieesti.ee/about/what-do-we-stand-for

afraid that all that Estonian citizens and politicians have worked for for years, will evaporate with EKRE in power.

Firstly, they are afraid that Estonia's good international political relations and standing will be harmed, that they can no longer cooperate with other countries as before. For instance, Mart Helme, the EKRE leader, publicly insulted the new Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin (Tambur, 2019). Another instance was when Donald Trump lost the elections. The EKRE leaders refused to congratulate Joe Biden as they called him "corrupt". My Estonia Too was happy with the response by the Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid (Tambur, 2020):

> *"The verbal assault on the newly elected President of the USA committed by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of the Interior of Estonia today is an attack against Estonian democracy and security. The words of a politician have weight and today two ministers of the Republic of Estonia have decided to use the weight of their words to attack our main ally."*

Secondly, this feeds directly into the fear for losing security: the security of independence, of having a nation-state and of preserving the Estonian language and culture. Estonian International Relations scholar Maria Mälksoo (2010) already argued several years ago that Estonia very much wants to belong to Europe / the core nations, as this provides them with a sense of security. If the EU and the US will not take them seriously anymore, My Estonia Too argues, they will also not defend Estonia in case of need.

Thirdly, they fear economic stagnation when EKRE is in power. EKRE made some proposals to deny entrance to society for foreign students and workers, which would threaten Estonia's labour market (Koppel, 2020). Also, EKRE is not fond of Estonians going abroad for work and study, which would be a missed benefit for Estonian society generally.

Fourthly, My Estonia Too fears to lose democratic values, as equality, personal freedoms and taking care of each other as neighbours and compatriots. These are regained values, which were in its current form absent in Soviet Estonia. In this context, the social movement is afraid of the internal polarization that, according to them, EKRE is creating:

> *"[We] appeal to put an end to lying, inciting fear, and setting members of society against each other. Our society is fragmented, and this didn't happen overnight. Antagonizing brings no-one forward and breaks us apart. Only by listening to each other can we find what connects us. We have more in common than we have differences. But our small country only has a future if we stick together—all of us here in Estonia.* Kõigi Eesti *wants us all to communicate politely with each other."* [3]

In other words, internal polarization is considered to put Estonia's independent future at risk. If Estonians do not stick together, the national story goes (Melchior, 2020), Russia (or any other perceived enemy) can easily invade its small neighbour. My Estonia Too argues similarly that by "making Estonia more inclusive and more connected, we also improve our security."[3] In sum, "[t]he inclusion of a far-right populist party in the government caused an alarmed reaction both at home and abroad. It was seen as a threat to liberal values, Estonia's progressive international reputation, and to alliance ties on which the small country's security so heavily depends" (Ehin & Talvin, 2019, 127). The biggest risk of EKRE in power that My Estonia Too has signaled out, is that the Estonian nation might not survive, not politically, socially, nor economically. Besides that, the social movement is very much aware of the effort that was put into creating the Estonian nation as it had become by 2019, and the sufferings it had cost. The blood, sweat and tears of their beloved ones and of themselves had gone into rebuilding Estonia as an independent nation-state, and with EKRE in power, they feel that this can evaporate in no time. All their efforts and sufferings – both while rebuilding the nation-state but also when fighting for independence from the Soviet Union – would have then been in vain.

# Ambitions

We now know the main fears that the social movement responded to, but what are their ambitions for Estonian society? On their website, they refer to 'Estonian values' that "stretch across political parties and unite us all." My Estonia Too believes that Estonian nation can only survive when Estonian society is "democratic, confident, protected, inclusive, caring, forward-looking and European in spirit." They want a country where people can make better lives for themselves: "[…] a caring, respecting, dignified, successful, involved country full of opportunities. For an Estonia we can be proud of. For an Estonia that is everyone's Estonia, regardless of gender, race, language, religion and other differences."

They believe that everyone should have a say and should be heard; a country where no one has to silence oneself, also not Russian Estonians (Grigorjeva, 2020) or homosexuals. If people feel happy in the place where they live, they argue, they will be willing to contribute to it. This open and tolerant stance also creates more opportunities for a growing population. After all, according to My Estonia Too, Estonian society can also grow when people from outside Estonia join. On their social media, they mention migrant children, who can be happy with their *kodumaa* (homeland), despite the fact that it is not their *isamaa* (fatherland) or *sünnimaa* (land of birth). In the same vain, they welcome students from all nationalities, as they can also contribute to the Estonian nation. Young Estonians on the other hand should not be kept against their will within the national borders. Rather, in order to make sure that

they carry their Estonianness forward, they should be encouraged to go and study abroad, according to Estonian scholar Anzori Barkalaja (2020), born in Tajikistan and member of My Estonia Too:

> *"If we want Estonian youngsters to carry forward their Estonian mindedness, we should not admonish them to 'stay home to get blue-black-white potato peels' but instead let them come up with something more relevant and timely. As an introduction they should be recommended to look around and learn about the world."*

In other words, the movement dreams of an Estonian nation that is inclusive and welcoming to 'others'. Their website shows this as well, by being available in Estonian, Russian and English: everyone is welcome, regardless of their native language, as long as they support Estonia.

## Actions

My Estonia Too started their actions with spreading a heart-shaped social media sticker, which was used by thousands of people in a couple of days. Supporters also made pictures of themselves making a heart shape with their hands, or holding a piece of paper with a message (see Figure 1). The initiators launched an online platform – a website and a Facebook group – where people with similar outlooks on society could find each other, share news items, and discuss contemporary societal problems with like-minded people.

*Figure 1 – Invitation to the song festival organized by My Estonia Too. The pictures show how the media campaign started.*

Not long after their foundation, My Estonia Too organized a song festival on 14 April 2019, in which 10000 people participated. The concert aimed to unite its supporters not only online but to also become a physically united community. "There are enough of us to change something, and few enough of us to come together on one field and agree on how to move forward. […] Great changes in our history have taken place when we have come together and acted in unity," was the explanation of the initiators about the concert (Vahtla, 2019). The concert was for free for the audience, the organizers and performers were not paid. The 92.000 euros that the concert cost were paid by donations. Politicians from the Reform Party and the Social Democrats attended as well to support the idea of freedom for all. The Estonian president refrained from attending, as she did not want to incite any political discussion and did not want to take sides (Cavegn, 2019). The initiators stress their wish not to become a political party, but to remain a citizen's initiative of people who put this effort in their free time. In October 2020, My Estonia Too organized a meeting in the city library in Tartu to discuss how to create an Estonia where more children will be born, who will grow up into adults who want to stay in Estonia.[4] Their aim is thus not only to publicly show a counter-voice but also to come up with actual proposals for a path of more equality and freedom for all.

My Estonia Too also "dovetailed into various (non-affiliated) protests", both in Tallinn in front of the government building but also across the country (Cavegn, 2019). 'Yes to Freedom, No to Lies' has organized several of these demonstrations. On the 31st of March 2019, the first protest took place in Tallinn, Tartu, Toronto, London, Stockholm, Berlin and even smaller informal meetings in other places around the world. They have also protested at important moments, such as during the vote on the coalition agreement on 17 April 2019, or against the visit of Marine Le Pen on 14 May 2019. Besides that, they have protested as a response towards new policy ideas, such as the protest in September 2019 to support higher education and academia, and in January 2020 in order to provide a counter-voice during the first voting on the dismantling of the pension system. On Thursday afternoons for more than 80 weeks, Estonians have been meeting in front of Stenbock House (*Stenbocki maja*; the official seat of the government), to recurrently show their presence in society.

On September 2019 they were not only responding to what happened on the political level, but demanding a concrete change: the resignation of the prime minister (see Figure 2). The location picked for the meeting was very symbolical, as the main demonstration against the Soviet occupation and in favour of Estonian independence

[4] https://koigieesti.ee/across-estonia

took place in 1987 in this park. The invitation spread on social media stated: "The Republic of Estonia is founded on liberty, justice and the rule of law. The current government has abandoned these values. Estonia does not belong to far-right populists. Estonia does not belong to Jüri Ratas. The government of Jüri Ratas should resign." (Whyte, 2019). A couple of hundred people participated. There were musical performances, and several speakers: Andrus Vaarik theatre actor and director), Kristin Siil (Fridays for Future – for climate change), Peeter Laurits (artist and photographer), Jari Pärgma (linguist), Stewart Johnson (American comedian residing in Estonia), Maarja Kangro (poet and novelist) (Raal, 2019).


*Figure 2 - The sign states: "The Estonian state does not belong to Helme [EKRE] or to Ratas (prime-minister Central Party). #Resign. Come to the protest." (Whyte, 2019)*

The actions of My Estonia Too are thus twofold. On the one hand, they aim at creating a community of like-minded people. Their ambitions for their nation are rather controversial in the traditional conceptualization of the Estonian nation in the 1990s. They *do* feel Estonian. They act *because* they identify so strongly with their Estonian nation. Yet they need a new collective discourse on what it means to be an Estonian – a new guardian for a redefined Estonian nation (cf. Melchior, 2020 for the concept of a guardian) – and for that, they need a community of like-minded people. On the other hand, they aim to reach wider society and the political level, and to incite social change into the direction of their ideal Estonia. So if they act out of national sentiments after all, how is their sense of patriotism different from that of their opponent EKRE?

# A Crisis of Competing Patriotisms

Let us briefly return to the point of departure in this chapter, namely the argument that Melchior (2020) made in her book that a wide share of the Estonian population feels insecure about Estonia's independence, which has created a strong national patriotism without much possibility for being critical of the Estonian order and people, as the nation is still considered very precarious. American historian John Connelly (2020) has made a similar argument about Eastern Europe as a region more generally: the fear for ethnic extinction is specific for peripheries. And this, subsequently, results in a strong sense of nationalism. This Eastern European nationalism, Connelly (2020) argues, is different from the kind of nationalism in the West. In Eastern Europe, nationalism is strongly related to (the right for) national self-determination. Nationalist advocates in countries that have a history of *being* overruled, rather than overruling others, always perceived the danger to the extinction of their language and culture to come from *outside*. Therefore, cooperation with other ethnic groups was impossible, and has been perceived as outright betrayal (Connelly, 2020). Similarly, Melchior (2020) argued that even young highly educated and liberal-minded Estonians in times of crisis perceive the duty to defend their right to national self-determination. They owe that to the land that their grandparents and great-grandparents fought for, where they felt at home and where they are buried. By sincerely singing at the national song festivals, they do not want to overrule or exclude anyone, but aim to defend what is dear to them and what they perceive to be in danger. In this peripheral context, patriotism and nationalism are internally perceived to be democratic rights to self-determination, considered more important than their possible threat to democracy by excluding others (Melchior, 2020).

The question that remains is then how My Estonia Too understands the nation and its threats. Do they perceive to have duties towards their fatherland or rather to humanity more generally? The answer becomes very clear from their website and their posts on social media: the focus is on their homeland. The movement was born out of a sense of duty to take care of their homeland. My Estonia Too wants Estonia to flourish culturally, socially, economically and politically. They want to make sure that the freedom that their parents and grandparents have fought for will persist. They feel obliged to continue the work of their forebears who have "toiled and spilt their blood to build and defend the nation" (Miller, 1995, p.23). In that sense, they want the same as EKRE. They similarly believe that independence and the nation is not something to take for granted, but a merit that needs to be won over and over again, that one needs to work for. In Figure 3, showing the song festival organized by My Estonia Too, we can see that the Estonian flag was very present, and the reason why all these people came together. In Figure 4 you see a meeting of EKRE supporters, similarly waving the Estonian flag. Both fear the loss of Estonian culture and values, and emphasize the need to preserve Estonian folklore traditions. The Estonian nation-state is for both

groups their frame of reference: their efforts are in the name of the Estonian nation-state.

So how do they differ? A few weeks after their foundation, My Estonia Too called the song festival they organized '*Kõigi Eesti laul*' ("an Estonian song for all"). Singing was – just like in the 1980s, and even before – their way to unite against a perceived threat. However, what was unique this time, was that the threat was not perceived to come from *outside*. The perceived threat to Estonian society was this time, not Russia, neither internal Russians. This time they were singing to unite against other ethnic Estonians (Mackenzie, 2019). This has created a kind of patriotism which is not based on ethnicity in the first place. *Kõigi Eesti* literally means "Estonia for everyone". By 'everyone' they mean: everyone who supports Estonia. This creates an ideological connection between people, rather than an ethnic connection. This opens up possibilities for thinking beyond ethnic lines and solutions for societal problems. For example, as we saw in the previous section, My Estonia Too sees opportunities in attracting non-Estonians to contribute to Estonian society and economy. On the condition that they love Estonia, everyone is welcome. For EKRE, this idea of the nation creates a sense of danger. When My Estonia Too was formed, EKRE member Remi Sebastian Kits formed a countermovement, named *Eestlaste Eesti*, "Estonia for Estonians". Kits argued that they do not oppose the values of My Estonia Too: "Of course we support democracy. Also self-confidence and security are important themes for us." But to them, who can belong to the nation is defined through a familiar ethnic logic and determined by birth (Tark, 2019). And those Estonians that do not adhere to the same idea of the nation, should preferably keep silent, as they are considered a threat. Unsurprisingly, EKRE has been accused of authoritarian tendencies.

Scholars working on nationalism have conceptualized these two opposing understandings of the nation as civic (universalistic) versus ethnic/cultural nationalism (particularistic), and brought together as 'constitutional patriotism' (Habermas, 1996). EKRE envisions an ethnic nation-state, where nation and state coincide totally. Only people born from Estonian soil or from Estonian blood, can constitute and contribute to the Estonian nation and state. This textbook form of nationalism is by definition exclusionist, concerns feelings of superiority and dictates a blind trust in powerholders. By contrast, My Estonia Too supports a civic, cultural patriotism, where the *will* or choice to contribute is more important than one's blood or land of birth. The Estonian language distinguishes between *isamaa* (fatherland, *maa* refers to the soil, *isa* means father), *rahvus* (people/folk) and *riik* (state/republic). During the Singing Revolution and the early 1990s, *isamaa*, *rahvus* and *riik* were considered to be one and the same. What My Estonia Too does, is challenge and reconsider these various concepts in light of contemporary times.

*Figure 3 - Song festival organized by My Estonia Too on 14 April 2019 (Vahtla, 2019)*


*Figure 4 - An EKRE marche (Wishart, 2019)*

# Conclusion

With the formation of My Estonia Too a new narrative of civic and cultural patriotism has gained traction in Estonian public discourse. This challenges the status quo of ethnic patriotism historically common to this region. Civic ideas of the nation as such are of course not new to Estonian society. However, these were sporadic voices, sometimes in public but mostly in private conversations. Civic nationalism in Estonia – detached from the ethnic component – has never before been organized in the form of a mass social movement as is the case for My Estonia Too.

Let us briefly return to the paradox that we started with in the introduction. Based on the previous research of Melchior (2020), in which even young liberal intellectuals were comparatively protective and perhaps defensive of their national identity and heritage, we were wondering how this social movement reconciles its national duties with its senses of insecurity. After all, as we have argued throughout this chapter, at the heart of Estonian national identity has been a fear of ethnic extinction, a characteristic which John Connelly (2020) ascribes to peripheries more generally. Because people in peripheries have always been overruled (rather than overruling others) their sense of nationalism is strongly related to (the right to) national self-determination. The danger for extinction of their culture and language was always perceived to come from outside the national group, not from within, which made cooperation with other ethnic groups by definition considered to be outright betrayal. How does My Estonia Too legitimize their activism against 'their own people' in that historical and theoretical framework?

Based on our analysis of the movement's website, their social media posts and our observations, we argue in this chapter that it is exactly their national duty which has founded this movement. They are in no way renouncing the sacrifices that their (grand)parents made, they are acting upon those sacrifices. They act in name of those Estonians that came before and that have given their lives for the Estonian nation. What is new, however, is that they do not depart from the idea that only Estonians can contribute to the continuation of Estonia's independence, but that love for Estonia is all that is needed. My Estonia Too is critical of its 'own people' as it perceives EKRE to divide Estonian society and with that, create various crises. They fear a crisis of democracy, as they believe that Estonia's democratic values (like equality and freedom for everyone) are being threatened by EKRE's actions. They fear an economic crisis, because EKRE does not encourage Estonians to form social and educational networks across national boundaries, nor does EKRE want non-Estonians to contribute to Estonian economy. They fear a crisis of international relations and with that of their national security, as Estonia crucially depends on its good international relations for their state security. They fear a crisis of sociopolitical stability, as EKRE might disrupt the sociopolitical order that has been built up since the 1990s. And

finally, they fear a crisis of national unity: the cultural unity that – according to their national story – has saved them from all former occupiers.

This perceived need of national unity has also split the My Estonia Too movement. Some argued that by criticizing EKRE, they are also dividing Estonian society. Other members of My Estonia Too did not see another option than to be critical of those who divide society into 'good citizens' and 'bad citizens'. Good citizens are those Estonians who take care of the Estonian nation, and bad citizens are those who live their lives not for the collective good but for their individual good. What we have argued is that EKRE and My Estonia Too eventually do not differ in that respect: they have the same aim and that is to make sure the Estonian nation will persist. They conflict however on their ideas of that imagined 'perfect nation' and on how they want to achieve that. For EKRE this is a nation consisting of ethnic Estonians, excluding all contemporary challenges such as migration, people who want to form non-traditional families and European cooperation. For My Estonia Too the perfect nation is a place where contemporary challenges are not ignored but dealt with, so that everyone can feel at home, and is willing to contribute to that Estonian nation. This is at the heart of the current crisis of competing patriotisms in Estonia.

This chapter did not focus on the question why the critical voice of My Estonia Too found its way out right now, and not in the previous three decades. One important reason is probably that it is very hard to be critical when the "wheels of communicative memory are [still] turning" (Kovács, 2003, p. 156), and the story of the nation is not coherent, but rather personal, sensitive and fragile (Melchior, 2020). Time passing by thus creates a certain space that allows for critical reflection. But there might be more at play here, such as international developments of a growing radical right and generational shifts. In an important way, the Estonian case is part and parcel of an increasing political polarization across the globe. This is a question on which future research can shed more light. Another path for future research is to look deeper into the social networks of My Estonia Too and other critical initiatives coming up, such as Yes to Freedom, No to Lies or SALK (liberal citizens). What is their overlap in terms of members and in terms of aims? How do they relate to each other? And how do they cooperate? Such an analysis could provide a more nuanced image of the counter movement, which in this chapter has been considered more as a homogenous group.

While writing this chapter, the political circumstances in Estonia changed. On 13 January 2021, the Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas resigned, after his party (Centre Party) had been accused of being involved in a corruption case. Consequently, the government stepped down too. The Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid asked the president of the Reform Party – Kaia Kallas – to become the new Prime Minister (Tambur, 2021). Together with the Centre Party, she is forming the new Estonian government at the time of writing. With the ongoing political developments, the position of My Estonia Too has also changed. Yet, at the same time, they have become

and remain a critical voice, to invite Estonian citizens to think critically, rather than traditionally. In May 2021, for instance, they shared a newspaper column by former diplomat and writer Harri Tiido (1953), who argues that Estonia's birth certificate's name is 'A manifest to all people living in Estonia' (*„Manifest kõigile Eestimaa rahvastele"*), not only addressing 'Estonians'. My Estonia Too has created a public critical platform.

This is exactly what made the rise of My Estonia Too surprising to us in 2019. Their message that everyone, and not only Estonians, can contribute to a better Estonia was not new. We had heard that before, *but* only in private, confidential conversations with particular groups of people (see also Melchior & Visser, 2011). My Estonia Too has created a public platform to voice this message, without having to fear the accusation of being a national betrayer. Within the My Estonia Too platform, these critical ideas of the nation can be shared in a discourse of being a perhaps more self-confident national guardian instead. This makes it possible to remain a romantic patriot and be critical of 'one's own people' at the same time.

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