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Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism

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**Journalistic Perspectives on Nordic Identity
in Estonia**

Master Thesis

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Abstract

Since its restoration of independence in 1991, Estonia has sought to include itself in the Nordic region (*Norden*) to boost its international reputation and promote its geopolitical interests. However, Estonia's inclusion within *Norden* is questionable and controversial despite its historical and cultural links to the region. For this Thesis, I conduct a qualitative case study, performing semi-structured interviews with six leading Estonian journalists to ascertain the state of Estonia's national identity vis-à-vis the Nordic region. Contextualizing these interviews by drawing on contemporary history and theories of nation branding, agenda-setting, and constructionism, I conclude that, due to current social and economic factors, Estonia cannot be considered a "Nordic country" at this time. However, Estonia undoubtedly lies within the Nordic region's sphere of influence and is on track for further integration with *Norden*, due to both internally generated reforms and external geopolitical pressures.

Keywords

Estonia, national identity, Nordic, journalism, agenda-setting, constructionism, nation branding

Abstrakt

Od obnovení nezávislosti v roce 1991 se Estonsko snaží začlenit do severského regionu (nordické státy), aby posílilo svou mezinárodní reputaci a podpořilo své geopolitické zájmy. Začlenění Estonska mezi nordické země je však sporné a kontroverzní, a to navzdory jeho historickým a kulturním vazbám na tento region. Předkládaná diplomová práce je kvalitativní případová studie, v rámci které jsem provedl polostrukturované rozhovory se šesti předními estonskými novináři. Cílem bylo zjistit, jak je vnímána národní identita Estonska vzhledem k severskému regionu. Na základě kontextualizace těchto rozhovorů a s využitím soudobých dějin a teorií nation branding, agenda-settingu a konstruktivismu docházím k závěru, že vzhledem k současným sociálním a ekonomickým faktorům nelze Estonsko v současné době považovat za "severskou zemi". Estonsko však nepochybně leží ve sféře vlivu severského regionu a je na cestě k další integraci s nordickými státy, a to jak v důsledku vnitřně vyvolaných reforem, tak v důsledku vnějších geopolitických tlaků.

Klíčová slova

Estonsko, národní identita, severská země, žurnalistika, agenda-setting, konstruktivismus, nation branding

Range of thesis: 50 pages and 112,435 characters

Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.
2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.
3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.
4. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

Prague...1 May 2023

James Niiler

Acknowledgments

I am especially grateful to Dr. Anna Shavit, my Supervisor, and Dr. Annamária Neag, my thesis seminar instructor, for their feedback, guidance, and encouragement on this project.

I also would like to thank those classmates who offered their suggestions and commentary for this Thesis. Your insight was extremely valuable and much appreciated.

And finally—I am deeply grateful to the 2023 Erasmus Mundus Journalism cohort. Thank you all for expanding my world, and welcoming me with open arms into the beautiful family we call Europe.

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism FSV UK
Research proposal for Erasmus Mundus Journalism Diploma Thesis

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Student's surname and given name: Niiler, James

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Thesis title in English: "Nordic Estonia" from Estonian Journalists? How Journalistic Agenda-Setting Informs Estonian Self-Identity as a Nordic Country

Expected date of submission (semester, academic year – example: SS 2021/2022)
(Thesis must be submitted according to the Academic Calendar.) SS 2023

Main research question (max. 250 characters): Since the collapse of the USSR, Estonia has looked to the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland) as examples of progress and modernization. Is Estonia considered to be "Nordic" by Estonian journalists, and to what extent has this idea influenced their reporting?

Current state of research on the topic (max. 1800 characters):

There is only a limited amount of academic literature on Estonia's (self)inclusion as a member of the Nordic bloc. Most of the discussion on this topic comes in the form of news articles, blog posts, and other genres that are informational yet non-academic in nature.

To ascertain the relevance of my RQ, I conducted a brief, preliminary quantitative analysis of how many times "Estonia" and "Nordic" have appeared in English-language news articles since 2000 to the present (2022). I selected this timeframe, as

- (a) 2000 is the year the Estonian Government began a "rebranding" campaign of Estonia, which has sought to portray the country as "Nordic" and "modern," and
- (b) the length of this timeframe allows one to ascertain whether this is an enduring phenomenon.

Articles selected were in English only, as

- (a) this is the sole language I am fluent in, and
- (b) the presence of English-language articles establishes whether this phenomenon is internationally recognized.

Method

Google search

Keywords: "Estonia AND Nordic" "Estonia AND Scandinavia" (search operators "" AND indicate both keywords exactly)

Timeframe: 2000-2022 (specified in search tools)

Findings

There were 29 search hits for “Estonia AND Nordic” and 122 for “Estonia AND Scandinavia.” With 151 total search hits for these keywords in a span of two decades, I believe there to be sufficient grounds for further investigating the links between Estonia and the Nordic world.

Expected theoretical framework (max. 1800 characters):

I would like to draw on **agenda-setting** as my primary theoretical framework, supplemented by **constructionism**.

Agenda-setting describes how the news media influences the importance of topics in the public agenda (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). In my case, I wish to investigate the extent to which Estonian journalists have framed the country as Nordic, or at least a country strongly oriented towards the Nordic region (in government policy, social practices, culture, etc.). Estonia’s history has been closely linked with the Nordic region: are journalists still promoting this connection? Is Estonia’s “Nordic status” a relevant concern for Estonian journalists—and if journalists are not the principal propagators of Estonia’s connection to the Nordic region, who is?

This concern leads to the other theory I wish to draw from. Constructionism posits that “individuals and groups actively create social reality from different information sources,” with journalists playing a vital role in mediating this information flow (Van Gorp, 2010). Constructionism appears relevant to my research, as it can inform how national perceptions of Estonia arise via the interplay of the media and public attitudes in diverse settings. The press, the public, and third-party institutions might all play roles in creating a common conception of Estonia as a “Nordic” society.

Expected methodology, and methods for data gathering and analysis (max. 1800 characters):

I wish to employ **in-depth, semi-structured interviews** with Estonian journalists about:

- (a) their work, especially over the past half-decade;
- (b) their perception of Estonia: their views on its society (internal) and its place in the world (external): Estonia’s relationships with the EU, NATO, the other Baltic states, and the Nordic countries;
- (c) whether they believe there is widespread opinion within Estonia that it is “Nordic,” and why this might be so;
- (d) whether they believe Estonia to be a Nordic country, and how this (non)belief informs their reporting.

I wish to employ qualitative research for three reasons:

- (a) The language barrier: I am fluent only in English, and would be unable to perform a quantitative analysis of news articles in Estonian or another language;
- (b) Lack of previous quantitative research: with little currently available, I believe it important to first establish the parameters for discussing this phenomenon before more narrow, quantitative studies are conducted; and

(c) **Strength of qualitative research:** I believe these interviews can uncover a rich breadth and depth of information that can be drawn upon later for further, more specialized investigation.

I will interview ten Estonian journalists (N=10). The top ten most followed Estonian journalists on Twitter will be selected. The journalists' prominence will help ensure their expressed views are most closely aligned with those of the public.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and each will be given detailed discussion in the text, with special attention paid to their common themes. I will also perform a basic quantitative analysis of the interviews. This analysis will be visualized in either a word cloud, bar chart, or other format I believe relevant to the presentation of the data.

Expected research design (data to be analyzed, for example, the titles of analyzed newspapers and selected time period):

Qualitative case study research design.

Data to be analyzed: Ten (10) semi-structured, in-depth interviews with leading Estonian journalists

Time period of interest: 2016 (election of Kersti Kaljulaid, first female President of Estonia) to 2022 (present).

Expected thesis structure (chapters and subchapters with brief description of their content):

- I. Introduction
 - a. RQ: Since the collapse of the USSR, Estonia has looked to the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland) as examples of progress and modernization. Is Estonia considered to be "Nordic" by Estonian journalists, and to what extent has this idea influenced their reporting?
- II. Literature review
 - a. Defining terms: Baltic, Nordic, Scandinavian, etc.
 - b. Historical connection of Estonia and Nordic countries
 - c. Historical self-perception of Estonians
 - d. Relevance of "Brand Estonia"
- III. Theory and methods
 - a. Agenda-setting: overview and relevance for study
 - b. Constructivism: overview and relevance for study
 - c. Justification for qualitative methods
 - i. Language barrier
 - ii. Lack of previous quantitative research
 - iii. Personal narrative able to uncover wide extent of firsthand knowledge
- IV. Research design
 - a. Description: in-depth semi-structured interviews
- V. Findings
 - a. Analysis of themes from interviews
- VI. Discussion: answering RQ
 - a. Is Estonia considered to be "Nordic" by Estonian journalists, and how has this idea influenced (or not influenced) their reporting?
- VII. Conclusion

Basic literature list (at least 5 most important works related to the topic and the method(s) of analysis; all works should be briefly characterized on 2-5 lines):

Ellefson, M. (2011). Remapping journalism history: Development of the press in the Swedish empire and its former colonies Finland, Estonia and Livonia until the early 20th century. *Medien & Zeit*, 26(4), 25-35. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn%3Anbn%3Ase%3Asu%3Adiva-65969>

- The author examines the history of the Swedish press and its colonies (which included Estonia) during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. In Estonia, the early press was dominated by the Baltic German elite and catered exclusively to their interests. Only in the mid-nineteenth century did genuinely national medias in the former Swedish Empire begin to emerge.

Jansen, Sue Curry. (2008). Designer nations: Neo-liberal nation branding—Brand Estonia. *Social Identities*, 14(1), 121-142. doi:10.1080/13504630701848721

- Jansen describes the rise and prominence of national 'branding' using the case study of post-Soviet Estonia. In tandem with the rapid economic liberalization, Estonia has adopted a new 'brand,' promoting itself as a young, progressive, 'neo-Nordic' country. However, this neoliberal branding obscures the reality of social and economic inequalities still faced by many in the country.

Jordan, Paul. (2014). *The modern fairy tale: Nation branding, national identity and the Eurovision song contest in Estonia*. University of Tartu Press. doi:10.26530/OAPEN_474310

- Jordan uses a case study of Estonia's victory in the 2002 Eurovision contest to explore how Estonia's contemporary branding reflects its pro-European aspirations, even as its demographic tensions (especially Russians) creates tension with Europe's liberal, multicultural paradigm.

Lagerspetz, Mikko. (2003). How many Nordic countries?: Possibilities and limits of geopolitical identity construction. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 38(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836703038001003>

- Published shortly before Estonia's accession to the EU, the article examines the Estonian Government's desire for the country to be construed as 'Nordic' based on cultural similarities with its Nordic neighbors. While the author grants many of these assumptions, Estonia's lack of a Nordic-style welfare state prohibits its full inclusion within the Nordic family of nations.

Pawłusz, E., & Polese, A. (2017). "Scandinavia's best-kept secret." Tourism promotion, nation-branding, and identity construction in Estonia (with a free guided tour of Tallinn Airport). *Nationalities Papers*, 45(5), 873-892. doi:10.1080/00905992.2017.1287167

- What has made Estonia's post-Soviet 'rebranding' campaign successful when compared to other former Eastern Bloc nations? The authors point to three successful components of Estonia's strategy: the country's positioning itself as a member of Europe and the Nordic region; Estonia's 'e-residency' program; and a tourism campaign centered on the country's culinary traditions.

Van Gorp, B. (2010). Strategies to take subjectivity out of framing analysis. In P. D'Angelo & J.A. Kuypers (Eds.), *Doing news framing analysis: Empirical and theoretical perspectives* (pp. 84-109). Routledge.

- Van Gorp describes a culturally informed strategy of removing subjectivity from frame analysis by actively weighing myriad competing frames against each other. He also provides an overview of constructionism, the communicative theory I wish to employ in my study.

Related theses and dissertations (list of B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. theses defended at Charles University or other academic institutions in the last five years):

Curran, T.D.R. (2020). *Competition & transition: Divergent approaches to nation branding in Estonia and Latvia* (Publication No. 1169488) [Master's thesis, Jagellonian University in Krakow]. Charles University Digital Repository.

Novshadyan, A. (2020). *Nation branding and public diplomacy in Estonia*. [Master's thesis, Charles University in Prague]. Charles University Digital Repository.

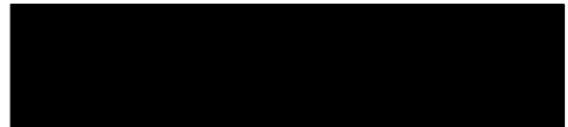
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THIS PART TO BE FILLED BY THE ACADEMIC SUPERVISOR:

I confirm that I have consulted this research proposal with the author and that the proposal is related to my field of expertise at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

I agree to be the Thesis supervisor.



Surname and name of the supervisor

Further recommendations related to the topic, structure and methods for analysis:

Further recommendations of literature related to the topic:

The research proposal has to be printed, signed and submitted to the FSV UK registry office (podatelna) in two copies, by **November 15, 2021**, addressed to the Program Coordinator. Accepted research proposals have to be picked up at the Program Coordinator's Office, Mgr. Sandra Štefaniková. The accepted research proposal needs to be included in the hard copy version of the submitted thesis.

RESEARCH PROPOSALS NEED TO BE APPROVED BY THE HEAD OF ERASMUS MUNDUS JOURNALISM PROGRAM.

The first time I heard the word “Nordic country” was from a children's play made in 1969, and shown on TV afterwards in Soviet Estonia. It was made on the basis of Swedish author Astrid Lindgren’s “Pippi Longstocking”... They had a song where Pippi and her friends are singing, “Northern country, our homeland...” and so on, and all of us immediately understood it that clearly this is not a children’s song about Sweden, but this is basically a song that tells between the lines that Estonia is not part of Russia and belongs to Europe. You could put this subversive message in children’s plays back at that time, and so they had subliminal effects on people... This song is still hugely popular for the same reason—they play it in (the) Song Festival, and that tells you something about what Nordic identity means. What I’m trying to say it’s basically synonymous with European democracy in a very large sense.

—Kaarel Kressa

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Introduction

In a 1999 speech to the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, then-Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves announced Estonia's identity as part of a wider European region he dubbed "Yule-land." Marked by the presence of the word *yule* and its variants in local languages to describe the midwinter solstice/Christmas season, "Yule-land," according to Ilves, bears several cultural characteristics that distinguish it from other European regions to the east and south:

Brits, Scandinavians, Finns, Estonians consider themselves rational, logical, unencumbered by emotional arguments; we are businesslike, stubborn and hard-working. Our southern neighbors see us as too dry and serious, workaholics, lacking passion and *joie de vivre* [...] Clearly the case is to be made that these Protestant, high-tech oriented countries form a Huntingtonian sub-civilization, different from both its southern and eastern neighbors. The long, dark and cold winter nights of Yule-land, inhospitable as they were to our ancestors' lives in agrarian societies, have produced a similar mindset and a culture geared to the demands of a modern, globalized economy. Indeed one could say that Yulelanders are the new wave of Europe.

What was Ilves' motive for issuing these striking claims?

Ilves' speech, entitled "Estonia as a Nordic Country," should tell us everything we need to know. Since the collapse of the USSR, in which Estonia was incorporated as the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, a concerted effort has been underway to identify the country as Nordic, bringing it into alignment, partnership, and popular identification with the Nordic countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland. In making this realignment, Estonia wishes to accomplish two principal objectives: firstly, to "rebrand" itself as a progressive, modern society such as the Nordic countries are commonly assumed to be, instead of remaining in the popular imagination as an "East European," "post-Soviet" society; and secondly, at a deeper level, to assert a claimed rightful place in the Nordic family of countries, based on the cultural traits and historical links Estonia shares with them.

In this Thesis, I draw upon historical and cultural research, and the communicative theories of nation branding, agenda-setting, and constructionism to explore the diffusion of the "Nordic Estonia" idea through Estonian society. Agenda-setting and

constructionism offer explanations of how journalists and media professionals interact with the public to create social narratives; hence, this study researches the perspectives and opinions of Estonian journalists on the promotion of Nordic Estonia in recent years. Indeed, Estonia's push for its inclusion in the Nordic world and its cultural characteristics has begun to yield fruit. Unlike many countries in the Soviet bloc, Estonia has become renowned and emulated worldwide for its embrace of digitalization. Technologies and services originating in Estonia that have advanced twenty-first century digital culture—including Skype, Wise, and Bolt—have given Estonia a reputational boost from its Soviet past (Pawłusz & Polese, 2017). Yet Estonia is a small country, both in terms of land area and population. Despite its high HDI, it remains poorer than its wealthy Nordic neighbors, and has begun to make contributions to world culture only very recently. Social attitudes in Estonia are more conservative than those of the Nordics, and openness to foreigners is relatively low (Puranen, 2016).

For these reasons, I believe it important to uncover more data on the current sociopolitical trajectory of Estonia. While quantitative data about contemporary Estonia is abundant, little qualitative research on the same topic appears to be extant. Thus, I have conducted a qualitative case study and critically analyzed themes, attitudes, and perspectives gleaned from interviews with six Estonian journalists. My **research questions** for this study are as follows:

***RQ1.** Since its restoration of independence, Estonia has looked to the Nordic countries as examples of progress and modernization in the hope of also being considered Nordic itself. Is Estonia considered to be “Nordic” by Estonian journalists, and to what extent has this idea influenced their reporting?*

***RQ2.** How have social, political, economic, and historical factors interfaced with contemporary journalism to establish, or not establish, the idea of Nordic Estonia?*

As an American of Estonian heritage, I have a vested interest in learning about the social and political dynamics of Estonia, where family of mine remain. Having also lived in Denmark during the first year of the Mundus Journalism degree program, I can attest to the notable cultural similarities between Estonia and the Nordic region proper, as well as their differences. As an aspiring communications professional who wants to live and work in Northern Europe, I wish to explore the intersection of journalistic communication with relevant political, cultural, and historical phenomena. It is my hope this qualitative study and resultant thesis, however brief, can provide some general contours or parameters on

this subject by which further, quantitative research of a narrower scope can be conducted. It is also my hope that this study can shed light on a still little-known European country and contribute—even in a small way—to the cause of pan-European solidarity and cross-cultural understanding, at a time when such endeavors are of utmost importance.

1. Literature Review

The following Literature Review prefaces the description of my study and is divided into three main sections: §1.1, *Defining terms*, providing operational definitions of potentially unclear or confusing terminology so as to establish a firm basis for my research and analysis; §1.2, *Estonia's Nordic connections*, which provides relevant historical and contemporaneous background information about Estonia's connections to the Nordic region; and §1.3, *Brand Estonia and the "modern fairy tale,"* a discussion of Estonia's national rebranding campaign—which, although lying outside the scope of journalism studies, describes an important communications-related development in recent Estonian history I believe is vital for understanding my research subject.

1.1 Defining terms

There are a few key terms that appear frequently throughout this Thesis: *Nordic countries*, *ECE*, *Baltic states*, and *social democracy*. Due to their political implications, however, the definitions of all these terms vary depending on context. To ensure clarity regarding their use in this Thesis, I provide operational definitions for each of these terms below.

The term *Nordic countries* and its derivatives (*Norden*, the Nordic region, the Nordics) indicates the countries of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland. All five nations cooperate in the Nordic Council,¹ testifying to the close cultural, geographical, and political ties they share (Nordic Co-operation, 2023). Meanwhile, *Scandinavia* possesses narrower geological and cultural components than *Norden*. It consists only of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, the latter two lying on the Scandinavian Peninsula and Denmark immediately to the south (Augustyn, Das, et al., 2022). These countries are the homeland of the North Germanic language family and historically have been the political driving forces of the Nordic region. They were cojoined in the Kalmar Union of 1397-1523 and have existed in various combinations with each other over the centuries (Jain & Rodriguez, 2023). I propose that one can imagine Scandinavia as the "heart" of the Nordics due to the political and cultural power it has wielded over this region for centuries, and Finland and Iceland the "periphery," as the latter two possess a heritage of colonization and domination by Scandinavia. Thus, the Nordic region can

¹ The Nordic Council also includes membership of Greenland, the Faeroe Islands and Åland. However, these are dependencies of Denmark and Finland, respectively.

also be considered to *consist of Scandinavia, and the countries in which Scandinavia has historically exerted maximal influence*. While Estonia might fit into *Norden* as a country peripheral to Scandinavia, along with Finland and Iceland, I argue Estonia cannot be considered a Scandinavian country even if Nordic, due to the stricter geographical and cultural components of Scandinavia vis-à-vis the Nordics. Thus, to avoid confusion, I will refrain from using the term “Scandinavia” in this text as much as possible, and will use “Nordic” instead, as the issue at hand is Estonia’s inclusion in the wider Nordic region, not Scandinavia.

The *Baltic states* consist of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, all lying on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea.² Despite their geographical proximity, small geographical and population sizes, and historical commonalities, these countries also possess important differences. Most notably, the Latvian and Lithuanian languages are Indo-European, whereas Estonian, like Finnish, is a Uralic language. Present-day Estonia and Latvia fell under German military influence during the Middle Ages and later became provinces of the Swedish Empire, but Lithuania was a powerful grand duchy that comprised half of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Bater et al., 2023; Misiunas et al., 2023). The divergences in history and language between the Baltic states have provided ample grounds for Estonia to claim a Nordic heritage in post-independence years, as will be discussed further.

Eastern-Central Europe (ECE) is a cultural-geographical space consisting of the eastern portion of the European continent (excluding European Russia) that has historically been under Germanic and Slavic domination, and more recently fell under Soviet influence during the Cold War. While many Westerners refer to this region as “Eastern Europe,” Antonyuk (2018) argues ECE “differs significantly” from the countries of “natural Eastern Europe in the political, socioeconomic and cultural context” (p. 22). Despite its northerly geographical position, Estonia is occasionally considered a part of Central Europe, and by extension ECE. *Central Europe* is often defined as being located “between Western Europe and Northern Eurasia...and between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea” (Antonyuk, 2018, p. 15). In this text, I will use “ECE” when referring to Estonia’s position within the former Soviet bloc, and “Eastern Europe” as a competing identity with “Nordic Europe” in Estonia.

² According to Ilves, Finland was also considered a Baltic country prior to its “Nordicization” process by Sweden in the early twentieth century (1999).

Finally, *social democracy* is a political-economic system “espous[ing] state regulation, rather than state ownership, of the means of production and extensive social welfare programs” (Duignan, Gaur, et al., 2022). It is considered a defining feature of the social, political, and economic regimes of the Nordic countries (Lagerspetz, 2003). The so-called “Nordic model” of social and economic governance within the Nordic region is consistently considered by researchers to exemplify social-democratic principles (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2016). Ryner argues the social-democratic Nordic model consists of the following six principal components: *Guaranteed income* independent of market forces; *Public commitment* to employment promotion; *Welfare state universalism* to counter social stratification; *Large social service sectors*; *Women-friendly policies*; and *Class compromise* between capital, labor, and agrarian interests (2007, pp. 62-63). However, the Nordic model has also been increasingly subject to market forces, especially since the 1990s, leading to potential paradoxes within the Nordic countries’ self-conceptions (Kvist & Greve, 2011). Because of the close association between social democracy and the Nordic model, I use “social democracy” in this text to refer *specifically* to the Nordic model defined by Ryner’s six characteristics, especially in the context of Estonia’s internal debate about its current and future economic policies.

1.2 Estonia’s Nordic connections

Estonia, lying outside the Scandinavian heartland of the Nordic region and being perhaps one of its peripheral countries, can only receive its “Nordic status” via Scandinavian influence as described above. Thus, the RQs should be approached through the lens of Estonia having received sufficient political domination and cultural influence from Scandinavia over time obtain a “Nordic” designation. In other words, has enough Scandinavian influence “rubbed off” on Estonia for it to be considered Nordic? This Chapter presents a case for Estonia’s Nordicity from historical evidence and contemporary social practices. But the data found in Chapter 3 provides further clarification on this matter, whether through the study respondents’ confirmation, refutation, or qualification of Estonia’s alleged Nordicity. In the following subsections, I present a brief overview of Estonia’s early and modern connections with the Nordic region (§1.2.1, §1.2.2); its contemporary cultural parallels with the Nordic region (§1.2.3), and its national self-perception today (§1.2.4).

1.2.1 Early Estonian history

Notable connections with Nordic culture have occurred early and often through Estonia's history. Swedish Vikings raided the Baltic coast in the early Middle Ages, and Estonian pirates in turn preyed on Scandinavian settlements. Yet colonization proper in Estonia first occurred by a German religious-military order, the Brothers of the Sword, in the early thirteenth century. This marked the beginning of a 700-year ongoing German influence in Estonia—first under the Brothers, then the Teutonic Knights, and later under the Baltic German landowning nobility, who maintained their power and privileges through the Middle Ages to the eras of Swedish and Russian imperialism (Smogorzewski et al., 2023).

More Nordic influence arrived in Estonia when the Danish King Valdemar II conquered the northern portion of Estonia in 1219. A popular legend in both countries recounts how the Danish flag fell from heaven during the King's crusade against the pagan Estonians. A memorial in Tallinn, Estonia's capital, marks the spot of this alleged miracle, and the very name "Tallinn" itself likely means "Danish town" (Vidović, 2021). The Danes continued to hold northern Estonia through the Middle Ages, while the south (Livonia, which also included present-day Latvia) was dominated by the Teutonic Knights and their bishops. In the sixteenth century, Livonia was acquired by Poland-Lithuania while the north remained under Swedish rule, but by the seventeenth century, the entire territory of present-day Estonia was under Sweden's grasp (Smogorzewski et al., 2023).

Between Danish and Swedish rule, Estonia has been under Nordic influence longer than Russian influence, in both its Czarist and Communist manifestations. Indeed, Sweden's rule in Estonian history has been mythologized as the "good old Swedish times" (Vidović, 2021; Smogorzewski et al., 2023). Yet this period of Scandinavian influence in Estonia was intermittent and inconsistent compared to that in Finland, Estonia's close geographical and linguistic neighbor. Finland was under Swedish rule nearly continually for six hundred years, from 1323 to 1809. Finland was incorporated into the Russian Empire a full century later than Estonia, and of course never experienced a Russian-derived Communist regime (Henriksson, 2023). Finland also never encountered either German or Polish political regimes, Estonia's principal connections to Central Europe.

However, it should be noted that much of Scandinavian culture is closely connected with German culture—perhaps most notably the Lutheran faith, which has

exerted a massive cultural influence over the Nordic region, Estonia, and Latvia (Lagerspetz, 2003). Extremely close political ties also existed between the Scandinavian monarchies and those in Germany—for example, the Danish royal house of Glücksburg originated in Germany, and the Danish monarch ruled the now-German territories of Schleswig and Holstein for centuries (Linton & Nokkentved, 2023). German economic domination throughout the Nordic region was also exemplified by the Hanseatic League, which maintained its presence in numerous Scandinavian, German, Polish and Baltic cities, including Tallinn (Hibbert, 2022). As the lines between “German” and “Nordic” cultures are not so easily demarcated, especially in retrospect, perhaps the question of Estonia receiving explicitly Scandinavian influence as the determiner for its Nordic status might be missing the mark. Perhaps a better way to approach the question is to assume a common Germanic heritage from which explicitly an explicitly Nordic culture sprang, one in which Estonia might participate (or not) today.

1.2.2 Modern Estonian history

Because of its long domination by foreign powers, Estonian nationalism developed only quite recently, during the nineteenth-century Romantic era, and then in tandem with and imitation of concurrent Finnish and Baltic German trends (Ellefson, 2015). Furthermore, while it subsists off popular feeling and common cultural or genetic traits, nationalism is often envisaged by intellectuals—writers, poets, politicians, priests, journalists—and disseminated via their writings to the public (Jordan, 2014). In Estonia, the press had been dominated by Swedish, Baltic German, and Russian elements since the eighteenth century, but in the next hundred years, the first Estonian journalism began to appear. The Estonian journalists of this period, who tended to be politically active in progressive circles, spoke for the rights of Estonians against the Czarist Russian imperialism of the time and the local Baltic German elite (Ellefson, 2015).

With the advent of World War I, a crucial figure in the history of Estonian nationalism emerged: Alexander Kesküla, a Bolshevik sympathizer and spy of Estonian origin who switched allegiances during the conflict as was expedient. Kesküla was ultimately spurred by nationalist motivations, however: he was not only an Estonian patriot, but a Nordic regionalist who envisaged a future “Greater Estonia” under the benevolent rule of a “Greater Sweden,” which would encompass Finland and the eastern Baltic region. For Kesküla, this was no mere fantasy, as his vision for Estonia as a land within “Greater Sweden” had historical justification, as this is exactly what Estonia had

been for centuries (Kuldkepp, 2014). The myth of the “good old Swedish times,” in which Swedes (in contrast to Russians) had protected Estonian peasants against the “arbitrariness of their immediate overlords, the Baltic German nobility,” was also a hopeful fable in which the “true” culture-bearers to Estonia had been the Swedes, not the Germans, and that “this positive Swedish legacy had somehow remained and been kept alive in Estonian minds and souls” (p. 17).

This was an identity that also had political implications. Already in pre-national Estonian folk stories and legends about the “good old Swedish times,” one can often see something approaching a prophetic dimension—the hope that, in some way, the good Swedish times would be coming back (Kuldkepp, 2014, 17).

Although his dream faltered, Kesküla’s vision indicated that at least a significant subset of Estonians viewed their country’s destiny as linked with the Nordics. For Kesküla, Estonia’s connection to the Nordics (particularly “benevolent” Sweden) was so meaningful that he was willing to sacrifice Estonia’s national sovereignty on the altar of (imagined) Swedish imperialism. In fact, Kesküla’s rival Jan Tõnisson, who served as the Estonian Ambassador to Sweden, “never criticized Kesküla for his Nordic ambitions” (Kuldkepp, 2014, p. 21).

In the interwar period, Estonia established close diplomatic and cultural ties with the Nordics, particularly Finland, which was the first country to recognize Estonia’s independence following the Tartu Treaty of 1920 (Kuusik, 2020). Estonia’s first period of independence was short-lived, and the decades-long Soviet occupation began in 1944. During the nearly five decades of Soviet rule, Estonian identity was heavily suppressed. Nevertheless, Estonians in the northern and western parts of the country were able to consume media broadcast from Finland and Sweden due to lax censorship policies from the Soviet government (E. Berends, personal interview, November 16, 2022). While a riveting moment of pan-Baltic solidarity occurred in the “Baltic Way” demonstration of 1989—the formation of the longest unbroken human chain in history from Estonia to Lithuania in protest of the Soviet regime—prospects for Baltic unity were quelled when the Estonian government began aligning the country with the Nordics in the post-independence years, as part of its efforts to integrate with the EU and NATO and provide the country a reputational boost. These efforts will be discussed further in §1.3.

1.2.3 Contemporary culture and society

How might “Nordicness” defined in a twenty-first century context and, per my RQs, would Estonia fit this definition? Lagerspetz (2003) helpfully provides a table offering eight characteristics of Nordicity (p. 57):

Table 1

The Nordic Identity is Based on . . .

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
1. Geographical location	×	×	(×)
2. Historical ties	×	×	—
3. Linguistic affinity	(×)	—	—
4. Lutheran faith	×	(×)	—
5. Social development (the Nordic model)	—	—	—
6. Nordic cooperative organs	(×)	(×)	(×)
7. Legal and administrative tradition (municipal self-determination; the rule of law)	(×)	(×)	?
8. Gender equality	—	—	—

Note: The obvious or relative presence of an element of Nordic identity is indicated by ‘×’ and ‘(×)’ respectively. The sign ‘—’ stands for the absence of an element. The question of the relationship is left open, which is shown by ‘?’.

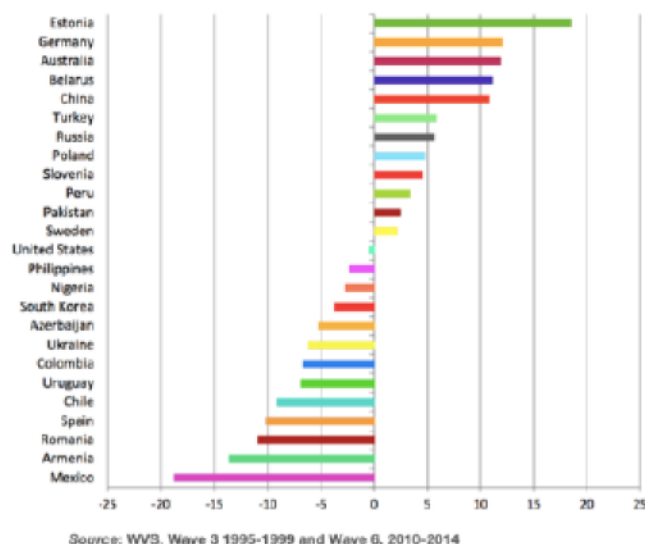
By Lagerspetz’ standard, Estonia wholly fulfills three of the eight criteria and partially fulfills another three. Twenty years from the publication of Lagerspetz’ article, we could perhaps add another (X) next to *Gender equality* on account of Estonia’s election of both a female President and Prime Minister since 2016, a 30 percent female representation in the 2023 Parliament, and the national adoption of the world’s most generous maternity leave program (ERR News, 2023; WEP, 2020). The decrease of corruption in Estonia (see below) might also warrant an X sans parenthesis for *Legal and administrative tradition*. Lagerspetz’ useful criteria thus allow us to track the development of Nordicness over time in the Baltic states and, by this measure, Estonia appears to be developing in a Nordic direction. That said, Lagerspetz misses an important dimension of his analysis: Nordic *social values*, of which gender equality and the rule of law are only a part. Are these values present in contemporary Estonian society and, if so, how?

At a 2016 convention co-hosted by the Nordic Council of Ministers in Estonia and the Tartu University Centre for Ethics, Swedish social scientist Bi Puranen delivered a presentation on Estonia’s gradual yet ongoing adoption of Nordic social values. Among these is interpersonal trust, as *Norden* currently has the world’s highest interpersonal trust

levels. According to Puranen, Estonia’s interpersonal trust level is about that of a typical Western European country, a level not associated with the Nordic region. However, Estonia is also where one of the world’s most profound shifts in level of interpersonal trust has occurred in recent decades (see Figure 2 below). This increase in trust parallels Estonia’s improved corruption ranking, now one of the world’s lowest: as of 2022, Transparency International ranks it 14 worldwide, and the Global Corruption Index ranks it fifth—one place below Denmark, and three above Iceland. Finally, as of 2022, Estonia was rated by the World Press Freedom Index as having one of the freest media ecosystems, a distinction it shares along with several Nordic countries (Vahtla, 2022). Thus, in many though not all respects, Estonia appears to be rapidly “catching up” with *Norden* regarding its national social ethics—or, perhaps, decades of independence have begun to reveal underlying, long-suppressed cultural tendencies. That said, socially conservative attitudes, suspicion of government, and the popularity of neoliberalism over the social democratic model remain common in Estonia, as will be discussed further in this Literature Review and subsequent Data Analysis.

Figure 2. Excerpt from Puranen (2016) displaying the level of change in interpersonal trust in several countries across two waves of the World Values Survey. Estonia’s data, located at the top, indicates a nearly 20-point increase in interpersonal trust within the specified timeframe.

Change in share that “trust most people” between 1995-1999 and 2010-2014



Perhaps the most important aspect of Estonia’s contemporary political, social, and economic life has been the presence of *e-government* since the early 2000s. Envisioned

by Ilves during his presidential term and implemented by then-Prime Minister Mart Laar, Estonia's e-government was and is intended to "provide transparent and easy-to-access public sector services to its citizens and also to ensure [an] attractive business environment for entrepreneurs" (Kimmo et al., 2018, p. 421). Besides providing citizen services, Estonia's e-government was intended as a "product" to be proffered on the global marketplace:

For small countries such as Estonia, which are often lacking natural resources for sale, it is important to find and promote very unique and niche products, services or specializations. Estonia has definitely found its own niche in ICT and e-governance. Estonia spreads the message of being a country with well-developed ICT sector and e-governance system through international media and own resources addressing international investors and business, other countries' governments, international students, and professionals (Kimmo et al., 2018, p. 426).

In 2014, the initiative was expanded into *e-residency*, in which entrepreneurs from any country can gain "digital residency" in Estonia via a special ID card. Estonia's e-government and e-residency programs have allowed the country to "mov[e] its services internationally, increase[e] worldwide awareness of Estonia success in the field and attract businesses and investments to the country" (Kimmo et al., 2018, p. 419). Estonia's e-government and e-residency programs have thus portrayed the country with a progressive, digitalized, high-tech identity—far more in line with popular conceptions of Nordic Europe than those of post-Soviet Eastern Europe. It should be noted, however, that a slew of government-derived PR has trumpeted the implementation of Estonia's e-governance. The digitalization of government bureaucracy has not equated with the elimination of bureaucracy altogether, and Estonia's self-conception of being an "e-Narnia" is less ideal in real life than is promoted in the global imagination (Vaarik, 2015 as cited in Dresechler, 2018).

Finally, Estonia's closest political tie to the Nordic region today consists of its membership in Nordic-Baltic Eight bloc, or NB8. An outgrowth of the Nordic Council, NB8 brings the five Nordic countries together in partnership with the three Baltic states to "discuss important regional and international issues in an informal atmosphere" (Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The Nordic Council also maintains branch offices in Estonia that have been highly active in promoting Nordic culture, values, and cooperation in Estonia since 1991 (Nordics in Estonia, 2021).

1.2.4 The question of national identity

National identity is a part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his/her knowledge of his/her membership of a national group together with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership. In other words, national identity is an answer to the question "who am I by national belonging" (Valk, 2017).

Aune Valk provides this definition of "national identity" in the introduction to his study on the state of national identity in Estonia. Commissioned by the Estonian Government as part of its 2017 Human Development Report, Valk explores the contemporary meaning of Estonian identity among different age and ethnic cohorts.³ Valk's research indicates that since the late 1990s, Estonian national identity—at least for ethnic Estonians—has been predicated on linguistic nationalism (the prevalence of the Estonian language) and an orientation toward the European Union, particularly the Nordic region. Further, of 2017, an approximately equal number of Estonians consider themselves "Nordic" as "Baltic." While belief in Estonia's Nordicness is less pronounced among Estonia's Russian community, a strong sense of belonging to the EU, even Western Europe, is especially significant among its younger members. In short, Estonian identity has become more multifaceted and cosmopolitan among Estonian youth regardless of ethnicity, in that one's Estonian identity can overlap with less traditional or less stereotypical ideas of Estonianness:

To be Estonian and proud about it, no longer requires to be confronted against something or somebody other. The identity of Estonians is still related to language and land, while fighting (for independence) and differentiation have been replaced by valuing its culture and people (Valk, 2017).

It should be noted, however, that Valk's research was published five years before Russia's invasion of Ukraine commenced. The integration of Estonia's Russians has hindered the cause of national unity since 1991, with many ethnic Estonians continuing to view ethnic Russians as a foreign "fifth column" who are insufficiently loyal to the Estonian language and culture, the Estonian State, and the political causes most ethnic Estonians support, such as Ukraine in its current war of self-defense against Russia (Boffey, 2022). In

³ Estonia's ethnic demography is approximately 69 percent ethnic Estonian and 25 percent ethnic Russian, with the remaining percentage consisting of other ethnicities (Kööma et al., 2023).

hindsight, Valk's conclusion that a sense of "confrontation" is absent from contemporary Estonian nationhood was likely premature.

In conclusion, Estonian ethnic-national identity has been marked both by small-state "petty" nationalism, particularly regarding the Estonian language, as well as a sense of regionalism directed particularly toward the Nordic countries, although the status of Estonian Russians within this paradigm remains unclear. Nevertheless, it is apparent that a significant component of contemporary Estonian identity consists of Estonia's cultural affinity with and idealized participation in *Norden*. I now turn to discussion of a government policy that cemented this tendency toward Nordic cooperation and inclusion in post-independence Estonia.

1.3 Brand Estonia and the "modern fairy tale"

In 2001, Estonia emerged the victor in the Eurovision Song Contest, the first of the former Soviet republics to do so. This win resulted in widespread national jubilation, but also left the country with an important task: hosting Eurovision in 2002. In the opening celebrations for Tallinn Eurovision—coordinated in large part with Swedish financial assistance—Estonia portrayed itself as an embodiment of a "modern fairy tale," a Cinderella or Snow White who had been victimized for years by a wicked witch or cruel stepmother—a not-unsubtle reference to the USSR. Now, however, after suffering many tribulations, Estonia had achieved its "happily ever after" of peace, freedom, and prosperity. To shed the trappings of Estonia's past traumas, it was considered necessary by the government and business community to pivot immediately to a new identity for Estonia: an identity divorced entirely from its Eastern, Soviet past, one linked with prosperity and progress, and—crucially—one that wasn't allegedly new for Estonia at all. This new identity was to be Nordic, and the means to create this identity was "Brand Estonia" (Jordan, 2014).

Brand Estonia is a premier example of the nation-branding trend that has gained increased prominence in the twenty-first century. *Nation branding* is the act of creating favorable images of countries through marketing communications (Anholt, 2013, p. 1). According to Polese et al. (2017), nation branding has three main intentions: it repositions the state geographically and confers its international legitimacy; it advances economic development; and it compensates for negativity associated with the country (pp. 27-28). Nation branding is thus a form of soft power (Jordan, 2014). *Soft power*, as opposed to hard power, is the means through which a country obtains international influence and

manifests its foreign policy goals through methods other than military might, particularly via a cultural or informational agenda (*ibid.*). Soft power and hard power can be closely linked as in Estonia's case, which used soft power in the form of nation-branding to assist its accession to NATO, an important step for the country's external security (Polese et al., 2017). Status and reputation management has also been recognized as a key driver in world politics, with Great Powers often engaging in calculated strategy to bolster their country's image, either while in a state rise or state of decline (Krickovic & Chang, 2020). Estonia is obviously far from a Great Power in stature, but it has been in a state of economic and political rise since 1991 and has thus sought to increase its international status accordingly. Where a declining Great Power might wield its hard power (as Russia has in Ukraine) or another, rising Great Power might refrain from doing so (as China has vis-à-vis Taiwan)—both to increase their global status⁴—a small country such as Estonia can compensate for its lack of hard power in its use of soft power. Such an endeavor would ideally allow the small country to win much-needed military and economic allies and enhance its international reputation.

Due to its small size and vulnerable position in the aftermath of the USSR's collapse, Estonia needed self-promotion and international visibility to be a viable competitor on the global marketplace, ensure its national security, and increase its chance of acceptance as a fully Western, European, and potentially Nordic country. Brand Estonia, launched in 2000 by Enterprise Estonia, a division of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, was the initial means by which this promotion occurred. Occurring during Mart Laar's term as Prime Minister, who was also responsible for the launch of Estonian e-government, the branding campaign was a collaboration between London-based firm Interbrand and Tallinn-based Emor (Novshadyan, 2020). As testament to the importance the government placed in this project, Interbrand was granted a budget of €850,000 (Jansen, 2008). This was only a part of the €2.3M Estonia invested in its branding campaign—a marked contrast to its neighbor Latvia, which budgeted only €500,000 for its own, contemporaneous branding efforts (Curran, 2020). There were multifaceted aspects to Brand Estonia: as in other former Soviet states, Estonia's rebranding campaign was intended, first and foremost, to “redefine relationships with the Western world,

⁴ The reputation or status a Great Power desires does not necessarily have to be a positive or friendly one. Russia has been internationally ostracized since its invasion of Ukraine but is nonetheless regarded by the West as a formidable force once again, which, from Russia's perspective, had not been the case since the collapse of the USSR (Krickovic & Chang, 2020).

overcome the negative image of socialism, and, often, further support European integration” (Pawlusz & Polese, 2017 and Kaneva, 2011, as cited by Polese et al., 2017, p. 29). More particularly, Brand Estonia was intended to position the country as Nordic by linking Estonia with the positively perceived business climate of the Nordic region, and emphasizing its e-government and e-residency programs (Polese et al., 2017, p. 34). The digitalized society of the future that Estonia promoted, coupled with the rapid free-market reforms of the turbulent 1990s and a strong entrepreneurial spirit, provided fertile soil in which a national rebranding campaign could take root. As Jansen notes,

Estonia was especially ripe for promotion, and had already undergone Freidmanesque free-market reforms before the branding campaign began. What it needed was international visibility, not psycho-sociological reengineering (2008, p. 129).

Why didn't Estonia embrace a *Baltic* identity, however? At first glance, Estonia's self-promotion as a thriving Baltic country with a burgeoning economy in close partnership with its neighbors Latvia and Lithuania would appear to be a viable nation-branding route. Besides potentially dispelling the negative public image of the region, a pan-Baltic initiative would have doubtlessly allowed the three small countries to draw closer in political, economic, military, and cultural matters. Yet a pan-Baltic identity and Estonia's place in it was not to be. The intensely negative reputation of the Baltic region in the 1990s and the correspondingly positive reputation of the Nordics was enough for Estonia to shift its alignment from the Baltic region to *Norden* almost immediately. At one level, Estonia believed its reputation would be undermined by its continued international perception as a “Baltic country” at a vulnerable, pivotal time in its national development. At another, more existential one, Estonia believed its national security and sovereignty would be gravely threatened if, on account of it being perceived as a “Baltic” or “Eastern European” backwater, it was not permitted access to Western capital and its associated institutions such as the EU and NATO (Curran, 2020). Thus, Estonia believed it was in its best interest as a rapidly digitalizing society with ample connections to the Nordic region to wield soft power via Brand Estonia to adopt a Nordic identity, one “already associated with high levels of confidence in the global marketplace,” rather than a pan-Baltic identity, “when Latvia and Lithuania were seen by the existing members of the European Union and NATO as not meeting their targets for accession to those institutions” (ibid., p. 35).

In hindsight, it appears the dream of pan-Baltic unity was likely dead upon arrival. In the same manner and time that Estonia leveraged its connections to *Norden* and particularly Finland to promote itself as Nordic rather than Eastern European, Lithuania also leveraged its historic connections to Poland to associate itself with Central rather than Eastern Europe (*ibid.*). With Estonia's pivot toward *Norden* and Lithuania's toward Central Europe, this left Latvia holding the bag: of the three Baltic states, only Latvia sought and promoted a pan-Baltic identity in its nation-branding efforts. However, Latvia's messaging did not have the same impact as Estonia's due to several factors: an insufficient budget provided for its branding campaign; lack of knowledge on the part of the Oxford University business graduates who were conducting the branding campaign; and—tragically—a self-undermining of its national narrative by portraying Latvian national identity as culturally dependent on Russia, rather than as an autonomous phenomenon (*ibid.*).

1.3.1 Brand Estonia 2.0?

The bulk of the Brand Estonia project, intended to boost the country's image immediately ahead of Tallinn Eurovision, lasted only about two years, and was quickly scaled down when Laar departed office and a new PM assumed power. Whether or not Brand Estonia delivered tangible results is debatable: Interbrand (unsurprisingly) claims it did, but other metrics suggest that it did little to spur foreign investment in the country or positive perceptions of the country among foreign tourists (Jansen, 2008).

Despite the demise of Brand Estonia proper, however, its spirit lives on. Enterprise Estonia has continued its activities unabated, continuing to promote the country using an officially sanctioned *Eesti Stiil* (Estonian Style) guide, originally published in 2001. Quite ambitiously, this style guide has sought to portray Estonia's seemingly essential Nordicness through an aesthetic that engages with popular tropes about the Nordic region:

The handbook explains the rationale behind this slogan as an attempt to encapsulate the idea that Estonia is, in its most essential form, in possession of “a Nordic temperament and environment.” This includes windswept vistas, snow-covered forests, minimalist cathedrals, and clean streets, in addition to a bevy of blonde citizens (Curran, 2020, p. 40).

As an example of *Eesti Stiil* in action, we can look no further than the home page of Estonia's official website, www.estonia.ee, as it portrays the “Nordic” aesthetic Enterprise Estonia wishes to cultivate:

Figure 3

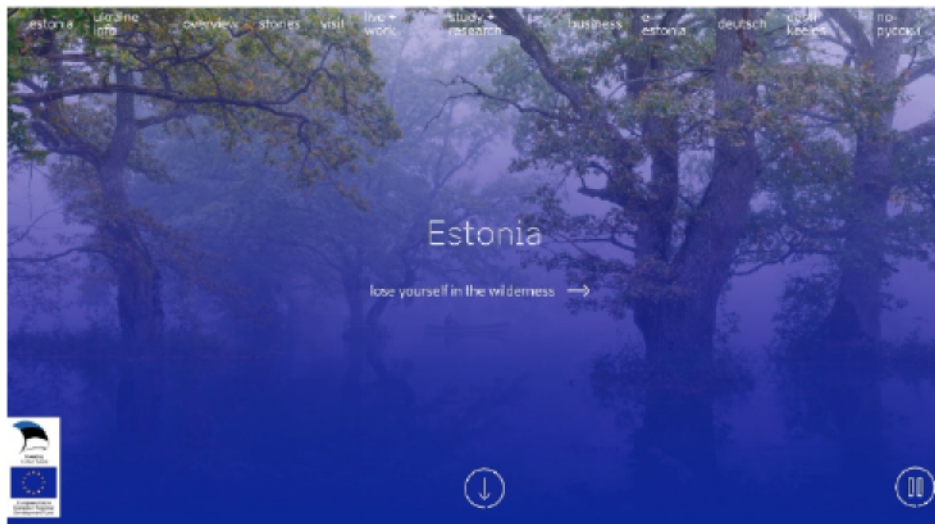
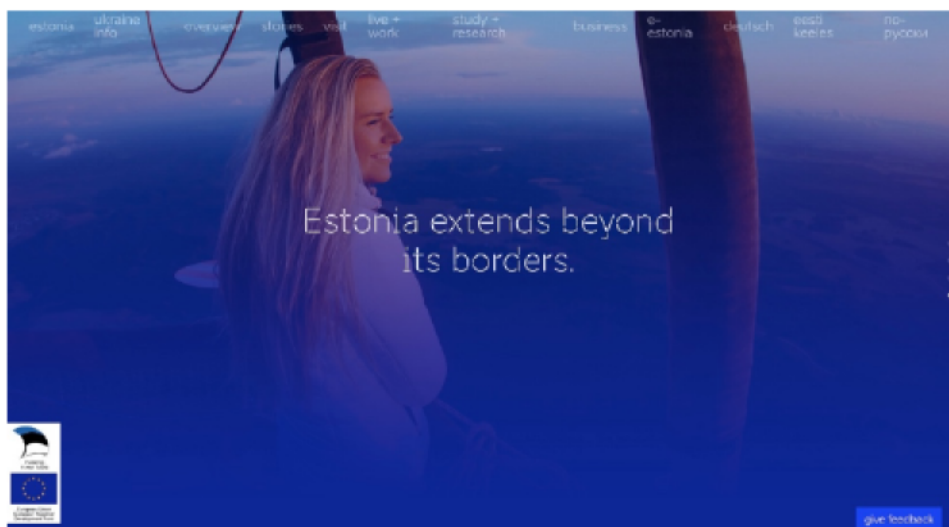


Figure 4



The viewer is immediately struck by sleek, modern graphic design. Cool blue shades permeate the imagery, doubtlessly intended to reflect the blue of Estonia's flag, the blue of the Baltic Sea, and perhaps the "coolness" of a northern temperament. A blonde woman—playing off a common stereotype about the Nordic region—enjoys a hot-air balloon ride, exemplifying unique experiences one is presumably able to enjoy in Estonia. Messages in a trendy font urge the reader to "lose yourself in the wilderness" and declare that Estonia's borders extend beyond itself, a testament to an allegedly cosmopolitan, ecological, open, and digitalized society fully enmeshed within the twenty-first century.

Despite the Nordic-inspired sleekness of Estonia's current branding, *Eesti Stiil* makes an important admission through a curious rhetorical strategy: it

“problematizes...Nordic qualities, characterising them as ‘boring and clinical,’ and offer[s] up Estonian ‘quirkiness, irony and experimentation’ as the antidote” (Curran, 2020, p. 40). This rhetoric reveals a particular weakness or insecurity on Enterprise Estonia’s part—that Estonia might not actually be a Nordic country at all. This, the Achilles heel of Brand Estonia, threatens to undermine Estonia’s international credibility: “[I]n attempting to establish itself as a Nordic country, Estonia must first acknowledge that this is not consistent with its existing perception within the international, or even regional, imaginary” (ibid., p. 49). Internal surveys conducted by Enterprise Estonia found that, contrary to the campaign’s intent, a sense of Nordicness was insufficiently present in Estonia for it to be considered as such:

[T]he [*Eesti Stiil*] handbook notes from the outset that Estonia is ‘becoming increasingly similar to the Nordic countries,’ implying simultaneously that it is not, in fact, a Nordic country but that there is a temporal process of realisation of a Nordic identity that is underway (ibid., p. 41).

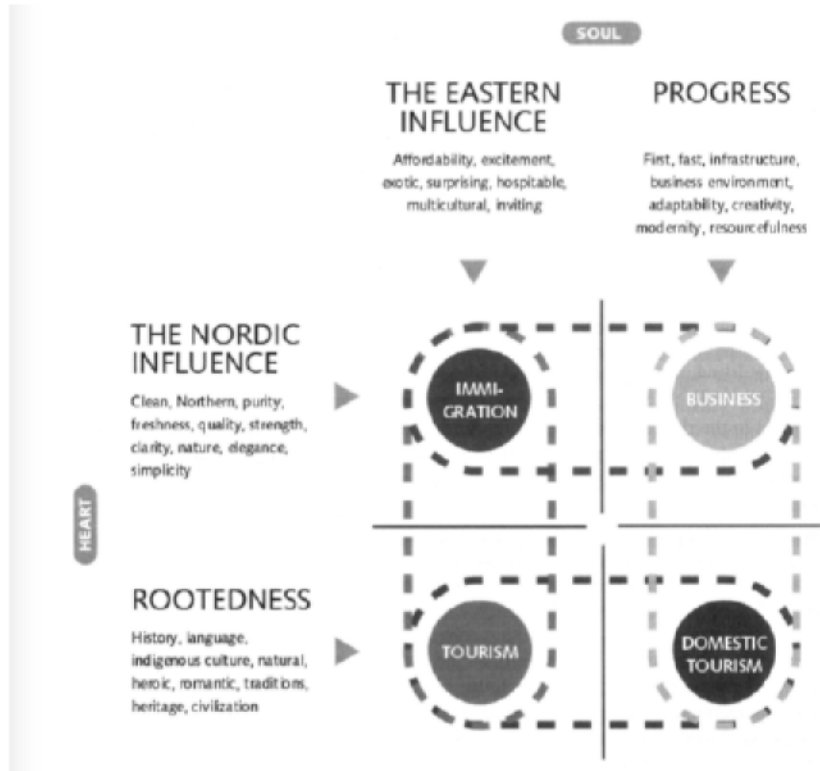
This criticism, however, appears not to have fallen on deaf ears. Strikingly, *Eesti Stiil* appears willing to embrace Orientalist tropes as a foil to excessive claims of Nordicity, and as justification for Estonia’s post-colonial contemporary identity. As Pawłusz & Polese (2017) remark:

Estonia’s Nordic heart—elegant, clean, and simple—is juxtaposed with its Eastern soul—hospitable, exotic, and spontaneous. Such representations draw from essentialism and groupism where some characteristics are ascribed to a wider group of people and perceived as natural. Rootedness and the Nordic influence are further pictured as primary oppositions to Eastern influence. From a postcolonial perspective, they echo the juxtaposition of the modern and sophisticated West with the more traditional and spontaneous East with a “Russian” or “Slavic” hospitable soul (p. 878).

Whether a country that meticulously plans and devotes significant government-funded resources to a creating a national narrative and branding campaign possesses a “spontaneous soul” is certainly debatable. Regardless, it appears Enterprise Estonia’s ongoing national branding and tourism promotion efforts have taken a more honest perspective about Estonia’s national character in recent years, opting to describe the country as “Nordic with a Twist” (Curran, 2020). The “with a Twist” addendum, in conjunction with the slogan “Estonia: Positively surprising,” signal a recognition of Estonia’s “Eastern” exoticness while embellishing it with a positive spin. Figure 5 shown

below, excerpted from Enterprise Estonia, demonstrates the idealized intersection of Estonia's "heart" and "soul," and its "Eastern" and "Western" components as forming a unified, presentable whole:

Figure 5. Enterprise Estonia, as cited by Pawlusz & Polese, 2017.



Thus, Estonia's history of occupation by the Russian Empire and USSR, the prominent presence of Slavic Russians inside its borders, and Estonians' ethnic origins in Siberia have lent the country a unique character that Estonian PR agents wish to portray as having positively enhanced, rather than detracted from, the country's allegedly Nordic orientation (Pawlusz & Polese, 2017). Enterprise Estonia may have finally hit on an ideal branding formula, at least for the time being: that Estonia's ongoing differences with the Nordic region proper merit it a distinctive classification, as essentially Nordic, but not quite.

1.3.2 Problems of nation-branding

Beyond the issue of Estonia's self-inclusion within *Norden*, another criticism of Estonia's branding campaign attacks the very practice of nation-branding itself. Critics claim that nation-branding's neoliberal ethos reduces the richness and complexity of a country's culture into a stylized "brand" or "trend"; the country itself becomes merely

another commodity on the global marketplace. In this spirit, Jansen (2008) denounces Brand Estonia in no uncertain terms as an egregious example of capitalistic mass commodification:

[Brand Estonia] is a hybrid case in which modern, reality-based promotion...combined with neo-liberal blurring of public and private interests to massage and transform an existing, if long repressed, national identity into an international marketing asset and a *domestic propaganda tool* (p. 129, emphasis mine).

Thus, where some see soft power wielded for beneficent ends, others see naked deception and exploitation. Jansen, restating Umberto Eco, even goes so far as to claim Brand Estonia is an example of “ur-fascism” in action, and that similar endeavors elsewhere should be met with resistance from artists and the creative intelligentsia (p. 135). While perhaps needlessly melodramatic, Jansen’s diagnosis nonetheless correctly posits that Estonia’s seemingly undemocratic rebrand—launched during the intensely neoliberal term of PM Laar—divided Estonian society into classes of “winners” and “losers”:

The winners are urban, well-educated, young, individual-centered, predominately male, ethnic Estonians living in the Western part of the country, especially Tallinn; the losers are those with farming or heavy industry skills from the Soviet era, the elderly, those without access to elite schools, community-centered traditionalists, Russian speakers and Russians who speak Estonian but are not integrated into Estonian culture, and those living in the rural Eastern part of the country. Prostitution, alcoholism, drug addiction and HIV plague the second Estonia, with young girls preyed upon by international sex traffickers (p. 129).

Fifteen years after the publication of Jansen’s article, Estonia’s economic situation has improved substantially, leading to a significant mitigation of the issues described above: Estonia’s average monthly wage has risen from about €800 in 2008 to about €1775 in 2023, and its HDI has risen from 0.856 in 2008 to 0.890 in 2020 (Trading Economics, 2023; Statista, 2022). Yet Estonia’s continued lack of a Nordic-style welfare state continues to perpetuate social and economic inequalities domestically, and hinder Estonia’s Nordic aspirations externally. Estonia has tried to have its cake and eat it too—strident neoliberalism *and* Nordic inclusion—but ultimately this prospect probably relies upon mutually exclusive premises. As Lagerspetz (2003) notes, the social-democratic welfare state functions as the central locus of inter-Nordic cooperation: “It is time to recognize it as a central element of their common identity...None of the [Baltic]

countries...would seem to be engaged in the process of building the welfare regime particular to the Nordic countries” (p. 57). In Estonia’s case, the capitalistic underpinnings of Nordic-presenting Brand Estonia and *Eesti Stiil* can paradoxically be tied to the principal feature which defines Estonia as non- or even anti-Nordic in the twenty-first century: neoliberalism, rather than social democracy, as the guiding national economic paradigm. That said, this neoliberal paradigm appears to be shifting, albeit gradually, as will be discussed later. Regardless, it is certain that Estonia’s full inclusion in the Nordic bloc, whether politically or at least culturally, would require a more thorough national commitment to the principles of social democracy than is currently displayed.

Finally, Anholt himself has criticized nation branding, claiming it is a fundamental understanding of his brainchild, the *nation brand*. In a 2013 article, he makes a thinly veiled reference to countries that have misused his idea:

Unfortunately, the phrase “nation brand” soon became distorted, mainly by naïve governments *in willing collusion with ambitious consulting firms*, into “nation branding,” a dangerously misleading phrase which seems to contain a promise that the images of countries can be directly manipulated using the techniques of commercial marketing communications. Yet despite repeatedly calling for it over the last fifteen years, I have never seen a shred of evidence to suggest that this is possible: *no case studies, no research*, and not even any very persuasive arguments. *I conclude that countries are judged by what they do, not by what they say*, as they have always been; yet the notion that a country can simply advertise its way into a better reputation has proved to be a pernicious and surprisingly resilient one (p. 1, emphasis mine).

Whether Estonia is included in Anholt’s critique is difficult to ascertain. Estonia’s neoliberalism-infused claims to Nordicness might be the kind of substanceless window-dressing that Anholt deplors, especially when implemented in partnership with major marketing firms—exactly as Estonia did. For Anholt, nation branding is nebulous and unclear, relying on sophistry and visuals to portray the given country in a positive light. By this measure, Anholt appears to agree with Jansen (2008) who remains dubious that Estonia’s active nation-branding efforts spurred on any further international investment or positive perception of the country among foreigners. Sleek government-sponsored websites have only taken Estonia’s reputation so far—that is to say, little.

However, national *brand creation*, per Anholt, consists of verifiable actions. Anholt’s diagnosis that actions, rather than words, are what matter in building a national

brand is based on the premise that a nation's actions can be quantified as objective measures of progress. (In the same 2013 article, for example, Anholt praises Estonia for its guarantee of internet access as a human right.) Actions, framed in conjunction with an ongoing "strategy" or narrative, can be internationally appreciated and thereby boost a country's reputation, which words and aesthetics cannot do alone. Thus, the question remains—has Estonia *done* enough to be considered Nordic? Have Estonia's progressive attitude toward technology and cultural affinities with Scandinavia and Finland (quite literally) paid off?

The principal theme of this discussion is that since its restoration of independence, Estonia has written its own ongoing national metanarrative: "Brand Estonia...project[ed] a future-oriented vision of itself, a postmodern, aspirational element, as 'progressive and hip,' which was presumably intended to become a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Jansen, 2008, p. 129). Through a nation-branding campaign derived from a historical-cultural core, Estonia has attempted a pivot toward the Nordics and away from Eastern Europe, the Baltic states, and Russia while preserving (and marketing) its unique heritage. How true to life this rebranding campaign has been, however, remains uncertain. Estonia's branding campaigns have been marked by paradoxes: the juxtaposition of the concepts of Nordic "Westernness" and Slavic "Easternness," with each supporting yet undermining the other; the blatant use of Orientalist tropes to justify a post-colonial narrative; and, of course, the embrace of neoliberalism to claim inheritance in an inherently social-democratic family of nations. Can Estonia's PR sustain itself under these (self-imposed) tensions? Or are these identity-based conundrums the inevitable result of a young country emerging from a previous state of arrested development?

It should be remembered that Estonia's "rebrand" is ultimately an elite project and may or may not reflect the actual attitudes and values of the Estonian people, both ethnic and non-ethnic Estonians alike. The acceptance of Estonia's Nordic pivot on the international stage—especially by the Nordic countries themselves—lies outside the scope of this text. But how successful this rebranding campaign has been *within* Estonia, over twenty years since its launch and thirty years since restoration of independence, is closely linked to our subject of interest. By examining the validity of the core assertion of Brand Estonia—that Estonia, at its core, is a Nordic country—we can ascertain not only the success of Enterprise Estonia's branding projects, but also the trajectory of Estonia's future aspirations on the regional, European, and international scales.

2. Theory and Methods

2.1 Theoretical background

In this Thesis, I draw on the communicative theories of agenda-setting and constructionism to contextualize my study. *Agenda-setting* describes how the news media influences the importance of topics in the public agenda (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). In my case, I wished to investigate the extent to which Estonian journalists have framed the country as “Nordic,” or at least strongly oriented toward the Nordic region. Per my RQs, is Estonia’s “Nordic status” a relevant concern for Estonian journalists, and if so, how do journalists interact with and/or promote this idea?

This concern leads to the other theory I draw from. *Constructionism* posits that “individuals and groups actively create social reality from different information sources,” with journalists playing a vital role in mediating this information flow (Van Gorp, 2010). As previously discussed, journalists, politicians, clergy, and other members of the intelligentsia were prominent advocates of nationalism, playing vital roles in national identity formation in many European countries during the nineteenth century, including Estonia (Jordan, 2014). Because of Estonia’s relatively recent founding (in 1920), and the suppression of Estonian identity during the Nazi and Soviet occupations, Estonian journalists may still play an important role in an ongoing formation of Estonian national consciousness in a way that journalists from older countries with more “secure” identities no longer do. Therefore, constructionism is a particularly relevant theory to contextualize this study, as it can assist in understanding how national perceptions of Estonia have arisen via the interplay of the media and public.

2.2 Research design and methodology

2.2.1 Preliminary research

Much of the research on Nordic identity in Estonia is found in literature about Estonia’s contemporary branding campaigns. Other academic research on this subject frequently takes the form of social and historical commentary. Still other literature about Nordic Estonia is found in news articles, blog posts, and genres that are informational yet non-academic in nature. However, much of this research is fundamentally limited in scope, as it fails to account for the inclusion of personal perspectives, whether through survey statistics, interviews or otherwise. Therefore, my study attempts to fill a

knowledge gap by obtaining and synthesizing individual perspectives that are frequently missing from the broader discussion on Estonia's Nordicity.

To ascertain the relevance of my RQs, I conducted a brief, preliminary quantitative analysis of how many times "Estonia" and "Nordic" have appeared in English-language news articles since 2000 to 2022. I selected this timeframe as 2000 is the year the Estonian Government launched the Brand Estonia campaign, and the timeframe's two-decade length extending to the present allowed me to ascertain whether this is an enduring phenomenon. Articles selected were in English only, as this is the sole language I am fluent in, and the presence of English-language articles establishes whether this phenomenon is internationally recognized. The keywords of the search were *Estonia AND Nordic* and *Estonia AND Scandinavia*.⁵ Details of the websites visited and the number of hits per website search can be found in Appendix 2.

There were 1282 search hits for *Estonia AND Nordic* and 613 for *Estonia AND Scandinavia*, amounting to a total of 1895 search hits. With the 22-year specified timeframe, this amounts to an average of 86 articles about Estonia and the Nordic countries published per year in the English-language Estonian press. Furthermore, many of these news sites have been launched only in the last decade, meaning most articles date from this time. Assuming 2012 as a more accurate starting point for the timeframe, this indicates an average of nearly 190 articles about the topic published per year. Alternatively, one could consider the publication of these articles in relation to the Estonian population, which numbered 1,326,765 in 2022 (MacroTrends, 2023). This translates to approximately 700 articles about the given topic published per Estonian citizen since 2000. Thus, the noticeable presence of journalism about the links between Estonia and *Norden* presents more than sufficient grounds for further investigation of this subject from an academic perspective.

2.2.2 Research design

I chose to employ a *qualitative case study* as my research design. According to Baškarda (2014), qualitative research "focus[es] on understanding the nature of the research problem rather than on the quantity of observed characteristics" (p. 1). Statistical procedures are usually not incorporated into qualitative research. Meanwhile, a *case study* is an "intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of

⁵ The search operator *AND* indicates both keywords.

(similar) units...observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time” (Gerring, 2004 as cited in Baškarda, 2014, p. 1). Case studies also “provide an opportunity for the researcher to gain a deep holistic view of the research problem, and may facilitate describing, understanding and explaining a research problem or situation” (p. 1). Alternatively, the Government Accountability Office of the United States defines *case study* as “a method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive description and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context” (1990, as cited in Baškarda, 2014, p. 3). Qualitative case studies thus possess the significant advantage of allowing the researcher to explore a phenomenon in depth without being excessively encumbered by quantification. Case studies are described as both “deep” and “holistic,” indicating their usefulness in ascertaining the depth and breadth of the subject of interest. However, the lack of quantification in this research design can appear indicative of a lack of rigor, especially in the social sciences where quantification methods are normative for data collection (Baškarda, 2014). In my case, I chose to employ qualitative research for three reasons:

- (a) *The language barrier*: I am fluent only in English, and therefore am unable to adequately perform a quantitative analysis of Estonian news articles or those in another language;
- (b) *Lack of previous quantitative research*: with little available, I believe it important to first establish the parameters for discussing this phenomenon before narrower, quantitative studies are conducted; and
- (c) *The inherent strengths of qualitative research*: these interviews can uncover a rich breadth and depth of information that can be drawn upon later for further, more specialized investigation.

2.2.3 Methodology

The methodology of this study consists in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Estonian journalists. *Semi-structured interviews* (SSIs) are a method of conducting qualitative case studies. They are contrasted with *unstructured* and *unstructured interviews*. All three interview methods “involve asking pre-defined questions, with a limited set of response categories. The responses are coded by the interviewer based on an already established coding scheme” (Baškarda, 2014, p. 11). SSIs offer a high degree of flexibility, allowing the interviewer to understand the interviewees’ perspectives: “a

researcher is able to refocus the questions, or prompt for more information, if something interesting or novel emerges” (p. 11). Crucially, interviews should only be used to gather data if no other means for doing so are available: if there are records, documents, or websites containing relevant information, they should be used instead (Baškarda, 2014). I justify my use of SSIs for this reason, as I am analyzing personal opinions about a sociopolitical topic.

For this study, my sample consisted of six ($N = 6$) Estonian journalists. As stated in my Proposal,⁶ I had originally wished to obtain ten. However, by the time I had completed the sixth interview, I realized I had reached a “data saturation” threshold, in that any new data sets would fail to reveal any significant new information: I was able to ascertain multiple common themes across the interview responses, even while the answers possessed unique characteristics. A significant flaw of current social science research is that no clear guidelines exist on how to determine data saturation empirically; while some basic rules are suggested by different researchers, the determination of data saturation ultimately appears highly context-dependent (Francis et al., 2010). However, Guest et al. (2006) conclude that “the more similar participants in a sample are in their experiences with respect to the research domain, the sooner we would expect to reach saturation” (p. 76). With the homogeneity of my respondents is considered—all Estonian, all having similar work experience, and mostly male—it is safe to assume the point of data saturation will arrive quite early. Thus, after consultation with my Supervisor, I decided to preserve the number of interview responses at six. This is in line with Guest et al.’s conclusions, who found in their research that “basic elements for metathemes were present as early as six interviews” (p. 59, 2006). Approximately 45 pages of interview transcript were obtained, with a total word count of 13,641.⁷ Interviews ranged from 11 to 27 minutes, with an average length of 24.5 minutes. The total length of all interviews was about 147 minutes, or 2 hours and 27 minutes.

As stated in my Proposal, I had initially wished to select the journalists based on their Twitter followings to gauge the journalists’ social prominence, and thereby ascertain

⁶ In this Chapter, I refer to my (Thesis) Proposal, a copy of which can be found before the Contents page. The Proposal outlines the purpose, structure, and methodology of this Thesis, and was submitted for approval to the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University in November 2022. Per Faculty requirements, deviations from the approved Proposal found in the Thesis must be explained and justified. Thus, a reference to the Proposal in my text indicates a change to a previously approved aspect of this Thesis.

⁷ Besides the recorded interview, respondent Hans Luik also included some answers via email. I include his written answers in the aggregated texts and have incorporated them into the total word count.

how relevant their views might be in broader public discourse. However, it quickly became apparent that this method was unviable, as many Estonian journalists are not active on Twitter. I attribute this situation to a very different professional culture surrounding journalism in Estonia where, unlike the Anglosphere, journalists may not be expected to be “tuned in” to social media all the time; having a “brand presence” on social media is not widely practiced. However, this is only personal speculation, and the exact cause of this phenomenon lies beyond the scope of this text.

The selected journalists were contacted via email. (A sample email I sent to journalist contacts can be found in Appendix 1.) Experience in reporting on international and Estonian domestic affairs, and/or specialization in fields such as history and politics (especially of the Nordic and ECE regions) were the criteria for making contact. Care was taken to ensure the journalists were unlikely to give uniform opinions about Estonia’s position vis-à-vis the Nordic region: journalists were selected in the hope of being able to provide nuanced and individual opinions about the issue, regardless of whether the study results indicated a broad consensus on the RQs. Interviewees were derived from a variety of sources: by researching the staff of major Estonian news outlets, from personal connections, and references obtained from other journalists. I employed the “snowball method” to help obtain interview contacts: in my email to potential interviewees, they were kindly requested to send contacts of other journalists in the event they did not wish or were unable to be interviewed. A table listing the contacted journalists, their journalistic and other professional experience, and how they were located is displayed below.

Table 1

Marianne Mikko	Former radio broadcaster and Social Democrat MP in Estonian Parliament; currently Estonian MP (Social Democrat) in European Parliament	Found online
Hans Luik	Longtime journalist and publisher	Personal connection
Joosep Värk	European Correspondent, <i>ERR.ee</i>	Snowball method
Silver Tambur	Editor, <i>Estonian World</i>	<i>Estonian World</i> contact form
Johannes Tralla	Former Brussels Correspondent, currently news editor and anchor for <i>ERR.ee</i>	Snowball method
Kaarel Kressa	Journalist, <i>Delfi.ee</i>	Snowball method

The timeframe given in my Proposal for the relevance of this study was from 2016 to 2022. Besides intending to provide a contemporaneous frame of reference, 2016 was the

year Kersti Kaljulaid was elected Estonia's first female President, and 2021 was the year Kaja Kallas was elected Estonia's first female PM. As gender equality is considered an important cultural trait of the Nordic region, Kaljulaid's accession to the Estonian Presidency and Kallas' election as PM is an indicator that Estonian society—at least to some extent—is beginning to reflect the Nordic region's commitment to feminism and gender equality.⁸ That said, contra to what was stated on my Proposal, this timeframe or the issue of Estonian feminism was little discussed in my respondents' answers. The events that proved most relevant were extremely recent—the war in Ukraine, Finland's accession to NATO, and the 2023 Parliamentary election. However, this might be attributable in part to an important limitation of this study—only one of the six respondents was female. This limitation is particularly severe because as of 2016, approximately 58 percent of Estonian journalists were female (Loit & Harro-Loit, 2016, p. 11). Thus, it is not improbable to assume the data I gathered via respondent answers reflects, even if unintentionally, this highly skewed gender ratio.

Interviews took place over video conference and were recorded either on the platform's recording feature or my phone's microphone app. The interviews were then saved and transcribed with the aid of *oTranscribe.com*, an online transcription tool. Interviews were transcribed manually. The interview questions asked of the journalists follow below:

- (1) *Could you tell me about your journalism career and any other work you've done (such as in politics, law, or business), especially within the past few years?*
- (2) *What is your perception of Estonia—(a) on its internal society and (b) its external affairs, such as its relationships with the Baltic and Nordic countries, the former Soviet bloc, and the EU/NATO?*
- (3) *Do you believe there is widespread opinion in Estonia that it is a Nordic country? Why or why not?*

⁸ On the webpage promoting his book *The Nordic Gender Equality Paradox*, Swedish-Kurdish author Nima Sanandaji writes:

Nordic societies seem to have it all: a historic tradition of women's entrepreneurship, modern welfare states that provide support to working parents, outstanding levels of women's participation in the labour market and populations that strongly support the idea of gender equality. It therefore comes as a surprise that Nordic countries, in one international ranking after another, are shown to have few women among top-managers and business owners. Another surprise is that the three Baltic countries, which have more conservative societies and a more small-government approach than their Nordic neighbors, have more women managers, top executives and business owners (TIMBRO, n.d.).

(4) *Do you believe Estonia is a Nordic country? Why or why not? How does this belief impact your reporting as a journalist?*

As these interviews were semi-structured, journalists were encouraged to share additional, personal knowledge that did not necessarily fall under a strict purview of the questions. Follow-up questions were also asked, so the transcriptions are not identical in their format. Once again, I was seeking deep and holistic knowledge which might lie beyond the strict bounds of the questions, knowledge often dependent on uniquely personal knowledge and circumstances.

Data visualization consisted of generating a word cloud. As I wished to ascertain textual themes and patterns that might not otherwise be evident to the naked eye, I believed utilizing a word cloud for this purpose would be ideal. To generate the word cloud, I first imported the raw text files of the interviews into *writewords.org*, an online service which counts the frequency of words in an input text. The words and their frequencies were then copied into an .xml datasheet. The total number of words included in the analysis was 1929. This datasheet was then uploaded to Flourish.studio, an online platform which allows the user to create digital visualizations. In the final step, the most frequently recurring 100 words in the data sheet were selected to be displayed in the word cloud, and another set of words excluded. The excluded words, whose presence would have cluttered the data, consisted of prepositions and grammatical articles, as well as personal names. A list of the excluded words can be found in Appendix 3.

Finally, I utilized *discourse analysis* to engage with the interviews and explore their themes. Discourse analysis is “a methodology for analyzing social phenomena that is qualitative, interpretive, and constructionist. It explores how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created and are held in place” (Hardy et al., 2004). Unlike content analysis, discourse analysis focuses on the relationship between text and its context and does not separate the two; it is thus a qualitative rather than quantitative methodology (ibid., p. 20). As this Thesis is an effort to uncover information about the discourse and rhetoric of Nordicness in Estonia and its cultural and political ramifications, I believe this approach to be particularly suitable in conjunction with SSIs. As Hardy et al. remark, “Discourses have no inherent meaning in themselves and, to understand their constructive effects, researchers must locate them historically and socially” (2004, p. 19).

a particularly important topic for my interviewees, one intimately tied to Estonia and Estonian affairs in a way the other Baltic states are not. In a similar vein, both *Sweden* and *Scandinavian* appear 33 times each. The frequency of the latter is due to some extent to the subject matter of the interviews, but as the topic of Sweden is not addressed in the interview questions either, its frequency must also be attributed to interviewee responses.

Finally, another notable omission is also revelatory: the lack of words related to the economy, the “welfare state,” or social democracy. The closest words related to these topics are *social* (N=37) and *society* (N=36). This result is of particular interest, as all interviewees addressed the state of Estonia’s economy and its differences with the Nordic region. However, it is apparent the prevalence of other subjects ultimately took precedence over this one.

3.2 Analysis: interviews

Because answers to the questions often overlapped in subject matter, I have divided this Section into four subsections: *Economy, Politics and society, National identity, and Personal views*. Thus, analyses of the interview questions are organized thematically rather than chronologically.

3.2.1 Economy

There are two main themes to answers about Estonia’s economy: first, that it is currently under significant strain due to the war in Ukraine; and second, that the gradual adoption of Nordic-style welfare policies has been met with significant resistance among politicians and the public, although this situation is changing. The implication of the second response is that the social-welfare state is the key factor Estonia is missing in its Nordic aspirations, echoing Lagerspetz’ conclusions (2003).

The responses about Estonia’s economic downturn are confirmed by news reports about the inflation rate in Estonia, among the highest in Europe, and the state of the Estonian economy playing a leading role in the 2023 parliamentary election (Euronews, 2023). Respondents concur that Estonia’s small economy is very flexible and highly subject to changes in the wider European market, for both better and worse:

Our economy is very much dependent on what’s happening in the European Union. If the EU as a whole is doing well, we are generally doing quite well. If it’s doing badly, then we are doing quite badly... (Tambur).

The economy is not doing very well, and we have a very small and very flexible economy that is highly affected and reacts very fast with all kinds of market dynamics happening in Scandinavia and elsewhere (Tralla).

Besides market dynamism, Kressa also highlights the importance of heavy industry, which Estonia and the other Baltic states lack compared to Finland:

The economy has clearly suffered because of the Russian war against Ukraine. We are clearly not as attractive a place for investors—actually, investors are horrified by that, basically. This is a huge problem. But I think Finland might have the same problems, but not on a similar scale I guess. And they also have a much stronger industrial capacity. We have huge problems with the energy crisis right now, but otherwise the real economic crisis hasn't hit us yet, but it probably will happen.

Luik also emphasizes the importance of Finland's industrial capacity:

My perception is that Estonia is not getting close to Finland, which is our primary benchmark, in economic ways because Finns are very quick to react to economic circumstance, and also they are self-sufficient in the sense of energy. They produce a lot of energy on their own—they have nuclear stations and also water, which we don't have, to produce energy. But yes, we are the closest that an ex-Soviet republic has gotten to the Western standard.

While praising Estonia's economic progress since 1991, Tambur also acknowledges the issues that have retarded the country's growth. Echoing Jansen (2008), Tambur claims the ongoing presence of poverty despite increased national wealth have contributed to political division:

We've come a long way—we're now among the 40 wealthiest countries in the world, and per capita as well, the wealth has obviously increased a lot. In that sense it's a developed country. But at the same time, this process hasn't been smooth. It means there's still a lot of people who are left behind. There's a huge poverty gap in the country, and about 23 percent of the people are poor, or at the risk of extreme poverty. So there is a gap, and that obviously leads back to our political situation.

As for the social democracy-versus-neoliberalism conflict within Estonia, the respondents emphasized the importance of neoliberal capitalism in the Estonian economic paradigm, but also mentioned this situation had changed dramatically from the immediate post-independence years and was continuing to do so. Opinions varied, however, over how

much of a shift toward social democracy was occurring at present. Vaarik claims that following the 2008 financial crisis, the idea of creating a social-welfare state grew in popularity:

That was one of the first time Estonian society and politics started to think, Maybe there is a merit in what you would call the welfare state of the Scandinavian countries. We saw there was a lot of people who didn't have jobs, and maybe the country should take care of those people more, and help the people more who are working, but are still not able to make ends meet. And over time, over the last decade, I would have to say even the politicians who were once against it are now maybe even secretly still creating that welfare state. So I would say the debate has matured a lot over the past ten years.

Tambur gives a near-opposite, more pessimistic response about Estonia's adoption of social democracy:

The prevalent, dominating ideology has been neoliberalism here since the 1990s. Social Democrats here are viewed as kind of a political force you cannot really trust. They are almost perceived as the equivalent of socialist or Communist, even. [...] In Estonia, usually when a political party says, "We want to raise taxes," they are shot down. That's more or less what happens, including a lot of the media. It's almost like a taboo here. Talking about taxes, another concrete example—we have a flat tax system... Whereas in the entire Western world, including the Nordic countries, they have a progressive tax system. Where here, if someone is to start proposing a progressive tax system, they get a lot of criticism.

Social Democratic MEP Marianne Mikko acknowledges the journey toward social democracy in Estonia has occurred only gradually:

I think step by step, drop by drop, we are getting closer to the target of being a "boring" Nordic country like our neighbors are. But there's a long way. We are halfway at the moment, we are trying quite our best, and especially I mean Social Democrats. All our neighbors have always had very strong social-democratic parties, and unfortunately in Estonia that has never been the case, a really strong party. But we're always in coalition, or trying to be.

Finally, Luik argues that "social democracy" doesn't exist at all, and is merely a conceptual illusion:

There's no such thing as social democracy itself. Those are just headlines. Social Democrats have been very capitalist in places like the UK, and Social Democrats

have been viciously anti-immigrant in places like Denmark and Sweden... This is a term invented, born 150 years ago and it never works.

While potentially controversial, Luik's words are worth bearing in mind, as Social Democrats have lost recent elections in Sweden (2022) and Finland (2023) to parties of a similar ideological vein Estonian PM Kaja Kallas' liberal Reform Party. A paradox of the Nordic model is evident here, in that its supposedly defining feature represented by a leading political party is inconsistently upheld. Luik's argument, paralleling Kvist & Greve (2011), indicates that perhaps the Nordics' deviation from more stridently socialist policies has undermined the social-democratic model, reducing it to a political buzzword rather than a set political program.

3.2.2 Politics and society

The respondents' statements about the state of Estonian society were strongly contextualized by the parliamentary election in spring 2023, when the interviews occurred. PM Kaja Kallas' center-right Reform Party won and entered a governing coalition with the Social Democrats and the Center Party. Kressa portrays the election result as a victory for the Western liberal order, especially when contrasted against populist forces active in Estonia:

Contrary to the more pessimistic forecasts, the liberal consensus won by a huge margin. The right-wing populists lost. Basically, that shows the rise of populism and dangers of polarization might have been a little overemphasized. So I think that Estonian society is kind of fine right now...

Tralla agrees with Kressa about the importance of the 2023 elections, and emphasizes the pro-Nordic sentiment that allowed for the Reform Party's victory:

Liberal parties overall won, the parties that have always highlighted Estonia's natural belonging is among the Nordic countries, so these values have clearly dominated these elections.

Tralla also indicates the Estonian political divide is closely linked to the question of Estonia's Nordicness, with at least half the public comfortably accepting of the social and economic progressivism associated with the Nordic region, and at least another quarter skeptical or outright hostile toward these progressive attitudes:

I'd say a quarter of society is either mildly skeptical or skeptical toward these very Scandinavian values, as you might characterize them—openness, transparency, pro-European, pro-Western, same-sex marriage, etc. These are the

values that are opposed by a quarter of society, and I'd say about maybe half of society is more seen as liberal, pro-Western, pro-Scandinavian values. And then you have this other quarter that is perhaps a bit milder in their appetite for Scandinavian liberties for all members of society.

Tambur concurs with Tralla about the proportions of political division within Estonian society, also strongly identifying Estonian development with adherence to not only economic, but social metrics:

We have a very popular, populist far-right party here [EKRE], which in the last election actually didn't do as well as expected, but still got 17 seats in a 101-seat Parliament. And roughly their popularity is at 25 percent of the country... The country is divided, you could say, similar to what's happening in the US—culture wars have been imported here, a clash between the liberal, more European or Western-minded progressive people, and conservatives here as well... If I could describe (Estonia) in one or two words, it is a developed country, and a progressive-liberal economy—but at the same time, really quite conservative when it comes to social issues...It's still a country in a process of developing. I wouldn't say it's developed on the level of Finland, Sweden, or Norway—the Scandinavian countries who we should actually aspire to.

Tambur explains one of the principal differentiators between Estonia and *Norden* is the former's highly conservative social attitudes regarding the LGBT+ community:

The mentality is not quite Nordic yet, especially when it comes to social attitudes. Let's say, for example, sexual minorities. We have still not legalized even a civil partnership bill here. A law was passed in 2014, and they needed some implementing acts, it wasn't really passed into law. And look—we haven't even done that, whereas the rest of Western Europe and Scandinavia have long legalized gay marriage. We are not even legalized a civil partnership bill. And if you look at it from that point, we are not like Nordic countries at all. We are still like Eastern European countries.

Another social concern of Tambur's is Estonia's gender pay gap, among the highest in Europe:

If you compare that with the Nordic mentality, (it's) completely opposite. They are looking at gender balance everywhere, even to the point where how many MPs are women and how many are men. In Estonia, we now present it as a big news that we have more women in Parliament in ever—but that's only 30 percent of the

Parliament. And of course, we have good progress as well. We've had a female President, a female Prime Minister right now, but when it comes to the gender pay gap, the fact is it's still a big gap here. And it's a mentality prevalent in so many places that even school, for example. "School directorship should be a man, and the teacher should be a woman. Directors, you know, they're supposed to be men." That kind of macho mentality is not going anywhere yet. And that, I would say, is a very Eastern mentality. It's not a Scandinavian or Nordic mentality where they put a lot of emphasis on equality or equal opportunity.

Unique to the respondents, Luik brings the issue of public health to his analysis of Estonian society, disclosing a worrying trend:

The thing that worries me is that our lifespan is still much more less (sic) than those of the Scandinavian people. And secondly...the difference in lifespan between men and women is extremely big. I think we are idiots, that's why. We don't think about ourselves and we don't keep ourselves healthy...A lot of people in Estonia are dying of liver problems, as alcoholics are in Central European ex-Communist countries. So checking by this pattern, we would not be called a Scandinavian nation.

Finally, Mikko and Vaarik provide a bird's-eye view about the general state of Estonian society:

We are no longer a classic East European country, but we are rather in the middle of Western and Eastern European perspectives... (Mikko).

I would say that Estonia is a country in the North, with the mindset of a country in the North...People tend to enjoy remoteness from other people. They value privacy very highly. At the same time (Estonia) is infused with the mindset of the Soviet society, that some ways of thinking are basically derived from the Soviet mindset. And this defines the politics for me as well, and because Estonia is only about 1.3 million people...I would have to describe that it's a lot like a village society. Everybody knows everybody, and this keeps people paralyzed, in a way. They don't want to diverge from the "normal" too much. So I think that also defines the politics in lots of ways (Vaarik).

3.2.3 National identity

As mentioned in the word cloud analysis, Finland regularly appeared as a discussion topic—especially notable as it was unprompted by the interview questions,

which only referred to the “Nordic countries” as a single unit. For this reason, it appears Finland plays an outsized role in respondents’ beliefs about Estonia’s national self-conception. As an unqualified Nordic country *and* linguistic kinsman of Estonia, Finland seems to serve as Estonia’s most important link to the Nordic region and a potential entry point for Estonia’s inclusion within *Norden*. The impression received from the interviews is one of close, even familial ties between the two countries; in fact, both Kressa and Tralla describe Finland’s position vis-à-vis Estonia as that of an “older brother,” while expressing Estonia’s conceptual self-distance from its Baltic neighbors:

(Finns) have this “older brother” position to us...I think there are genuine warm feelings they always feel, especially if you are visiting Finland as a tourist or a professional, not as an immigrant or foreign worker, in which case there is more patronizing and maybe more hostile...well, not exactly hostile but not as positive. [...] Latvia and Lithuania are considered something like Eastern Europe, but Estonia still has this Nordic condition, a little bit. We identify with Finland, I think, much more than with Latvia, although Latvia is for many reasons much more similar to us—economically, politically, demographically, and so on (Kressa).

I think Estonia has always benefitted from the proximity of Finland—that just comes from our geography, right? So this proximity has always had Finland on our horizon, not just geographically but also language-wise...This proximity...has meant that Finland has kind of been the benchmark for Estonia, a natural benchmark in many ways...As for Latvia and Lithuania, I think from the outside world Estonia is seen as part of the Baltic states. Of course, our history is very similar, and therefore it is easy to group Estonia in this group of three Baltic states. But I would say we are in many ways closer to Finland, and I think we like to think of ourselves as more close (sic) to Finland in comparison with Latvia, who’s right next door...So if we say that Estonia is a smaller brother of Finland in a way, that is a comparison image that I think many don’t see as very positive, but nevertheless recognize that OK, this might be the case in many ways (Tralla).

As for Estonia’s Nordic identity itself, whether Estonia is considered Nordic varies by interviewee, with some considering Estonia to be fundamentally so but lacking in certain aspects of the Nordics’ social and economic progressivism, while others considering it to be a cultural mix of Eastern and Nordic Europe. The Nordics’ current political and economic realities thus create a benchmark for each respondent to assess Estonia’s

Nordicity: some believe Estonia meets this benchmark despite its socioeconomic realities; others, for this very reason, do not. However, Estonia's position within the Nordic sphere of influence, at the very least, appears unquestioned by all respondents.

Kressa claims Estonia is not Nordic, though it ought to be. However, the reality of Estonia's fundamentally weaker economic situation means it will likely never be considered fully Nordic:

[The] short answer, no. Nobody thinks Estonia IS a Nordic country, but many if not most people would say Estonia SHOULD be a Nordic country, and this is our heritage that was taken away from us in World War II, because before World War II, I don't think there was the term of "Nordic country." Finland was considered a Baltic country, because it was very similar to Estonia or in other aspects—like a commonwealth of the Russian Empire and so on. So not a Nordic country yet—we should be, but the train has left the station in many regards.

For Mikko, however, the answer is simple—a resounding “yes”:

Yes, I truly believe that. Absolutely I do. Why not? I mean, geopolitically, very much so. Geographically, yes. And the mentality has always been there. We were part of the Swedish Empire. At the same time, there are a lot of words which are originally from the Swedish language. So, yes. I am a true believer in our place to be in that family of Nordic countries. The other thing is, do Nordic countries believe we are part of them? NB8 is a nice tool...but is not used so much or enthusiastically or emphatically by politicians of the Nordic countries. But I think now, currently, a new era when Sweden and Finland are seeking NATO membership, I think things have been changed.

Based on his previous statements about Estonia's widespread social conservatism and economic policies, Tambur argues Estonia's status as a Nordic country is uncertain:

It's a mixed bag. Once again, economically yes. Business culture-wise, Nordic yes...Trust is high, corruption is low—again, that is very Nordic. Corruption is very low, and you can trust your business dealings. When you agree something, you can usually address the partner. That's very Nordic, and that's very different

from what you see in Russia or some Slavic countries. So business-wise Nordic, but socially or culturally, not quite there.

Similarly, Tralla ties the state of Estonia's Nordicism to its current state of cultural and economic flux, leaving Estonia's Nordic status as more of an aspiration than present reality:

Any Scandinavian and Nordic countries have always been this ideal for many in Estonia. Every country needs an aim, needs a purpose, needs a benchmark to compare itself with, and I'm pretty confident the Nordic countries are this benchmark for the majority of Estonians. For about a quarter of the population they represent a society which has done things terribly wrong and where things are not working. But I think Estonia has its own way of approaching things.

Finally, Vaarik argues that Estonia possesses common understanding with other countries that suffered under Soviet occupation or influence. In this sense Estonia is fundamentally linked to ECE, although he says Estonia far more resembles the Nordic region culturally. For Vaarik, however, terminology is less important than the present-day reality of national survival:

We (in the former Eastern Bloc) understand what Western European countries don't understand, mostly right now that there's a difference between peace and peace. You can have peace and freedom, and you can have peace and occupation. And this is where we understand each other brilliantly. But at the same time, we understand that we are still pretty far away from each other... We understand that we are sometimes portrayed as the Eastern Bloc countries, but that this is a misconception culturally—that they are more similar to the other Central European countries, and we are more (like) the countries (in the) North.

Maybe Estonians back then [in 2014-2015] dreamed a lot more about becoming a "New Nordic" (country). I think now it is not so high, maybe. The feeling is that if they [the Nordic Council] would take us as such, we're fine with it. But we're also fine with our past. This is one of the things I feel. This is absolutely my personal view, that Estonians were fighting for years not to be called an "Eastern European" country. Whereas I personally believe, C'mon! Own it! Don't try to push it somewhere away, try to define it yourself. Maybe

people have some idea of what it means to be Eastern Europe, but try to define it somehow differently. Show that it's something else.

That said, Vaarik also implies a “benchmark” or “role model” position that Nordic countries, particularly Denmark, exemplify for Estonia:

I think Denmark has been a role model in a lot of ways, also when creating some laws in Estonia in the beginning of the 90s. But in general, for Estonians they might be kind of a role model of how it would be possible to live in this region so far in the North. But I think (Danes) don't know too much about Estonia. That's my experience in Denmark as well.

Thus, for the respondents, Estonia's Nordicness at present is ultimately ambiguous, but the country is more strongly tied to *Norden* than any other region in Europe. The question of Estonia's Nordic status, and how it relates to Estonia's relationship with Finland, is perhaps best exemplified by Luik's response:

This is a very ideological question. We don't ask this question, we just settle to Finland.

The respondents' answers reveal the question of Estonia's Nordicity is a fundamentally political one. A basic orientation toward the Nordic region, particularly Finland, is extant in Estonia, best exemplified through strong trade ties and cultural-linguistic similarities. But the question of whether Estonia should fully fulfill a “Nordic destiny” depends on the political leanings of the one asked—left-leaning Estonians are likely to be pro-Nordic, and right-leaning Estonians anti-Nordic. At least some of the public's response toward *Norden* will undoubtedly depend on media (mis)representation of the region. Right-wing Estonians may associate Middle Eastern immigration and gun violence with Sweden and thereby the “failed Nordic model,” but such a media frame, especially when tied into “Scandinavia” or “the Nordics,” ignores differences and complexities within the Nordic region—such as Danish policies which, opposed to Sweden's, consist of a program of immigration restriction and cultural assimilation (Ruhala, 2023).

3.2.4 Personal practice

Finally, most respondents believe their beliefs about Estonia and its position between Nordic and Eastern Europe impacts their work in some form. Luik claims his

familiarity with Russian culture has given him a key advantage in journalism and business:

I'm so happy I understand the Russian language and their mentality as well, but Swedes don't. I've been learning Russian and Russian culture for tens of years.

Mikko claims her activism as a Social Democrat has “absolutely” been motivated by the example of the Nordic countries:

The fact we are using that idea and our examples of the Finnish or Swedish ones, which are our neighbors and where our diaspora are (sic). In those countries there are a lot of (Estonian) people who are working, or who are émigrés who left when the Soviets occupied our country. So we have a lot of connections, especially with those two [Finland and Sweden] at the moment seeking NATO membership. So that's very natural for us, and we are not hesitant to tell that our place is there, and I haven't seen any contradictions or resistance from these mentioned countries in not believing our place is with them.

Likewise, Tambur's journalism at *Estonian World* has been frequently motivated by socially progressive concerns. But he characterizes the work as sometimes “difficult”:

We'd always like to do more. Our resources are very limited in the English-language media generally. Estonia is very small, and we basically have two main outlets. One is run by the public broadcasting service, and one is us. And both of us have limited resources. So we would like to do so much more in terms of the reporting, the problems, the issues, and stuff like that. But saying that, we in Estonian World, in our outlet, we have highlighted the gender pay gap for years, and we've also published articles about perception about feminism, for instance. Or equal marriage. Again, we've written about it for many years, and called for the Estonian Parliament to legalize it, etc. etc. So those are issues...and generally human rights have been very important for us. We've done that and would like to do more, of course.

Kressa denies his reporting is influenced by personal beliefs:

No...I think journalists should not be influenced too much by ideological consideration. But this is not really an issue that really anybody would have on the back of his mind—how does it help to make Estonia a Nordic country? No, this (sic) is not like this.

Meanwhile, like Mikko, Vaarik “absolutely” affirms his belief in Estonia being a new frontier of Eastern Europe/the Baltic region contextualizes his work:

I have to say that sometimes I have to hold back from portraying Estonia as being very influential in NATO and the European Union right now, because I don't want to lose sight of myself or my reporting. And sometimes I feel that I'm not sure if Estonian politicians really are that influential, but if I look at policy-wise, then there has never been a point I believe in history where Estonian politicians would have been this influential as they are right now.

Tralla does not provide a clear answer to this question but emphasizes instead the numerous similarities and differences between Estonia and the Nordic region (see §3.2.3).

3.3 Discussion

Regarding the word cloud, the prevalence of the words *Finland* and to a lesser extent *Sweden* bear a unique relationship to the subject of interest. As these countries are not mentioned by name within the interview questions, their presence within the 100 topmost words displayed in the word cloud is due in large part to the respondents' answers, indicating they consider these countries to be particularly important. With a corresponding lack of respondents' discussion or even mention of the Baltic states within their answers, this appears indicative of the national perspective or orientation that Estonia possesses. As constructionism and agenda-setting describe how journalists serve as mediators and arbiters of information flow vis-à-vis the public, it is likely the consciousness or orientation of Estonian journalists toward the Nordic region generally, and Finland in particular, either are influenced by or influence public perception of Estonian national identity. But which?

Based on the respondents' answers, a Nordic consciousness—that Estonia is self-aware of being a Nordic country—derived from historical precedent is strongly present in Estonia. Respondents do not appear to be directing this consciousness on the Estonian public via their roles as journalists; instead, this consciousness already exists, based especially on the “familial” bond between Estonia and Finland. On the other hand, more recent developments that occurred in *Norden* (and the rest of the West) while Estonia remained under Soviet occupation have created a disconnect between contemporary Nordic values and Estonian values, especially the social progressivism/traditionalism and social democracy/neoliberalism divides. The Soviet occupation also created a disconnect

between Estonian self-consciousness as Nordic nation, and the international perception of Estonia as lacking Nordicness. It is this disconnect or conflict between what Nordicness *is* and what Estonia *should be* that some of the respondent journalists are attempting to resolve through their work—especially regarding energy and the environment, governance, healthcare, the economy, and social issues. But it is the disconnect between Estonian *self-conception* and international *external perception* that has driven the Estonian Government’s branding campaigns. In brief, respondents are interested in *substance*, and Enterprise Estonia in *style*. We are reminded of Anholt’s dictum that “countries are judged by what they do, not by what they say” (p. 1, 2013). Ultimately Estonia’s Nordic status will be judged based not on pre-existing “feeling,” historic connections that date to the Middle Ages, or trendy branding, but by how much it *behaves* as a Nordic country in the present. The inescapable fact is that being “Nordic” implies not only geographical proximity and historical cultural similarities, but the presence of certain economic programs and contemporary cultural values. With important differences remaining between Estonia’s current social, political, and economic realities and those of the Nordic countries, Estonia cannot be said to be fully Nordic at this time. However, potential exists for the country to be remodeled on a Nordic basis—if that is what Estonians so desire.

Judging from the respondents’ answers and accumulated literature, this is in large part what appears to be happening. Estonia, culturally constructed in large part on a Nordic base, appears to be undergoing a both internally directed and externally influenced “Nordicization” process, a development in line with Curran’s interpretation of the *Eesti Stiil* handbook directives (2020) and Lagerspetz’ criteria of Nordicity (2003). Even if, like Vaarik, some respondents do not particularly care about the terminology assigned to Estonia’s geopolitical position, efforts to modernize the country combined with Estonia’s geographical proximity to *Norden* will essentially Nordicize the country regardless. (It is safe to imagine, for example, that Italy could adopt a welfare state under Scandinavian influence, yet still not be considered “Nordic” due to its geographical and cultural distance from the Nordic region.) Thus, respondents’ personal activism, whether in politics or journalism, ultimately brings Estonian society more fully into its Nordic self-conception, whether such activism is predicated on explicitly pro-Nordic premises or not.

Indeed, despite current internal opposition, I believe Estonia’s national trajectory is inevitably directed toward *Norden*. Besides the cultural-historical foundation for Estonia’s Nordic pivot, its geopolitical position essentially demands this move. A tiny

country in both land area and population and lacking major industrial capacity, it is hemmed in from the east by the world's largest country, which itself formerly oppressed the Estonian nation and is currently waging a brutal war of attrition against Ukraine. To the south are other Baltic states, themselves of similar size and geopolitical weight as Estonia. With the problems and inherent contradictions of Baltic identity driving it to irrelevance, at least for the foreseeable future, a vital component of Estonia's national strategy means it is left with no other option to assure its survival than by linking itself with the Nordics. Such linkage has occurred so far principally regarding trade and business, as well as through the NB8 format and presence of Nordic Council branch offices. Increased military cooperation is also on the table with Finland having entered NATO and Sweden (presumably) to do so soon. Regarding contemporary cultural realities—including social issues such as LGBT+ acceptance and economic ones such as social democracy—it appears, however slowly or rapidly, Estonia is increasingly seeking to emulate its Nordic neighbors as models of socioeconomic success. Internally generated reforms and cultural shifts, such as discussed in the Literature Review, must also be accounted for as potent sources of progress and social change. Estonia's convergence with *Norden*, in some ways faster than others, has been an ongoing process since 1991. But reaching a full convergence point, particularly regarding Estonia's industrial capacity, may never arrive: Estonia's small size is its biggest limitation. With this in mind, the Brand Estonia campaign and the subsequent nation-branding and tourism promotion efforts (particularly the "Nordic With a Twist" moniker) can be seen as not merely a reputation-salvaging PR attempt, but as the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, of a much deeper, even existential, national survival strategy.

Finally, the current geopolitical realities of Europe and their relation to this study cannot be ignored. The war in Ukraine has fundamentally contextualized my research, impacting Estonia's domestic and foreign politics and thereby my respondents' answers. Shortly before the submission of this text, Finland joined NATO, an event alluded to by several of the respondents, one which will have important ramifications for Estonia's national security. As also discussed by respondents, PM Kaja Kallas has played one of the most prominent roles in NATO in the past year, galvanizing the Alliance in support of Ukraine and a hawkish position vis-à-vis Russia: as Vaarik says, Estonia has never occupied such a prominent position not only within European, but international affairs. The context of Estonia's current reality is indeed so unique that it is safe to presume the

conclusions of this Thesis would have been very different had it been written merely two years ago.

Conclusion

This Thesis examines whether and how Estonian journalists have contributed to Estonia's presentation as a "Nordic country" in recent years. I have drawn on several communicative theories and practices to explore this phenomenon: *nation-branding*, or how countries utilize soft power under a neoliberal framework to shape their international reputation in a positive light; *constructionism*, which describes how journalists interact with public opinion to create media-based narrative frames; and *agenda-setting*, or how journalists use their platforms to communicate certain ideas at the expense of others, in essence setting a "public agenda." I also draw on historical and cultural perspective, both medieval and modern, to understand how Estonia might or might not be considered a Nordic country contemporaneously.

I interviewed six Estonian journalists in a semi-structured format to obtain their perspectives on this issue, critically analyzing their responses. Based on their statements and the accumulated literature, both theoretical and historical, I derive several conclusions: *first*, that Estonia possesses a Nordic heritage that is, of yet, imperfectly realized, and that previous nation branding efforts may have overstated some claims about the country while making others that are more accurate. *Second*, the question of a country's Nordicity is not only cultural-historical, but political. Estonia's conservative social attitudes and neoliberal economic model are the chief factors which exclude it from the Nordic region. Both factors are in large part traceable to the Soviet occupation era and its immediate aftermath. However, public attitudes regarding these factors have shifted in recent decades, in some cases quite rapidly. *Third*, due to geopolitical considerations as well as these public attitude shifts, Estonia is probably destined to become ever-closely more linked to *Norden* in the future, even if it never matches the Nordics' level of prosperity and economic self-sufficiency. *Fourth*, through their personal writing and/or activism, the interviewed journalists appear certain of Estonia's place in the Nordic community. However, the level of importance they attach to this issue varies, and they all maintain that important changes in the country's social attitudes and economic system must continue to occur before Estonia is perceived as Nordic regionally and internationally. *Finally*, the respondents appear to draw on widely held, pre-existing ideas

about Estonia's Nordicness, rather than self-generating these ideas and publicly disseminating them through their journalism. Nevertheless, their issues of concern—such as social democracy, social progressivism, and EU cooperation—are also causes associated, however imperfectly or imprecisely, with “Nordic values.” Thus, a goal of at least some Estonian journalism consists of bringing the country into greater alignment with what being a “Nordic country” means in the twenty-first century.

Much of the research about Estonia's Nordicness was written in the 2000s, when the country had gained some prominence for its embrace of digitalization and had emerged more fully from the shadow of Soviet rule. However, like many European states in the former Eastern Bloc, economic, political, and social progress has been rapid in Estonia. I believe, then, that this issue is deserving of another look, especially as Estonia enters its third decade of restored independence. Furthermore, much of the previously published literature has not utilized personal perspectives: without an *organically defined* base of knowledge to establish the parameters of research (“What is Nordic Europe? What is Eastern Europe? What is social democracy?”), data collection suffers from a crisis of operationalization, in which common terms are defined differently by individual social scientists, misaligned from and unsupported by how such terms are understood colloquially. As Europe continues its path of integration—and as most of the Continent now lies in what was once considered the “free West”—previously accepted terminology and its connotations (such as “Eastern” versus “Western” Europe) must be reconsidered in the light of far more complex cultural realities. My ultimate hope for this research is that it has shed some light on a case of *national identity creation*, which many European states underwent centuries ago but for some, especially in the former Eastern Bloc, is a process still incomplete.

Besides the skewed gender balance of the respondents—which should undoubtedly be remedied in future studies—the chief limitation of my research is its small sample size. However, I also believe this to be its chief strength. The small sample allowed me to conduct interviews of considerable depth and determine the threshold of data saturation with relative ease. Future research of this topic should undoubtedly be quantitative in nature, incorporating larger sample sizes so that trends can be more clearly discerned. However, the employment of qualitative methodology should by no means be neglected. Personal, in-depth perspectives have much to contribute to the field of national identity research, allowing for its complexities to be more fully revealed when at risk for being glossed over by purely quantitative methods. Future research would track the

perspective of Nordic identity in Estonia over the long term, ideally even decades, considering social, political, and economic realities while also monitoring the changes to Nordic identity within the Nordic countries themselves. Continued analysis of journalists' personal opinions and published news articles is also recommended: monitoring how a country or region's opinion leaders react to and explore issues of this nature can serve as a bellwether for general trends in public opinion and social development, especially as individual perspectives on Nordicity are closely tied to individual political attitudes.

Finally, despite Estonia's determined turn toward *Norden*, it will always possess a unique identity born from occupation by its eastern neighbor, an experience the Nordic countries have never undergone. Whether or not is ever fully and formally incorporated into *Norden*, Estonia will always be marked by its Eastern history, and share its experience of oppression and defiance with other countries that suffered under Soviet and Russian occupation. In this light, I conclude with a remark from Vaarik's interview:

I think that the war (in Ukraine) just redefined a lot of the ways Eastern European countries think of themselves. Maybe before, it was kind of trying to push some kind of image away...and maybe now, Eastern European countries have much more self-confidence. Maybe there is something in that history, something in that experience, that makes us understand better some parts of international life. And

we should use that experience. We should own it, because this is our...in a way, destiny.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Email to Estonian Journalists

Subject: Master's thesis interview request

Dear _____,

Tere! [Hello!] My name is James Niiler and I'm master's candidate in journalism at Charles University in Prague. As an American of Estonian heritage, I am highly interested in learning about Estonian culture, politics, and society.

For my master's thesis, I am exploring whether Estonian journalists have played a role in portraying Estonia as a "Nordic" country. I am aware that, in Estonia, being "Nordic" is linked with social and economic progress, and Estonia's close historical/cultural ties to countries of the Nordic region, especially Finland, Sweden, and Denmark.

In short, is Estonia considered to be Nordic by Estonian journalists, and to what extent has this ideal influenced their reporting? Is this idea even still relevant in 2023?

To this end, I'd like to request a video interview with you sometime between now and the end of March. The interview will last no more than 30 minutes and will be conducted in English. Later, I will analyze your responses and compare them to those of other respondents to determine common themes, perspectives, and attitudes.

Because this is information is not personal or sensitive, your name and occupation will appear in the thesis text, which will be publicly available on Charles University's digital database. However, none of your personal information will be published. If you would like to be interviewed yet have privacy concerns, please let me know.

Finally, I am aware that this subject may not align with your areas of journalistic interest, or you may simply be unable to take an interview soon. If this is the case, I would much appreciate it if you could provide contact information for another Estonian journalist who could be interviewed about this subject.

Thank you for your time, and I hope to hear back from you soon.

Aitäh [Thank you],

James Niiler
Erasmus Mundus Journalism
2021-2023

Appendix 2: Preliminary Research

RQ: (a) How many news articles about Estonia's relation to the Nordic region can be found on English-language Estonian media? (b) Does the proportion of Estonian population to relevant news articles warrant a full study of this phenomenon?

Methodology: Examine leading English-language Estonian online news outlets for the presence of articles about Estonia and the Nordic region. Specify the following in the websites' search tools:

Timeframe: 2000-2022 (launch of Brand Estonia to present)

Keywords: Estonia AND Nordic, Estonia AND Scandinavia

A proportion of 100 articles per capita (Estonian population : relevant articles) will serve as the threshold for further investigation of this topic.

<https://news.postimees.ee/search>

Estonia AND Nordic: 10
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 10

<https://news.err.ee/search>

Estonia AND Nordic: 677
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 240

<https://estonianworld.com>

Estonia AND Nordic: 273
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 107

<https://baltictimes.com>

Estonia AND Nordic: 0
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 0

<https://en.rebaltica.lv/>

Estonia AND Nordic: 0
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 0

<https://bnn-news.com/>

Estonia AND Nordic: 199
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 181

<https://emerging-europe.com/>

Estonia AND Nordic: 27
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 8

<https://balticworlds.com/>

Estonia AND Nordic: 46
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 31

<https://neweasterneurope.eu/>

Estonia AND Nordic: 16
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 15

<https://upnorth.eu/>

Estonia AND Nordic: 34
Estonia AND Scandinavia: 21

Subtotal Estonia AND Nordic: 1282
Subtotal Estonia AND Scandinavia: 613

Total hits: 1895

Estonian population, 2022	News articles	Proportion
1,326,765	1895	1:700.14

Conclusion: With 700 articles per capita, this preliminary research result meets and exceeds the specified threshold for further investigation.

Appendix 3: Excluded Words in Data Cloud Visualization

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interview
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Kaarel
Joosep
Marianne
Hans
Silver
Johannes