

Estonia “has no time”: Existential Politics at the End of Empire

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Abstract

This article is about the Estonian transition from the era of perestroika to the 1990s. It suggests that the Estonian national movement considered the existence of the nation to be threatened. Therefore, it used the window of opportunity presented by perestroika to take control of time and break free of the empire. This essay has the following theoretical premises. First, **Estonia** was not engaged in “normal politics” but in something that I will conceptualise, following the Copenhagen School, as “**existential politics**.” Second, the key feature of existential politics is time. I will draw on the distinction, made in the ancient Greek thought, between the gods Chronos and Kairos. By applying these concepts to Estonia, I suggest Kairos presented the opportunity to break the normal flow of time and the decay of Socialism (Chronos) in order to fight for the survival of the Estonian nation. The third starting point is Max Weber’s historical sociology, particularly his notion of “charisma,” developed in Stephen Hanson’s interpretation of the notions of time in Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism. Based on this, I will argue that Estonian elites thought they were living in extraordinary times that required the breaking of the normal flow of time, which was thought to be corroding the basis of the nation’s existence.

Keywords: Notions of Time, Existential Politics, Perestroika, Estonia, Soviet Union, Social Transitions.

Résumé

Cet article porte sur la transition estonienne de la perestroïka aux années 1990. Mon analyse suggère que le mouvement national estonien considérait que la nation était menacée dans son existence. Il a donc utilisé la fenêtre d’opportunité offerte par la perestroïka pour prendre le contrôle du temps et se libérer de l’empire. Cette étude repose sur les prémisses théoriques suivantes : premièrement, l’**Estonie** n’était pas engagée dans une « politique normale » mais dans quelque chose que l’on peut conceptualiser, en s’inspirant de l’école de Copenhague, comme une « **politique existentielle** ». Deuxièmement, la caractéristique principale de toute politique existentielle est le temps. Je m’appuierai sur la distinction qu’établit la pensée grecque ancienne entre les dieux Cronos et Kairos. En appliquant ces concepts à l’Estonie, j’avancerai l’hypothèse que Kairos a représenté l’opportunité de briser le cours normal du temps et la décadence du socialisme (Cronos) afin de lutter pour la survie de la nation estonienne. Le troisième point de départ de mon analyse est la sociologie historique de Max Weber, en particulier sa notion de « charisme », développée dans l’interprétation que livre Stephen Hanson des notions du temps appliquées au marxisme-léninisme-stalinisme. Sur cette base, je mettrai en avant que les élites estoniennes pensaient vivre à une époque extraordinaire qui nécessitait la rupture du cours normal du temps car, selon elles, ce dernier portait atteinte aux bases de l’existence de la nation.

Mots-clés : Notions de temps, politique existentielle, perestroïka, Estonie, Union soviétique, transitions sociales.

Introduction	23
1. Historiography and the argument	24
2. “Social and biological extinction”: Existential fears in the 1980s	29
3. “Time is working against us”: The politics of time from perestroika to independence	34
4. “A fast and busy life”: Stakhanovite Estonia in the 1990s	41
Conclusion	43
References	46

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Introduction

On 20 August 1991, Estonia declared independence. Champagne was served at the Supreme Soviet where the historic decision had been made but Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar¹ did not join the celebrations. The Estonian government did not regard independence as an end point but rather as a beginning. It indeed feared the Baltic states were entering a “very challenging period” at that time. Shortly after 20 August 1991, the Estonian government presented an elaborate plan to implement and consolidate independence from the USSR as quickly as possible, i.e. within a time frame which was expected to last no longer than three years. It was called the 3x3x3 plan, meaning that the most urgent matters were supposed to be settled in three days, other issues in three weeks, three months, etc. Three years was regarded as the time span during which the independence of Estonia had to be consolidated in order to become “irreversible.” To succeed, one had to act vigorously while the “climate was still hot.” In a typical Estonian sense of time, the program noted:

Fifty years of hard times have brought us to the situation where we must admit: time is working against us. The destructive processes are intensifying and turning those processes around will take immense efforts.²

The plan suggested that the government work even harder despite having made superhuman efforts in the previous two years. In late August, Foreign Minister Lennart Meri³ established a seven-day working week for all employees in his ministry; but by and large this only formalised existing practices. As Meri’s officials reported, the chief had already been working almost 24 hours a day. He expected his staff to do the same (Eek-Pajuste 2008, 166). In an internal Foreign Ministry memo of autumn 1990 Meri declared: “Estonian foreign policy has

¹ Edgar Savisaar, born in 1950, studied history and obtained a candidate degree with a dissertation on the Club of Rome. As a member of the Communist Party, he worked at the Estonian Planning Committee. He was the instigator and organiser of the Estonian Popular Front in 1988. In early 1990, he won the elections and led the Popular Front to take control of the government. He remained Prime Minister until early 1992, as well as a dominating figure in Estonian politics throughout the 1990s and the 2000s.

² “3x3x3 plan,” Private papers of Enn Liimets (hereafter: EL), Kohila. The author or authors of the plan are not known but stylistically the last quote may be Lennart Meri’s. See also Taagepera 1991.

³ Lennart Meri (1929–2006) was the son of an Estonian pre-WWII diplomat. In 1941, he was exiled to Siberia with his family but allowed to return. Meri studied history and became a filmmaker, traveller and writer. His travelogues, films about the Finno-Ugric peoples in Siberia and books on the ancient history of Estonia widened the horizons of the Estonian people in the suffocating Stagnation times of the 1970s–1980s. He took an active part in the independence struggle and became the first president of Estonia (1992–2001).

less time than the other European nations, because in Estonia time determines whether the nation will survive or perish.”⁴ Following Meri’s example, people had been working at the limits of their capabilities since the Popular Front government⁵ had taken office in spring 1990.

Lennart Meri’s slogan that Estonia “had no time” became the idiom of the 1990s: the whole nation seemed to be toiling without rest in a heroic effort to drag the country out of the Soviet past into the future of Western-style capitalism and democracy. But why did Meri think Estonia never had enough time? What was the reason for Prime Minister Savisaar’s anxiety that it was facing a hard struggle for survival? Why was the government, upon achieving independence, determined to press ahead with its program of consolidating independence and “returning to Europe” as swiftly as possible?

1. Historiography and the argument

With hindsight it appears that Savisaar and Meri were right: the 1990s were a difficult time for domestic as well as foreign politics. Estonia had to fight for its sovereignty, for its place in the international community. For example, thousands of former Soviet, now Russian troops were stationed in Estonia and their withdrawal was a chequered process, as relations with Russia under Boris Eltsin deteriorated soon after the collapse of the USSR. Moscow tied the withdrawal of the troops to the question of the plight of the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia. Nonetheless, the Russian garrison left in 1994 and Estonia was free to choose its allies. It chose NATO and the European Union. Again, it seemed almost impossible that Estonia, along with Latvia and Lithuania, could be able to join these institutions, but in 2004 both accession processes came to fruition, demonstrating that the countries had been able not only to reform but also to free themselves from Russian influence –in striking contrast to other aspiring countries in the 2000s, such as Georgia and Ukraine. The Baltic success begs the question: what was Estonia’s, Latvia’s and Lithuania’s competitive edge over many other countries of the former USSR? In the following, I will sketch briefly the main arguments explaining the Baltic states’ relative success, suggested in existing literature.

⁴ Lennart Meri, “On Foreign Policy,” undated but probably mid-December 1990, Kohtumiste memod, Eesti välisministeeriumi arhiiv, Tallinn (Archive of the Estonian Foreign Ministry, hereafter: EVA).

⁵ The Popular Front of Estonia was formed in 1988 ostensibly to support Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. It became the largest mass movement supporting the aspirations of the Estonian nation. In spring 1989, it started to demand full independence from the USSR. It was supposed to be an umbrella organisation uniting all social movements. However, by 1990 it was splitting into separate political parties. The government that came into being after elections in March 1990 was nevertheless dominated by the Popular Front led by Edgar Savisaar.

Most of the research so far appears to be *structural*, drawing on Weberian comparative-historical sociology, quantitative sociological analysis, or discourse analysis (e.g. Mole 2012). For example, the Swedish political scientist Li Bennich-Björkman employs a Weberian sociohistorical paradigm and points out that both Estonia and Latvia are characterised by religious Protestantism, individualism and a Weberian legal-rational socio-political ideal (Bennich-Björkman 2002, 350). The British journalist and scholar Anatol Lieven emphasises the strength of inherited national identity, which he thinks is less developed in Latvia than in Estonia, where “the connection between nationalism and honest effort” was more apparent than in the other two Baltic countries (Lieven 1993, 318). Other authors have agreed that the strength of national feelings played a role. The Norwegian scholar Anton Steen indicates that since the early 1990s, the Estonian political elites were ethnically and ideologically more homogenous than the Latvians, who had a larger share of Russians and former communists. This produced a stronger sense of loyalty toward the nation state, because ethnicity as the main basis for political cleavage probably resulted in a more integrated elite with interconnected behaviour and attitudes (Steen 1997, 110).

What about Lithuania? The Lithuanian sociologist Zenonas Norkus has suggested several conjunctural causes which could explain why Latvia and especially Lithuania lagged behind Estonia. Lithuania and Latvia adopted a gradual and non-impartial approach to market reforms and privatisation while Estonia administered an effective and complete “shock therapy.” Moreover, Latvia and Lithuania had a far from complete break with Soviet practices and elites, but Estonia was absolutely serious about its policy aimed at “cleaning the house” of corrupt Soviet *apparatchiks*. The more pronounced perception of a Russian threat in Estonia, in contrast to Lithuania, may have inclined Estonians to vote for right-wing parties favouring radical reforms. Lithuania’s Catholic background probably played a part too, as Lithuanians were less keen to embrace capitalist ideas (Norkus 2011, 29).

Another factor, which has been stressed, is the proximity and openness of Latvia and especially Estonia to influences from Nordic countries. This is the “foreign-influence” argument. The Danish scholar Ole Nørgaard has highlighted the strength of the North-European cultural legacy in the Baltic states in contrast to the rest of the former Soviet space (Nørgaard 1994 cited in Bennich-Björkman 2002, 351). More recently, historian Lars Fredrik Stöcker has argued that in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the Finnish and Swedish know-how was essential to the Baltic states’ economic reforms. Moreover, it seems that the Baltic diaspora

played an important part in knowledge transfer. The fact that the Estonian diaspora in Sweden was much larger than the Latvian or the Lithuanian diasporas may explain differences between the Baltic Three (Stöcker 2016; Saharov 2018).

With the exception of studies on knowledge transfer and conceptual history, there has been little historical research in the field. This is what this essay will try to remedy by drawing extensively on archival research. Since documents from the period from ca. 1987 to 1991 are rather scattered,⁶ I have focused on a few institutions, such as the Estonian Foreign Ministry, and the Cultural Council of the Unions of Creative Artists, which have preserved at least some of their archives. Additionally, I have looked at other kinds of primary sources, like transcripts of parliamentary discussions, calendars, self-improvement books, and sociological studies, in particular informative human development reports.

This essay is thus based on empirical research. It focuses on two themes, existential fears and the concepts of time, because sources indicated that these were the central factors in the Estonian transition from the era of *perestroika* to the 1990s. My study suggests that the Estonian national movement⁷ considered the very existence of the Estonian nation to be threatened by the effects of Soviet occupation. Therefore, it sought to use the window of opportunity presented by Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika* to take control of time, and even defy physical time, to break free of the Soviet empire. Existential anxiety continued to motivate Estonian politics and the behaviour of the society at large even in the 1990s. It may account for Estonia’s success in reforms paving the way for joining the major Western institutions by 2004.

This article argues that as a result of existential fears, Estonia was not engaged in “normal politics” but in something that I will conceptualise as “existential politics” (see also Mälksoo 2006).⁸ Existential politics can be analysed in the terms of the Copenhagen school’s idea of “securitisation.” Securitisation is a speech act through which threats are represented and recognised. It occurs when something is cast as an existential threat, placing the matter above public debate, requiring extraordinary measures beyond the routine of everyday politics. Securitisation

⁶ The reason was that the national movement had developed a conspiratorial culture, in which record keeping was deemed as dangerous. New bureaucracies were also negligent about their archives.

⁷ I follow the broad definition of “national movement” by Aareleid-Tart and Johnston (2000, 671–698, 679). Among other things, the authors say: “The national movement is defined as the fifty-year aggregation of individual and collective actions that began with forcible incorporation into the Soviet Union... The national movement for the most part took the form of small acts of resistance in the cultural sphere and subtle measures to promote political and economic autonomy within the Soviet system.”

⁸ Mälksoo’s article has been an early stimulus for this research but she deals primarily with issues of identity and does not factor in concepts of time.

invokes what the German thinker Carl Schmitt referred to as the “sovereign right”: in a situation of emergency, one can make decisions outside the normal order (Wæver 1993; Balzacq 2009; Williams 2003). Following this, I argue that as a result of “existential anxiety,” the Estonian national movement thought that extraordinary measures were required to claim sovereignty for Estonia, and was prepared to take great risks in challenging Moscow. For example, shortly after the August 1989 mass demonstration for independence called the “Baltic Way,” Gorbachev threatened with dire consequences, stating that there was “a serious threat to the fate of the Baltic peoples... A question could arise as to their very existence.” Obviously, this failed to caution the Baltic peoples because of the assumption that they were already facing an existential threat from Soviet colonialism (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993, 328; Annus 2017).

The central feature of existential politics is time. The fact that time is not only a passive medium of a narrative but can and should be the subject of historical reflection has been recognised by historians since at least the 1960s. In 1967, E. P. Thompson wrote his seminal article on time work-discipline and the advent of “Industrial Capitalism” (Thompson 1967). In the next decade, J. G. A. Pocock analysed time as a category of political thought in early modern Florence (Pocock 1975). As to the history of regulating time, David S. Landes’s *Revolution in Time* remains one of the best sources (Landes 1983). Nevertheless, as Charles S. Maier has noted, historical research on *contemporary* politics of time are rare, probably because of the impression that time is more basic than politics (Verdery 1992). In actual fact, precisely because time is a scarce resource, “if a society needs its citizens’ time, it must purchase or commandeer it against alternative claims”; therefore, time must be understood as a stake of political regulation (Maier 1987, 153). Moreover, political decision-making always involves envisaging a desired future and invoking a formative past. “To act in the political domain is to propose a view of how society should progress through history” (*Ibid.*, 152).

In the analysis of the Estonian notions of time I will first draw on the distinction, made in the ancient Greek thought, between the gods Chronos and Kairos (I will not discuss here the God *Aiōn*, translated as “eternity” –Keizer 2010). In the Greek tradition, Chronos connotes measurable duration of time, associated with the inevitable birth-death life cycle of individuals, while Kairos indicates a transformational time of action, in which the certainty of death and decay is challenged (Hutchings 2008, 5). This distinction presents exceptional time (Kairos) as challenging or interrupting normal time (Chronos), normal time meaning the infinite, divisible medium within which finite lives are lived out.

Applied to the Estonian existential politics, I will argue that Kairos presented the opportunity to break the normal flow of time and the decay of Socialism (Chronos) to fight for the survival of the Estonian nation. We can see these efforts as the *kairotic* challenge to normal time. In contrast to *chronotic* time, which can be measured and quantified (the modern world rests on Newtonian assumptions of time as linear, infinite succession that can be counted by means of calendars, clocks and timetables), *kairotic* time is relative, dependent on daily experience and a sense of “inner duration”; referring to “due time” and “appropriate time” (Marramao 2006, 2).

The other point of departure is Max Weber’s historical sociology, particularly his distinction of ideal-type forms of legitimate domination: traditional, rational-legal and charismatic (Weber 1922). Because Weber did not analyse conceptions of time explicitly, I will draw on Stephen E. Hanson’s interpretation. According to Hanson, the rational-legal domination can be linked to the modern sense of time as an abstract grid outside all concrete events. Its authority is derived not from tradition but from the idea implying that rules of social and political conduct can be seen as inherent in the very unfolding of human development in time (Hanson 1997, 12). Drawing on Weber’s notion of “charisma,” Hanson develops the concept of “charismatic time.” Neither traditional (cyclical, concrete) nor modern time (linear and abstract) can characterise charisma, which exists only in the unpredictable realm of the extraordinary, representing the “specifically creative revolutionary force in history”:

[...] Charismatic leadership requires converts to forgo all worldly considerations to take part in political activity that is seen as reordering the normal course of time –the founding of states, the creation of new religious communities, or the conquest of new territory. It makes sense that charismatic leaders would thrive in periods of social breakdown, when the destruction of daily routines makes it difficult to make sense of time either in terms of abstract rational measurements or through the experience of concrete cycles of repetition (*Ibid.*, 12–13).

According to Hanson, charismatic leaders draw their strength from the impression that only they can successfully navigate a world where ordinary time no longer appears to function. In such circumstances, successful leadership is perceived as nothing short of “miraculous.” However, Hanson predicts that domination based on the apparent ability to transcend time tends to be unstable: “there is strong pressure within social groups... for that conception [of charismatic time] to give way, eventually, to ‘routinised’ time” (*Ibid.*, 13).

The following three sections will advance the following argument: because of existential fears the Estonian elites thought they were living in extraordinary

times that required the “breaking” of the normal flow of time, which was thought to be corroding the basis of the nation’s existence. *Perestroika* was a moment of radical change that empowered charismatic leaders who appeared to be able to master time in volatile circumstances. Existential fears and the extraordinary measures by which one tried to take advantage of the *kairotic* moment, presented by *perestroika*, amounted to what is best conceptualised as “existential politics.” The first section will map out the development of the existential-threat discourse in Estonia from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. The second section will trace the development of the Estonian sense of time and the charismatic time concept, which was similar to the Stakhanovite time *ethos*. The third and final section will look briefly at the broader societal developments in the 1990s, suggesting that existential fears and the Stakhanovite mentality may account for Estonia’s successful transformation.

2. “Social and biological extinction”: Existential fears in the 1980s

Ever since the Estonian national movement rose from the underground, in the early 1980s, it always expressed the fear that the nation was facing an existential threat from the combination of two factors: 1° Russification; 2° Negative demographic trends.

As to russification, the situation was thought to have deteriorated since 1978 when Moscow replaced Johannes (Ivan) Kabin, the first secretary of the Estonian Communist Party (ECP), with Karl Vaino, a Russian-speaking more orthodox communist. Vaino began exerting administrative pressure to enforce the use of the Russian language in administration, education and everyday life. Propaganda, prophylactic and repressive measures by the KGB against expressions of nationalist feelings, as well as against the influence of the capitalist West across the iron curtain intensified. Vaino’s policies, supported by the “turning of the screws” by the KGB chief Iurii Andropov, was perceived by the Estonian *intelligentsia* as an effort to stamp out Estonian identity to pave the way for a uniform Soviet identity to take over.

As to demographics, there lacked reliable statistics about the scale of immigration into the Estonian SSR –this was not disclosed by the authorities until the late 1980s– but it was clear that the numbers were large. Anyone visiting North-Eastern Estonia could see that the region was already predominantly Russian-speaking. In Tallinn, too, it was difficult to get by without Russian. The new city quarters where new Soviet-style modernistic apartment houses were built were already predominantly Russian. Most of the new apartments were

reserved for the immigrant work force (which among other things contradicts the claim made by Geoffrey Hosking that the Russians were a disadvantaged group in the republics [Hosking 2001, 563]). When Hellar Grabbi, an Estonian literary figure from the US diaspora visited Tallinn in 1977–1978 and asked a militia officer why he did not speak Estonian, he received the following answer: “Zdes’ Sovetskii Soiuz” (Grabbi 2010, 251).

Since Stalinist terror, active resistance against the Soviet regime had been limited to the activities of a small number of individuals, primarily schoolboys and dissidents. The Estonian *intelligentsia* entered the fray only in 1980, when forty intellectuals compiled a letter of protest and sent it, on 28 October 1980, to the editors of the major state newspapers, including *Pravda*. The immediate spur for the letter was the harsh reaction of the Soviet regime to the demonstration of the youth of Tallinn during a concert of the popular punk band “Propeller” on 22 September 1980. The police had broken up the concert on grounds of real or imaginary misconduct and this had triggered instances of spontaneous protest on the streets of Tallinn, to which the police reacted with force (Vahter 2015). The instigators of the letter later claimed that they were encouraged by the recent victory of Solidarity [Solidarność] in Poland. On 31 August, the Polish government was forced to accept independent workers unions and their right to strike. For the Estonian *intelligentsia*, this demonstrated that public protest could be possible and even permissible, although everyone counted with some sort of harassment on the part of the regime after producing the protest letter (Kiin and Ruutsoo 1990, Tarand 2005).

The “Letter of Forty” was never published but information spread among people. The wording of the letter was relatively circumspect but nevertheless made it clear that current tensions and discontents were primarily the result of poorly regulated “relations of national rights.” It complained about the lack of public discussion over nationalities policies, as all national conflicts had been handled by the authorities as instances of hooliganism. While the question was treated as a taboo, the proportion of Estonians in the population was decreasing fast and they were “becoming a minority ethnic group.” The use of the Estonian language was officially restricted, the letter argued, and the root cause of national conflicts was said to be “fear about one’s identity” and such “fear breeds irrational, openly aggressive behaviour.” As a remedy, the authors suggested immediate measures to restore confidence among the Estonians about the present and the future and to guarantee that the “natives” of the Estonians SSR would always have the decisive word about the country’s future (for the text of the letter, see Tarand 2005, 117–124).

As one can see, the letter already included traits of the two most important elements of existential politics: the existential fear about the nation’s survival and the urgency of the matter that demanded immediate action, even if this entailed considerable risk to the people involved. Indeed, authors’ careers were in jeopardy.

The reaction of the authorities was harsh but no one was imprisoned. Instead, there were threats, harassment, dismissals from jobs, etc. By that time, the communist regime had become aware of the existential fears among ethnic Estonians. In October 1982, there was a scientific-practical conference in Tallinn on the “Sharpening of the Ideological Struggle on World Stage and the Political Training of Workers,” at which the First Secretary Karl Vaino gave a speech. He claimed that the thesis about the “future perishing of the Estonian culture, science and language” was a propaganda ploy used by the capitalists to undermine socialism in Estonia and had to be fought against by all means (Graf 2008, 128). In line with the policies of the new general secretary Iurii Andropov, repressions against dissidents intensified. 1983 saw another wave of arrests that effectively stamped out the dissident movement in the republic. It re-emerged only in 1987 (Pesti 2009).

Gorbachev’s policy of *glasnost* immediately brought a change. The first sign of a genuine grass-root movement in Estonia was the Heritage Society. It was established in December 1987 and started to restore national heritage sites – and national memory more generally –with the purpose of strengthening Estonian identity as a bulwark against russification. Another important and even earlier turning point was the disclosure in late 1986 and early 1987 of Moscow’s secret plans for expanding phosphorite mining activities in North-Eastern Estonia. What agitated the Estonian public most was not so much the environmental threat, although of great concern, but the envisaged large influx of foreign labour. This triggered a mass protest movement, the so-called “phosphorite war,” that eventually forced the authorities to abandon the plan (Laar, Ott and Endre 2000, 132–142, 151–155; Aare 1999).

Nevertheless, this could hardly alleviate the general feeling that the Estonian nation was facing an existential threat. As the economist Arno Susi noted in summer 1989, “as soon as pressure relaxed and Estonians could begin talking to each other, it appeared that everyone shared the same strong feelings of threat and that it was *high time* that ways should be sought to prevent a *catastrophe*” (Susi 1990, 142; emphasis is mine).

One of the first fora that allowed for (semi-)open discussions of the most important issues was the Cultural Council of the Unions of Creative Artists established in May 1987. It was a body representing officially acknowledged cultural elites of Soviet Estonia. Characteristically, the first issue that the Council raised on its first meeting of 25 May 1987 was the Tallinn housing policy, which was seen as an “immigration pump” attracting newcomers from other parts of the USSR. Lennart Meri, a member of the Council representing the Writers’ Union, noted that in order to form an opinion on the matter, one had to know the demographic prognoses for the future. This was a reference to the fact that reliable statistics had not been shared with the public despite Gorbachev’s promises of *glasnost*. The poet Hando Runnel noted that the whole matter came down to the problem of Estonia’s legal position, which was an unmistakable reference to the occupied status of the country.⁹ As the theory of “securitisation” predicts, calling something an “existential threat” immediately raises the question about sovereignty. This entails the possibility of taking measures immediately to avert that threat, which is precisely what Runnel suggested in his intervention about Estonia’s legal position. In 1987, Estonia was not sovereign and could not control its borders. As a consequence, it was clear to the *intelligentsia* that Estonia had to assert its sovereignty vis-à-vis the imperial centre.

Initially, the Cultural Council tried to influence the authorities via memoranda but this proved ineffective. It decided to organise a meeting –a plenum– to attract wider attention. The plenum took place in April 1988 at the assembly hall of the Supreme Soviet. Representatives of the communist leadership were present. It was at that plenum that Lennart Meri expressed the view probably shared by almost everyone in the room: “Our first duty is to free the nation from the fear of biological and social extinction” (Meri 1988/2013). During the plenum, the Estonian cultural elites thus gave considerable weight to the Estonian national movement’s double demand for identity and controlling demographics.

Another program that showed promise was suggested by the Estonian economists and evolved around the idea of economic self-management. Initially the term *hozraschot* meant self-accounting of enterprises, but gradually evolved into a term denoting self-management and even economic independence from the USSR. The plan was called IME (literally “miracle,” which neatly captured the charismatic qualities of the plan and the four instigators) and was introduced in September 1987. Although the chief *rationale* was to take control of economic activities on the Estonian territory in order to allow for a more rational and time-

⁹ Eesti Rahvusrhiiv, ERAF.9609.1.1/1, 4–11.

efficient management (i.e. Meri 2008, 448–452), an important element was the possibility to take control of the borders. In June 1989, the economist Arno Susi introduced the IME program as a measure to “become the owner of one’s entire territory and nature,” symbolising an economic path toward independence. Susi warned that one had to act calmly in order not to force a reaction from Moscow but “still quickly enough, so that we were able to secure our survival” (Susi 1990, 142–243). Susi was referring to the widespread fear that Moscow may react with repressions against individual activists or even resort to Stalinist measures, such as mass deportations.

The demographic situation was prominent in most of the key speeches during the independence struggle. In one of the most memorable speeches during the Singing Revolution in summer 1988, Trivimi Velliste, a leader of the radical wing of the national movement, characterised the situation: “We see that our land has been plundered... and the main political problem is the question of our survival. The continued existence of the Estonian nation is impossible without independent statehood” (Velliste 1988/1992, 22). The demand for independence was considered premature at the time of Velliste’s speech, but it would soon be shared by all political groupings. Even the more moderate People’s Front declared at its founding congress in October 1988: “The establishing of equal relations between Soviet nationalities, the development of socialist federalism is the only effective guarantee for the continuing existence of the Estonian nation” (*Ibid.*, 29–30).

By that time, open discussion of the demographic situation had become possible. Kalev Katus, who pioneered scientific population research in Estonia, was pessimistic. In June 1989, he noted that from 1939 to 1959, when the first post-war census took place, Estonia probably lost 200,000 people, which was 17,5% of the pre-war figure. Due to the demographic transition that had already taken place, this loss would be irreplaceable. Next came immigration from Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian territories, which he characterised as having “catastrophic” consequences –mostly in terms of affecting social cohesion in the country. By 1989, the proportion of the immigrant population had reached 40% but Katus estimated that it would grow considerably as the immigrants had a larger share of young people in fertile age (Endre 1990, 22–23).

Resulting from the fear of “social and biological extinction,” the early program of the Estonian national movement focused on two objectives: 1° Official status for the Estonian language; 2° Controlling immigration.

On both of these key issues, we can see that the new nationally-minded communist leadership of Vaino Väljas replacing Karl Vaino and his entourage in summer 1988 proved accommodating. The new language law of the ESSR was passed in January 1989 and came into effect in January 1990, establishing Estonian as the official language of administration. The issue of immigration was more difficult, however. Already on 19 January 1988, that is during Vaino's time, the communist authorities began discouraging the inflow of foreign workers by applying a tax of 10,000 to 16,000 roubles to all enterprises on each newcomer (University and special secondary school graduates were exempted) (Graf 2008, 258). However, the national movement, especially the radical wing, wanted to go much further by establishing Estonian citizenship based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, the long-term effect of which was to exclude large numbers of immigrants from Estonian politics. There was a lot of opposition to it from the Russian-speaking minority, criticism from Russia, scepticism among moderate nationalists, so the new citizenship law came into effect only in 1995. However, in 1992 the citizenship law of 1938 was reinstituted as a stop-gap measure. In practice, immigration to Estonia had dried up by the early 1990s and had been replaced by emigration (mostly but not exclusively to the East).

The two most pressing issues, language and immigration, could to some extent have been solved before the achievement of independence in 1991. In fact, the communist leadership had already taken measures to avoid both “social and biological extinction,” as it moved to increase its autonomy from Moscow. This hardly satisfied the national movement, however, nor did it abate existential politics (i.e. Taagepera 1988/1992, 32–34). When the first democratically-elected government, headed by Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar, took power in April 1990, it was determined to achieve nothing short of independence, risking conflict with Gorbachev and the formidable power of the Soviet government. As we will see in the next section, it was seizing the kairotic moment to become the master of the nation's time.

3. “Time is working against us”: The politics of time from *perestroika* to independence

Every political regime must engage in the politics of time. In his pathbreaking study, *Time and Revolution*, Stephen E. Hanson theorised about Soviet conceptions of time and suggested that, at the core, the Bolshevik revolution was a synthesis of rational and charismatic notions of time inherent in Marxism.

Lenin and his successor Stalin combined the charismatic concept of time, and the revolutionary Marxist ethos, with the disciplined and bureaucratic time management of a vanguard party. Stalin’s application of this concept in Soviet economy –represented by the figure of the Stakhanovite work hero– was well captured in Valentin Kataev’s novel *Time, Forward!* [Время, вперед!] (1932). In the novel, the work hero Marguilies defies the laws of bourgeois economics and physics by pouring concrete faster than anyone thought possible (Kataev 1933). In Hanson’s interpretation, Gorbachev was a true disciple of Lenin and Stalin as he tried to create a mass culture based on the charismatic-rational work ethos, freed of central Brezhnevite control, but his reforms proved illusory as only a small faction within the Soviet society in fact lived up to that ideal (Hanson 1997, 194–198; see also Anastasoae 2015).

Although alternative notions of time always co-existed with the official timeframe (Yurchak 2013, 156), reminding us that late socialism as a system did not repress but even relied on the coexistence of multiple temporal regimes, *demokratizatsiia* under Gorbachev’s allowed those concepts to emerge from the private into the public sphere to compete with Leninist-Stalinist time. The Estonian national movement’s attempt to take control of the nation’s time, in opposition to Moscow’s claims on the population’s time, can be seen in the following policies: 1° Removing Estonia from Moscow’s time zone; 2° Replacing the communist eschatology with the temporality of the nation state; 3° Replacing the Soviet calendar of anniversaries and festivities with an ethnonational calendar; 4° Instilling a new individual time ethos compatible with existential politics.

First, it was symbolic that already in March 1989 the authorities of the ESSR annulled the decision of the Stalinist regime of 3 August 1940 and removed Estonia from the time zone of Moscow (from +3h to +2h in summer). Sharing Moscow’s time had not only been unnatural and uncomfortable but had always been regarded as a symbol of imperial dominance. Indeed, it could rightly be considered a colonial practice similar to the application of the Central European time by the German occupation authorities in 1941 and compared to many other instances where colonial regimes have enforced their abstract times and schedules on locals (Ogle 2013; Ogle 2015).

Second, the Soviet state had promoted a sense of time that proceeded from the Marxist theory of social formations, positing, on the one hand, that history was destined to progress inexorably toward communism and, on the other hand that, for the sake of that bright future, one had to make all sorts of sacrifices in the present (Maier 1987, 161).

The communist eschatology had hardly taken root in Estonia, as the following popular anecdote from 1979 illustrates:

- > There is always the talk that communism is on the horizon. But what is communism?
- >> ???
- > Communism is our bright future, society without exploitation, paradise on Earth. But what is horizon?
- >> ???
- > Horizon is a line that always moves away whenever you approach it (Viikberg 1997, 224).¹⁰

Indicative of the lack of belief in the Marxist teleology is the growing revisionism within the Marxist school of thought itself. For example, Eero Loone, a Marxist philosopher at the University of Tartu, speculated in his book *Contemporary philosophy of history* [Современная философия истории] that another, still to be identified formation should logically succeed the communist formation (Loone 1980; Loone 1992). A Western reviewer of the book noted with surprise that it was difficult to see what was left of Marxist historical materialism if this problematisation was followed to its logical conclusion (Scanlan 1983).

The national movement naturally objected to the idea of communism being the final stage of human development, but the nationalist temporality was strikingly similar to the communist one. Instead of communism, it was the nation state that would liberate mankind (Ruutsoo and Selg 2012). Vaino Väljas, the nationally-minded communist who replaced Karl Vaino as the First Secretary of the Estonian Communist Party in summer 1988, acknowledged as much, noting in a speech in Finland in early 1990 that regimes based on dogmatic Marxism have invariably repressed their subjects in their ignorance of the fact that “[...] all-human values can materialise only in the nationalist form” (Väljas 1990).

Third, the Soviet regime had its calendar of anniversaries and festivities that sought to legitimise the rule of the Party by connecting Soviet people to the origins and the turning points in the history of the Bolshevik Revolution. As anthropologist Henry J. Rutz has stressed, the calendar is a “technology of time that has proven to be among the most effective instruments for exercising power” (Rutz 1992, 4). It was natural that the national movement, in opposition to the Soviet regime, had its own calendar that underscored two things: 1° Premodern and primordial roots of the Estonian nation; 2° The continuity of the ongoing political struggle with the nation state established in 1918.

¹⁰ A variant from 1966: “How do we march toward Communism? – Along Lenin’s way: one step forward, two steps back.”

As to the first point, the objective was to restore the most important folk and church festivities, such as Christmas and Easter, that had been discouraged by the Soviet regime. As to the second, the Independence Day and the Victory day that had been celebrated before the Second World War were restored. These changes in the calendar were made by the communist authorities in 1989 and the Popular Front government in 1990.¹¹ The suggestion by Andres Tarand to accommodate the Russian minority by allowing a free day on 7 January, the Orthodox Christmas, was rejected, revealing strongly ethnonational tendencies in the democratically-elected parliament at the time.¹² Moreover, the changes proved insufficient for the national movement. In 1994, other Christian holidays, such as the Three Kings' Day and Pentecost, but also originally pre-Christian festivities, such as the All Souls' Day, were included. The calendar was further purified from Soviet ideology by changing the name of 1 May from the “International Workers' Day” to the “Spring Day.” The importance of the nation state was enhanced by the adding of the day of the Restoration of Independence (20 August 1991).¹³

Fourth, the national movement promoted a new individual time ethos suited not only to a new spirit of capitalism but also to the demands of the existential politics of the nation. There were two main tendencies: 1° The capitalist idea of time as a precious commodity; 2° A Stakhanovite work mentality geared for the *Kairotic* moment in existential politics.

Indicative of the new (but partly also pre-war) capitalist time management was the publication of the second edition of Dick Carlson's *How to Develop Personal Power*, which had seen print in pre-war Estonia in 1940 (Carlson 1991; Carlson 1940). Carlson's book was a classic statement of the capitalist time ethos:

[...] Time becomes our master, because every fraction of time allocated to every individual has physical limits. We should understand and learn that the only way to handle time in a reasonable way is to manage it, to make a budget for it, exactly as we would make a budget if we had a limited sum of money to spend” (*Ibid.* 1991, 157).

When the book saw print, in 1991, it must have sounded thoroughly utopian, as the everyday Soviet reality of scarcity and the deficit, which forced people to

¹¹ Transcript of the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian Republic, XII koosseis, 16 October 1990.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Riiklike pühade ja “Eesti NSV töökoodeksi” muutmise kohta, vastu võetud 16.10.1990; Eesti Vabariigi Ülemnõukogu Presiidiumi Seadlus; Pühade ja tähtpäevade seadus, vastu võetud 08.02.1994; Lauri Vahtre, a leading national politician who had researched the folk calendar as an historian, explained the importance of purifying the calendar from Soviet ideology: “As long as there is the identification [with premodern time concepts], even if only at an emotional level, it is an extremely important element in the stabilizing of our spiritual culture...” (Vahtre 1991, 6).

rush to shops or to do extensive queuing whenever there were supplies, was hardly inductive to the type of rational time use that Carlson proposed. As anthropologist Katherine Verdery has noted on the example of Romania in Ceaușescu’s time, the economics of scarcity produces impassive and immobilised bodies, which serve the authoritarian purposes of the communist regime. However, extreme plasticity of time and rushes of shock activity is also required, for example when scarce raw materials are delivered to the factory or the Party mobilises people for sudden meetings or parades (Verderey 1992, 39–49).

The extent of the “etatization of time” in Soviet Estonia hardly reached the levels of Ceaușescu’s Romania. Time discipline at work was low. For example, drinking at work was commonplace –this had been the trigger for Gorbachev’s prohibition laws. Even in the Estonian Foreign Ministry where Lennart Meri had established a wartime mentality, young diplomats hired from Estonian universities drank alcohol socially, which was perceived as highly unusual by the Estonians whom Meri had brought in from the Estonian diasporas in the West (Eek-Pajuste 2008, 82–83, 109). This practice ended soon, as it hardly suited the new capitalist work ethos nor the needs of existential politics.

The Estonian national movement borrowed (probably unconsciously) from the Stalinist concept of the Stakhanovite shock worker. This was certainly a paradox as the Estonian national movement was determined to undue residues of Stalinism in society. But as we have seen above, the national movement believed that:

Fifty years of hard times have brought us to the situation where we must admit: time is working against us. The destructive processes are intensifying and turning these processes around will take immense efforts.¹⁴

The idea that the continuation of a normal time flow was destructive to the prospects of the nation was similar to the thought Stalin expressed in his *The Foundations of Leninism* [Об основах ленинизма]: “Petty-bourgeois habits” have a corrosive influence on the revolution and bourgeois decadence had to be fought against through imbuing the proletarian masses with the spirit of discipline and organisation (Stalin 1953, chapter VIII; Hanson 1997, 141; Roberts 2010).

As noted above, Meri nurtured a war-like mentality in his Foreign Ministry, making almost 24-hour working days without weekends and expecting the same from his sometimes-helpless staff. Translator Siiri Oder remembers: “In the first years [after joining the ministry in 1990] I often stayed at work for 16–18 hours non-stop” (Eek-Pajuste 2008, 121). This certainly did not mean that she was

¹⁴ “3x3x3 plan” (EL).

working 18 hours without a break. Rather, she had to be available and ready to do “shock work” whenever Meri required (similar to the work practices in Soviet factories under conditions of scarcity). Few people dared to complain about the lack of normal working hours but when someone did, Meri’s quip “There were no free days in the Independence War” was enough to end any conversation (Eek-Pajuste 2008, 166; Mutt 2006, 115). The military language is another indication that work in the ministry consisted of periods of waiting and rushes of activity –as would war look like from the perspective of a soldier.

What best characterises Meri’s sense of time is the Greek notion of Kairos. The god of Kairos inspired Meri both on the macrolevel of large historical developments and the microlevel of time management. As to the macrolevel, Meri thought Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and the dissolution crisis of the Soviet Union had opened up a *Kairotic* moment for the Estonian nation. This was the underlining spirit of the 3x3x3 programme, but Meri would also tell his staff: “If we fail to achieve independence in the next couple of years, you can leave” (Eek-Pajuste 2008, 166). This argument persuaded many officials to stay –in the expectance that the hardships would end after achieving independence. Yet as Meri showed no slackness even after August 1991, there was a noticeable exodus in late 1991 (Eek-Pajuste 2008, 88–89). As to the microlevel, Meri’s personal work habits reflected a strong *kairotic* sense of time, as his long hours of reading, listening to the radio and reflection were interrupted by quite unpredictable rushes that were often frustrating for his colleagues and staff. Meri’s sense of time was post-modern rather than Newtonian, as he believed in the essential plasticity of time. In 1979, he explained: “Actually it is quite a pleasant feeling when you suddenly realise that there is incredibly little time. When there is a lot of time, then, I am afraid, nothing really comes to pass.”¹⁵ It is also possible that his long-time experience in filmmaking prepared him for his future role as a scriptwriter and choreographer who was able to use and play with time shrewdly in his purposes.¹⁶

Meri’s sense of time was not an exception. Prime Minister Savisaar, in office from April 1990 to January 1992, and his staff worked in a similar way. Savisaar was already almost legendary for his exceptionally long working hours (Meri 2008, 449–452). Raivo Vare, who as “minister of state” was responsible for the running of the government offices, recalled that staff meetings began at midnight because no one had time for reflections and policy planning during

¹⁵ “Tantsud linnuteele. Pildistusi Lennart Meri filmirännakutelt,” režissöör ja stsenaarist Jaak Lõhmus, Estinfilm 2010.

¹⁶ I thank Kaidi Kähär-Peterson for this suggestion.

the day. These meetings lasted into the early morning. Meetings at Meri’s home often started at 3.00 am and later.¹⁷ Not all ministers or government branches worked with similar fervour. One can also argue that the job of a chief executive, prime minister or president is extremely demanding also in normal times. There have been many workaholics in high positions. For example, it is reported that the French President Emmanuel Macron and the US President Donald Trump share the need for extremely short sleep. Napoleon is known to have slept only a few hours a day (SleepAdvisor.org 2019; *The Guardian* 2018; Derickson 2014, 3). However, people with extremely short sleep times seem to be few. In fact, they may be suffering from various sleep disorders and are in a risk group in terms of health issues (Leung and Bradley 2001; Taylor, Lichstein and Durrence 2003). For example, Stalin’s general staff –the “brain” of the Red Army– worked literally 24 hours a day during the Second World War and the result was that few of the staff officers, who could get only a few hours of sleep, survived the war without serious health issues (Štemenko 1978, 446). Such a work culture could be sustained for a relatively short time and in exceptional circumstances (like war) but would have been quite counterproductive in normal times.

We can see similar tendencies in the Estonian Foreign Ministry. By autumn 1991, the work of the ministry was effectively paralysed and the staff, including Meri’s most trusted lieutenants, revolted against the chief. A group of some of the key officials threatened to leave if Meri did not instil normal work procedures in the ministry.¹⁸ This illustrates that Meri’s heroic work habits had impressive short-term effects, for example during the *coup* attempt in August 1991 (Raig 2003, 7–19), but were bound to be self-destructive and counter-productive in the longer term. When Meri was forced to leave his position, in April 1992, the main criticism levelled against him was that he was unsuited for regular bureaucratic activities in normal times. However, Meri would soon take office as president and continue, from 1992 to 2001, to stress the urgency of time while instilling charismatic time onto the bureaucracy. In the next section, I will further mark the development of Estonian time concepts in the 1990s but also trace the existential fears present in society. Again, Lennart Meri’s writings and speeches are a valuable source, as he was quite unique in his ability to reflect on the spirits of the time.

¹⁷ Interview with Raivo Vare, Tallinn, 30 January 2019.

¹⁸ Indrek Kannik, Toivo Klaar, Tiit Pruuli ja Andres Tomasberg Merile 14. oktoobril 1991, minister 1990–1992 (EVA).

4. “A fast and busy life”: Stakhanovite Estonia in the 1990s

Meri was not inclined to be complacent, nor did he think *kairotic* times were over. In 1993, at the Independence Day celebration on 24 February, he said: “The most important lesson is simple: time is short and time will not wait for small nations” (Meri 1993). In a lecture at the University of Turku two years later he found the following metaphor: “Much like the heart of an elephant or whale, the heart of a large state beats more slowly; a small state’s hours or weeks could fit into a whale’s second” (Meri 1995). In 1999, Meri expressed his notions of plastic time with another metaphor:

There are many clocks of different countries [...] They all tick in the same pace [...] And there is another kind of clocks. These are the political clocks of the states [...] These clocks tick much more quickly in small countries [...] They never get as much time as the big ones [...] by postponing the decision today, we are [...] signing the verdict that in ten years we shall be no more (Meri 1999).

Much like Kataev’s *Time, Forward!*, Meri seemed to be indicating, along with expressing existential fears, that time was plastic and could be compressed almost exactly as the novel’s main character Marguilies had done while casting concrete. In 2001, his last year in office, he again stressed that Estonia “has no time... Time is precious and small states always have little time” (Meri 2001).

Beside Meri, other Estonian politicians also emphasised time. For example, Mart Laar, leader of the Pro Patria national-conservative coalition and Prime Minister from 1992 to 1994, stressed the *kairotic* moment for bringing about radical economic reform. If Estonia wanted to break free of command economy, it had to act as quickly and decisively as possible because popular support for such changes would wane (Laar 1993/2017, 84–85). As Laar had expected, he was forced to back down after two years in office but by that time Estonia was in the forefront of economic change in Eastern Europe (Lauristin and Vihalemm 1997, 105–112). It seems that the Russian factor became more important in Laar’s thinking during his second premiership from 1999 to 2002. In 2002, he warned that while NATO-Russia relations had improved a lot over the past years, there was no reason to be complacent as Russia’s opposition to the Baltic accession to NATO was an indication that there were lingering hopes that the Baltic nations could be drawn into the Russian sphere of influence (Laar 2002). The Russian factor had loomed large also earlier. The first government of Mart Laar had worked hard to persuade Russia to withdraw its military garrison. Together with President Meri, Laar used the window of opportunity, in 1994, to sign a deal with Boris Eltsin that eventually secured the withdrawal of the Russian army. In a typical Estonian

sense of time, Jüri Luik, member of Laar’s government and chief negotiator with the Russians over the issue (and a close associate of Meri), wrote: “There was little time” –a small country like Estonia had to act as swiftly as possible to take advantage of opportunities presented by the shifts in great-power relations (Jüri Luik 2019).

Research on the collective values of Estonia shows that Meri and other politicians were not merely engaging in rhetoric but were encapsulating the spirit of the times: the whole nation was working hard to drag the country out of the socialist past into a prosperous and safe future. This is reflected, for instance, in the importance that people attached to work and career in their lives. In 1990, 82% of people in the age group 24–39 considered work as important, ten years later the percentage had risen to 94%. This was much higher than in Western Europe where family and leisure time often eclipsed the emphasis laid on work (Saar 2001, 4–5). According to a human development report from 2006, Estonians were used to “live a fast and busy life.” Moreover, nearly half of society took uncertainty as a challenge, not a problem (49% compared to 30% in Europe), and it was normal to deal with several issues at the same time (42% against 28% in Europe) (Heidmets 2007, 61).

In the 1990s, almost the whole Estonian nation had become a Stakhanovite shock worker who was taking advantage of the *kairotic* moment presented by the collapse of the USSR and the regaining of independence. However, the uneasiness and fears about the future of the Estonian ethnic group –the basis for existential politics– was always in the background. Despite the joining of the EU and NATO in 2004, a move that one might assume to have given much confidence and security, 25 % of Estonian-speaking respondents still said in 2005 that the Estonian ethnic group may face extinction (Heidmets 2007, 48). The reason for anxiety was probably the demographic situation that had deteriorated again after a short period of optimism at the turn of the 1990s. The end of the 1980s had seen record levels of population growth but in 1991 growth had turned into negative. In 1993, natural growth was as little as 1.4, even though it was regarded as positive that the proportion of Estonians was growing, as many Russian-speakers had emigrated (*Ibid.*).

However, by the end of the 1990s negative population growth was coupled with the emigration of large numbers of Estonians. From 1989 to 2000, the population of Estonia had decreased by as much as 12% (Lauristin 2009, 13). The human development report of 2001 cited Aino Järvesoo’s dire warning that the Estonians faced “the last stand” to survive in a globalising world (Lauristin, Heidmets and

Vetik 2002; Järvesoo 2001; Taagepera 2005). On the other hand, the report added a note of optimism:

Small nations do not make big history, history is made for them. But they have the possibility that ancient Greeks called Kairos. Kairos is the ability to grasp the best moment for doing something. Furthermore, it is an art to act in an eternal time ocean, so that catching the right moment ensures the success of the venture.

In the conclusion, I will reflect on the phenomenon of existential fears among smaller nations, and return to the concept of existential politics that, I will argue, necessarily includes two elements: existential fears and notions of time.

Conclusion

The political scientist Uriel Abulof has noted the cognitive gap between members of small peoples, who regard their existential uncertainty as self-evident, and outsiders, who regard the existential fear as baseless, a pathology of the collective mind. He argues that the small peoples' intersubjective sense of vulnerability is one of its defining characteristics (Abulof 2009, 227–228), drawing on the Czech writer Milan Kundera's notion of “small peoples”:

[...] Small peoples do not have that felicitous sense of an eternal past and future; at a given moment in their history, they all passed through the antechambers of death; in constant confrontation with the arrogant ignorance of the mighty, they see their existence as perpetually threatened or with a question mark hovering over it; for their very existence is the question.

Abulof's approach does the service of shifting the focus from small states to the analysis of small ethnic communities. He brings the examples of the Israeli Jews and the French Canadians, who have had long-standing existential fears: the first mostly about the viability of their state, the latter about identity. By highlighting intersubjective processes rather than “objective” features of small states he creates a useful framework for analysing small peoples (Abulof 2009; Abulof 2014).

This may also apply to the Estonian case. For example, Merje Feldman has analysed Estonian identity discourses and established that existential fears formed an important part thereof. Yet she indicates that these existential fears could not be genuine: “Danger is a constructing and enabling notion, not a threat to Estonian identity but a precondition for its existence” (Feldman 2001, 16). However, following Abulof's approach, the question of objective validity of such fears is of secondary importance. More important is the impact of such anxieties.

The first section of this essay showed that existential fears emerged in the Estonian discourse in the early 1980s and retained their importance at least until the 2000s. Indeed, if the essay had researched earlier periods of Estonian history, it would have found many instances of existential fear in the Estonian national discourse. For example, during the Russian Revolution of 1905 Jaan Tõnisson, a leader of the national movement, warned against engaging in “high politics” in the Russian empire because this could end being “suicidal,” endangering the very existence of the Estonian *ethnie* that he regarded as a “dwarf” among larger nations (Karjahärm 1998, 232–233). This further suggests that existential fear is deeply rooted in Estonian nationalism and supports Abulof’s hypothesis that it can in fact be a feature of all small peoples.

The second section showed that, resulting from the threat perception, the Estonian national movement always stressed the lack of time for securing its survival. Beside the strong grasp of the *chronotic*, historic time, there was the particularly strong sense of *kairotic* time –the ability to grasp the right moment to break the normal time flow to fight for Estonia’s sovereignty. Gorbachev’s *perestroika* was perceived as such a *kairotic* moment. In order to use that window of opportunity, individual time management had to change too. There was the borrowing from the capitalist time ethos –something that the Estonian novelist Artur Hansen Tammsaare had suggested at the time of the first period of independence, in 1927:

There are few people who understand or have even the interest to grasp that one does not achieve Europeaness by aping Europe but by learning to think, feel and work as intensively as Europeans do (Tammsaare 1976 [1927], 298).

This suggests that the wish to learn from the capitalist time management was already an important element in Estonian nationalism earlier. However, the individual time ethos that the Estonian national movement introduced in the 1980s cannot be considered entirely capitalist. According to Stephen Hanson, the ethos of capitalism is based on the acceptance of abstract time as sacred. In the long term, it discourages heroic attempts to defy time’s dominion and considers the indulging in round-the-clock activity at the cost of one’s future time efficiency as sinful. “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise,” taught Benjamin Franklin (Hanson 1997, 206). We have seen that the Estonian government thought time was plastic and tried to transcend the constraints of physical time, but the Stakhanovite, self-destructive work mentality was not limited to the government. The third section indicated that in the 1990s, most of the Estonian society had become used to living a “fast and busy life.” Indeed,

Estonia stood out among all the former Soviet republics as it was the only one to be included, in 1997, in the first group of countries invited to start membership negotiations with the EU along with Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia (Taube et al. 1999). This set an example for other countries and probably also accelerated reforms in Latvia and Lithuania.

However, the undesired corollary of the “fast and busy life” mentality were the high social costs of radical societal transformation. These were reflected, among other unfortunate effects, in rising levels of emigration and the decrease in natural population growth. Thus, paradoxically, the success of restoring independence and “returning to Europe” had by the early 2000s not alleviated but rather revived existential fears in the Estonian society.

Considering the existential fears and notions of time, the Estonian national movement was not engaged in normal politics but in what I have conceptualised as “existential politics.” In this article, the expression “existential politics” referred to the process of securitisation by which certain matters are perceived as posing an existential threat, therefore calling for extraordinary measures beyond the routine and the normal flow of time. Existential politics explain why the Baltic leaders were prepared to take great risks in challenging Gorbachev’s government despite Moscow’s threats of force and the actual use of force in January 1991, and again during the *coup d’état* of August 1991. I argue that the central feature of existential politics is time. Existential fear leads to the assumption that time works against the existential basis of the nation, thus one has to break the normal flow of time to grasp the *kairotic* moment to save the nation from imminent extinction. I suggested that the *kairotic* sense of time can work on a macro as well as micro level. At the macro level, people can sense the existence of a “window of opportunity” in the midst of a larger societal crisis (such as *perestroika*). The micro level represents the daily management of time: the *kairotic* sense of time leads to frenetic activities and attempts to compress and beat time. The Estonian case showed that this may result in the mentality that each individual should sacrifice almost all his/her free time, and even his/her long-term health and time efficiency, in order to accelerate the tempo of state-building and reform in the present. The charismatic time element leads me to think that the Baltic transformation was not really a “return to normalcy,” as Daina Eglitis has argued (Eglitis 2002, 8), but a genuinely revolutionary moment.

This essay has been long in the making. I presented the initial idea at a conference organised by Juhana Aunessuoma at the University of Minnesota in 2016. A person from the audience suggested I read Hanson’s “Time and revolution”. An important stimulus to develop the theme further was given by a stay at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in spring semester 2019, made possible by a grant from the Kone Foundation. I would like to thank director Tuomas Forsberg, all the fellows, and especially Mika Vähäkangas for guiding me to explore the Greek gods Chronos and Kairos.

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