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**EAST-WEST DICHOTOMIES IN THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF ESTONIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY**

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**Abstract**

This article discusses Estonian national identity. It contends that identity, for both individuals and groups, is always constructed in opposition to certain Significant Others. For countries in Eastern Europe an important element of identity construction is the location between East and West, which complicates claims to Europeanness. The political and cultural space of Estonia's diverse history has been a key influence on the self-identity of Estonians and the way they are perceived by others. The 700 years of 'German rule' and, even more poignantly, the 50 years of Soviet power have had the most mythopoetic and real impact on the construction of Estonian national identity. Based on interviews, this paper studies how young Estonians construct their national identity through ethnic stereotypes, taking Germans, as representatives of the West. The discourses revealed in the interviews can be seen as embedded in the debate over the manifold character of European identity.

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**EAST-WEST DICHOTOMIES IN THE CONSTRUCTION  
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**Introduction**

In order to be someone, to possess an identity, we need to have ideals—who do we identify ourselves with?—and at the same time we need to know who we are not. Every nation is in a way located at a crossroads, either in the spatial or temporal sense of the word, often both. For countries in Eastern Europe one of the important dimensions in their identity construction is the location between East and West in Europe. This is true of a number of states in Eastern Europe—Estonia is far from being the only country to highlight the point.<sup>1</sup> Estonia's borders may be defined in different ways, and yet the desired identity position locates itself in the West. Various discourses are employed in legitimating the affiliation of the nation to the West of Europe. Significant Others help the nation to perceive itself as included in the group to which it wants to belong and to substantiate and explain this claim to Western identity.

Estonian national identity was, like that of many European nations, formed in the second half of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries. At that time the Significant Other—the basis of the national identity—with whom Estonians compared and contrasted themselves were the (Baltic) Germans, who constituted the higher classes in Estonian society. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Estonia gained independence from the Russian Empire, lost its German speaking minority, had to fight alongside and against both the Germans and the Russians to preserve its independence in World War II and finally lost it, the focus for Estonian identity gradually shifted to the outside. The question of belonging to the East or to the West then gained relevance. Since the changes in

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<sup>1</sup> Kusý, 1989; Matvejević, 1989; Kiss & Hunyady, 2005

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political conditions again at the beginning of the 1990s, Estonians have again been re-evaluating their national identity. A focus on the West, on Europe, has been of particular importance in this process. At the same time, the East is the negative Significant Other for Estonian national identity, whose difference is constantly emphasized.

National and ethnic stereotypes are a useful source for research on national identity construction and identity dynamics, as they tell us more about those who formulate them than those to whom they are applied. Stereotypes, predominantly defined as a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people,<sup>2</sup> are more than just cognitive images in people's heads, as Walter Lippman first put it in 1922.<sup>3</sup> Stereotypes are 'sets of traits ascribed to social groups (...) used to predict and explain behaviour.'<sup>4</sup> They gain currency due to their function of offering a social group a collective explanation of why other social groups behave the way they do.<sup>5</sup> As 'objectified cognitive and affective structures about social groups within society which are extensively shared and which emerge and proliferate within the particular social and political milieu of a given historical moment', stereotypes are constructed in everyday communication.<sup>6</sup> In other words, they are culturally communicated<sup>7</sup>—like social discourses. The capacity of stereotypes—'collective and psychologically deeply rooted images of the world, which reduce the complexities of life and bear a mythopoetic quality'—to create myths also calls attention to discourses in society.<sup>8</sup>

Stereotypes do not just describe the complex reality surrounding us, helping us to cope with our daily life, they are also normative, creating and re-creating reality. As Klaus Roth has put it, in a discussion on the influence of stereotypes on reality, stereotypes '*sind kognitive Formeln, verfestigte Überzeugungen, die der Umweltassimilation und Lebensbewältigung dienen. Es sind*

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<sup>2</sup> Stroebe & Insko, 1989:5

<sup>3</sup> Lippman, 1922/2004

<sup>4</sup> Stephan, 1985 in Horwitz & Rabbie, 1989: 106

<sup>5</sup> Hinton, 2000: 158

<sup>6</sup> Augoustinos & Walker, 1995 in Hinton, 2000: 158; Tusting et al., 2002: 669

<sup>7</sup> Gerndt, 1988: 11

<sup>8</sup> Zijderfeld, 1987: 26

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*historisch-wandelbare, aber doch ziemlich stabile Alltagskategorisierungen, Typisierungen der Umwelt, die aber dadurch, dass sie Verhalten steuern, auf die Realität zurückwirken, Realität beeinflussen und erzeugen können.*<sup>9</sup>

### **The role of the Other in the formation of national identity: Significant Others**

Benedict Anderson coined the term ‘imagined communities’, stating that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group.<sup>10</sup> An imagined community is different from an actual community since it is not based on everyday face-to-face interactions between its members. Instead, members hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity. As Anderson puts it, a nation ‘is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.’<sup>11</sup>

As early as 1934, Mead stated that the way we see ourselves and construct our identity is influenced by our interactions with those around us. The logic of stereotyping suggests likewise that it is others who make us into who we are. ‘National identity is formed and consolidated through interaction, co-operation or conflict with Significant Others; these processes influence the shape that national identity will take and the importance that will be assigned to individual features that characterise the ingroup.’<sup>12</sup> The notion of a Significant Other refers to another nation or ethnic group that is usually territorially close to, or within, the national community.<sup>13</sup>

Pille Petersoo explains that in the history of each nation there are Significant Others that are perceived either in a positive or a negative way.<sup>14</sup> Or, as Triandafyllidou puts it, ‘Because of their close relationship with the nation, Significant Others *pose a challenge* to it. This challenge may be

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<sup>9</sup> Roth, 1999: 23

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, 1991: 6-7

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Triandafyllidou, 2002: 31

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: 33

<sup>14</sup> Petersoo, 2005

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of a positive and peaceful character, when the outgroup is perceived as an object of admiration and esteem, an exemplary case to be imitated, a group with a set of features to be incorporated into the national identity, a higher ground to be reached by the nation, in brief, an *inspiring* Significant Other. This challenge, however, may at times take the character of a threat, it may be seen as a danger to be avoided, an enemy to fight against, an outgroup to be destroyed, if necessary, an Other that represents all that the nation rejects and despises: a *threatening* Significant Other.<sup>15</sup> A variety of other categorizations of Significant Others can also be found in the literature on nationalism.<sup>16</sup>

### **East and West in Europe**

The prevailing tendency in European East-West discourses to value the West and degrade the East is a historical one and can be traced back to the image of barbarians in the ancient world.<sup>17</sup> No matter where the borderline between the East and the West has been drawn, the peoples in the East have always been seen as backward, rustic and wild, while the West has felt itself superior to its eastern counterpart.<sup>18</sup> The Iron Curtain reinforced this separation within Europe and drew a distinct line between East and West.<sup>19</sup> Yet the meaning of the concept keeps changing—for example, Estonia, which used to be considered among the most eastward European nations when it belonged to the Soviet Union, has now become a kind of darling of Europe, almost considered part of the West.<sup>20</sup>

The East-West dichotomy is problematic: as the East is portrayed as inferior, no nation wants to associate itself with it.<sup>21</sup> Literature and the media offer numerous examples of the East-West discourse. To name a few, Quasthoff, for example, refers to ‘the negative picture of Russia

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<sup>15</sup> Triandafyllidou, 2002: 34

<sup>16</sup> For an overview see for example Petersoo, 2007: 120

<sup>17</sup> Koch-Hillebrecht, 1977: 245; Wolff, 1994; Nolte, 1995

<sup>18</sup> Koch-Hillebrecht, 1977: 246; Marącz, 1995

<sup>19</sup> Stráth, 2000: 418

<sup>20</sup> Orłowski, 1993: 164

<sup>21</sup> Hahn und Hahn, 2002:21; Ther, 2000

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among Western nations’ and describes Russia as a ‘backward’ nation.<sup>22</sup> Fischer mentions in *Die Zeit* that Hungarians and Poles in London complain about the British media’s use of the term ‘Eastern Europe’, which often connotes something gloomy, dirty or criminal.<sup>23</sup> In 2004, shortly before Estonia’s membership of the EU, German writer Susanne Gaschke, also writing in *Die Zeit*, says ‘A successful makeover is of major importance in Estonia., [which presents an image of] nightmarish tower-block slums, despairing lumpenproletariat, criminality, drug addiction and HIV.’<sup>24</sup>

When a Finnish newspaper describes Estonia as Finland’s eastern neighbour<sup>25</sup> (*sic!*), this notion has definite negative connotations and conveys a sense of superiority. Hahn and Hahn note that when a person refers to the uncivilised nature and economic backwardness—poverty, filth, underdevelopment—of the Slavic peoples, it is always a reflection of his or her own positive self-view—in the case of the German middle classes, for example, of their positive view of themselves as bringers of culture.<sup>26</sup> In short, we need only think of *Le plombier polonais*, a catch-phrase which originated in France 2005—and which was then used excessively as a symbol in positive identity construction both by the West and by the East—to be reminded of how entrenched such views of the East are.

The Eastern European countries are affected by the same mentality. For example, Žurek noted in a study of Polish students that the countries the students rated most positively were those in Western Europe; followed by those in Central Europe; whilst those in Eastern Europe were rated last of all. These results, claims the author, conform to the general tendency, in the former Eastern Bloc, of being open towards the West and indifferent towards the East.<sup>27</sup> As Laakso puts it so well: there seems to be a tradition amongst Eastern Europeans of identifying the eastern border of

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<sup>22</sup> Quasthoff, 1973: 87f.

<sup>23</sup> Fischer, 2003: 14

<sup>24</sup> Gaschke, 2004

<sup>25</sup> Kyntäjä, 1997: 68

<sup>26</sup> Hahn & Hahn, 2002: 32

<sup>27</sup> Žurek, 1997: 628

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European civilization with that of their home country.<sup>28</sup>

In essence, the discussion about East and West in Europe has to do with defining Europe itself and deciding (preferably once and for all) who belongs to Europe and who does not; who is part of the West and who belongs to the rest of Europe; with whom the limited resources, that is, welfare, is to be shared, and who has the right to influence the ever-changing European identity.

### **Russia as the East par excellence**

The importance of a category lies not only in what is defined as its essence, but also, and perhaps even more, in what is excluded, i.e. who or what does not belong to the ingroup. Whereas for Europe, these Others are the Turks, the Muslims,<sup>29</sup> for Estonia, this crucial Other is Russia.<sup>30</sup> Eastern Europe has traditionally been defined through Russia. Esterhazy writes that after Napoleon lost the crusade against Russia in 1812–15, the theoretical borders of ‘the East’ shifted—in the minds of the Western élite—from the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea or the Chinese border to the front door of Prussia.<sup>31</sup> Historical events that followed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century labelled Russia as the empire of despotism, the constituting Other through which the West could form its identity.<sup>32</sup> After World War II, the idea of a no man’s land was replaced by the Iron Curtain, which, in Churchill’s speech in Fulton, Missouri in 1946, was envisaged as a long-term, armed border line between Eastern and Western Europe; this demarcation was maintained not only by means of military and economic weapons, but also culturally.<sup>33</sup>

In recent times, the dividing line has been shifting. After the last enlargements of the European Union, the line between the East and the West seems to have moved to the western border of Russia, Byelorussia and the Ukraine, although it is always possible to recall the configuration

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<sup>28</sup> Laakso, 2001: 235

<sup>29</sup> Stråth, 2000: 23

<sup>30</sup> Goble, 2005

<sup>31</sup> Esterhazy, 2003

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Stråth, 2000: 417

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that applied over the past two hundred years.<sup>34</sup> Huntington's 'civilizational conflict' largely legitimizes, since 1993, the othering of these countries,<sup>35</sup> which guarantees the popularity of his notion among Eastern European scholars.<sup>36</sup> Even so, once in a while 'Old Europe' will give in to the habit of seeing the Eastern European countries as a source of irritation,<sup>37</sup> although time (and presently economic hardship) are cementing ties between EU member states, making the possibility of a new 'curtain'—even if not an 'iron' one; even if only a 'lace' curtain or even a transparent, but harder 'glass' curtain, or a socio-economic 'golden' curtain—less and less possible.<sup>38</sup> At the same time the fear of Russia, of its difference, its otherness, has not diminished,<sup>39</sup> and Russia does not make it any easier for the West by demanding a special position, special treatment whenever possible, be it economically or politically. In short: there is no defining Europe without considering what role Russia will play in it.<sup>40</sup>

### **The role of historical tradition in defining the Estonian nation**

During the emergence of Estonian national identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social classes in Estonia were separated by language: the lower classes spoke Estonian, the upper classes spoke German. Therefore, the Baltic Germans were at this time the Significant Other, the model that Estonians were keen to follow. Triandafyllidou claims that the dominant nation is rarely an inspiring Significant Other for the emerging group, except for post-colonial movements,<sup>41</sup> which was the case with Estonia. Ideologically, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the stereotypical picture of Baltic Germans was used to shape Estonian national identity during the establishment of the Republic of Estonia; by contrasting the Estonians with the Germans (the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.: 419

<sup>35</sup> Huntington, 1998: 253

<sup>36</sup> Kuus, 2004: 481; Kirch, 2002: 89, 91, Herkel, 2006

<sup>37</sup> Esterhazy, 2003

<sup>38</sup> DeBardeleben, 2008a

<sup>39</sup> Ilves, 2005; Önnepalu, 2004

<sup>40</sup> Schöpflin, 1989; Vajda, 1989; Kuus, 2004; Pachlowska, 2004; DeBardeleben, 2008b; Koschmal, 2008; Noonan, 2008

<sup>41</sup> Triandafyllidou, 2002: 39

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peasants with the higher classes) it was possible to motivate people and mobilize them for political purposes. The fact that as late as in the 1930s hatred dominated in the Estonians' attitude towards Baltic Germans<sup>42</sup> shows how effectively the national myth of Germans as oppressors was employed at the beginning of the Republic of Estonia. The heroic myths that contrasted Estonians with Germans—Estonians' fight for freedom in the 13th century, 700 years of serfdom and oppression under the German rule, and finally the hard-won independence—were applied for the purpose of the birth of the nation.

World War II marks a turning point in Estonian history. After being incorporated into the Soviet Union by violence, Estonia became isolated from the Western world for fifty years. During this time, while on the one hand the traditional national myths about Estonians' heroic past in the fight against German invaders and 700 years under German rule were kept alive, on the other hand, there were no more German speaking inhabitants in Estonia and contact with Germany was non-existent. Contact with Russia and Russians—who were blamed for the loss of independence, for repressions, and for inhumane living conditions in the totalitarian state—became a part of everyday life. The Russian speaking minority in Estonia was constantly growing with the support of Soviet occupation powers. Estonians perceived this as a threat for the future of the Estonian language. A comparison with Russians formed the new basis for Estonian national identity while dreams of independence, democracy and material welfare were tied to the Western world, where Estonia was perceived to belong.

After 1991 contacts with the Western world were re-established. One of Estonia's priorities—as well as that of the other Eastern European states—was to join Western defence structures, NATO and the European Union, in order to secure its position as an independent state. The link between identity and national security is obvious; the discourses about national identity include the idea of the Europeanness of Estonian culture and values, and at the same time the notion

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<sup>42</sup> Jürjo, 1997: 199

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of Russia as the Other that is different and hence dangerous not only to Estonia but to Europe as a whole.<sup>43</sup> A new ethnic mix in Estonia (nearly 30% Russian-speaking minority and an absence of Baltic Germans) had brought along with it a new perspective: the Germans no longer held the role of the negative Other—this position was occupied by the Russians.

Having taken the theoretical concept of stereotypes and the stereotypical picture Estonians hold about the Germans<sup>44</sup> as the starting point for my qualitative research, this revealed certain dichotomies concerning the perceptions of Germans held by Estonians, and the Significant Others in the national identity construction of the Estonians.

### **Germans are linked to Russians in the Estonian identity construction**

In-depth group interviews were carried out with young Estonians. This is a social segment that reads, communicates and travels more than average. Therewith we can see them as opinion leaders as they are in possession of a comparatively high social capital and will, also simply because of their age, influence future discourses in Estonian society more than the older generations. Using qualitative research methods, answers to the following questions were sought:

- What are the features of the stereotype of Germans at the crossroads of time?
- What is its function in the construction and re-evaluation of Estonian national identity today?
- How are stereotyping discourses employed in constructing the European identity of the Estonians, especially in relation to the East-West axis of identity formation?
- What kind of outlook does this reveal for the future development of the Estonian national as well as European identity?

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<sup>43</sup> Mole, 2007

<sup>44</sup> It is important to distinguish between Germans and Germany here: when Estonians speak of Germans in a historical context, they are referring to the Baltic Germans, the historical local minority, and not to Germany; as the former have ceased to exist, the present discourses speak about Germany and Germans coming from Germany—yet, the interviewees do not distinguish between them.

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The fact that in Estonian history both Germans and Russians have played the role of oppressors influences identity discourses today: it was not possible to talk exclusively about Germans in the interviews, as constant comparisons with Russians were made. The two nations seem to be inseparably interlinked in Estonian national awareness, although attitudes towards the two differ.

Here are some examples from interviews:

*'It is difficult for a small nation, we compare all the time: a German, he is not like [a Russian] (...) On the other hand there is the comparison with Russians. I mean, there is the comparison constantly—which do we prefer? You cannot just look at the Germans; you always have to make a choice between two negative historical examples. Yes, that's it: who is worse?'*

*'[World War II] was actually started by the Russians and everyone who thinks that it was the Germans, they should have a deeper look into history. Really it was the Russians.'*

*'Towards the end of the socialist era, goods that reached Estonia from Eastern Germany were of a high quality [compared with the poor quality goods from the Soviet Union]. That shaped our attitude among other things.'*

*'Anyway, by then [the 1940s] we already had much more in common with Germans than Russians. And we still do.'*

Looking back at World War II, we notice an explicit role allocation: Germans are perceived excessively positively, whilst Russians are more or less demonized. Obviously the 50 years of Soviet occupation overlaid memories of earlier experiences, resulting in a surprisingly positive image being bestowed on the Germans—with hindsight even on the soldiers of Nazi Germany:

*'...when a German [soldier] came to inspect [the house] at night, he knocked on the door and asked politely whether he could search the house. But if a Russian [soldier] came, he forced the door open with his foot, maybe hit a child first, and shot the dog.'*

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*'When my grandmother was alive, she told me about both the Germans and the Russians. I must say that there were positive things about [the Germans] (...) the Germans seemed to have heard about manners in war. And you could say that they also had some other positive features; for instance, they were generally cleaner than other foreign troops [i.e. the Russians]. (...) therefore their image in history is a bit more positive. I mean, even in war you could see that they had culture.'*

*'Elderly female relatives ... do keep saying that they liked the German boys but (...) they did not like the Russian boys.'*

*'The most important thing is that while Russians came and ruined and spoiled, Germans rather added something.'*

In this dichotomy the positive and negative Other are obvious: the Germans cannot be the negative Other since that role is occupied by the Russians, no matter what negative aspects might be revealed about the Germans. The reasons for this lie in the combination of recent Estonian history with the East-West logic in European thinking. Moreover, since there is no German minority in Estonia today and Germany is geographically not especially close, the Germans are perceived solely through the mirror of the past, and the Estonian past is strongly overshadowed by the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dominated by Russian, not German atrocities. Last but not least, Germany is in the West, which lends it a positive pre-notation. At the same time Russians are present both in the memories and in the everyday experience of the Estonians.

### **Germans as the positive Other**

If before World War II the picture of the Germans was negative, necessary at that time for constructing a national identity, for building up a nation, then today the attitude towards historical events has changed: on the one hand, the German conquest of Estonian territory in the 13<sup>th</sup> century—one of the cornerstones of the Estonian national identity—is still criticized; on the other

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hand, that fact is mostly supplemented with a less attractive alternative: if Germans had not conquered Estonia and united it with the Christian world, the Russians could have conquered the country and thereafter the Estonians would have been a part of *them* and *their* ‘lack of culture’. Considering the fate of smaller Finno-Ugric peoples living in Russia, Estonians have the feeling that if the same had happened to them, neither Estonian language nor culture would exist today.

The conquest by German crusaders is seen today as having been a catalyst that accelerated the development of Estonian culture and made Europeans out of Estonians. Even if a part of ancient Estonian culture might have been destroyed during the conquest, Estonians do not condemn this destruction because today one sees only the apparent alternative of German conquest—Russian conquest—and the option of whether to be united with the Western or the Eastern cultural area, of which the former is obviously the more attractive option. As an interviewee puts it,

*‘If in the 13th century Germany and Denmark and Sweden had not sewn up Estonia, Estonia’s development would have been more primitive. I mean, Estonia’s development would have stagnated. I mean, it [the conquest] was an advantage for our development.’*

The following excerpts from interviews support the idea of Germans as positive Others who made Europeans out of Estonians:

### **Germans as are perceived *Kulturträger* in Estonian history**

*‘They have been teachers and educators.’*

*‘... for example the role of the German language in shaping the Estonian language, or how many words the language has borrowed from German.’*

*‘They came, conquered and shaped us.’*

*‘Our culture has been influenced by Germany a lot. Or learned from them.’*

*‘Besides, the culture ... has all come from there [Germany]. (...) The Germans have probably influenced us the most.’*

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*'They trained us for 700 years, didn't they?'*

*'We are who we are thanks to Germans.'*

*'Thanks to them we are a civilized people.'*

*'It [the conquest] probably accelerated all kinds of development.'*

*'Germans have shaped Estonians according to their liking. It is the politics of the back door of the manor; the things that came that way, flowerbeds, underwear, handkerchiefs (...) On top of that loads of words of every kind and the Estonian family names (...) The Germans took a nation of people and shaped them ... culturally. (...) In that way Germans have been developing Estonians. That is very positive. On top of that the grammar!'*

*'Cultural history and literary language.'*

### **Similarity between Germans and Estonians**

Constructing similarities with Significant Others is very important. The opinions of the interviewees on this topic are seldom based on personal experience; rather, attitudes based on positive or negative feelings seem to dominate.

*'They are similar [to Estonians] simply because they were here for such a long time. (...) They were here for quite some centuries. Generally they have had a lot of influence. Very similar cultures and things come out of this. (...) We are soaked through with it. (...) They have the same culture there.'*

*'The cultural space is rather similar.'*

*'Their cultural space is similar first of all because the Germans ... came, influenced and created.'*

*'Probably thanks to those ... Baltic Germans I feel rather related to them [Germans].'*

*'The cultural background is so very similar. It includes a great deal ... I mean much of our culture has its roots in the Germans (...) things that we have integrated into our culture. Starting*

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*with the fact that the grammar of the contemporary Estonian literary language has been altered following the example of the German language. And the rest of the spheres of culture as well, before the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was the main source (...) that makes our cultures incredibly similar (...) And World War II is closely linked to Germans as well. And Estonians immigrated to Germany and served in the German army. (...) Germany is part of Estonian culture a lot. In short—we are similar to Germans because they have had their share in shaping us.'*

*'It surprised me [while in Germany], how similar they are ... to Estonians.'*

*'They [the Germans] are absolutely normal, cultured people who can communicate with you normally ...'*

*'I think there is very little difference if we compare them with Estonians.'*

Similarity with Germans is at the same time a difference from Russians:

*'The Germans had clean socks.' [in the war]*

*'During the russification... German officials were immediately replaced by Russian officials, who came to work late, wearing disorderly, filthy clothes.'*

*'One could compare the Slavic and the German culture. She [a German student] was intelligent, exact and proper, bothered no one. But the Slavs [Russians students] walked around, laughed and blustered.'*

### **Germans as negative Other**

Historical discourses that do not contain the dichotomy of Russians-Germans still include elements of the traditional picture of the Germans as the negative Other, in keeping with the historical tradition of how Estonian national identity has been defined. Everybody is familiar with these discourses as they are still part of Estonian society and education, although they have been overlaid by a different attitude. The following examples from the interviews show that while the image of the Germans as oppressors persists, this image has been softened by the more recent experiences of

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Soviet oppression.

*'It cannot be denied that they have destroyed much of our local stuff [culture] and replaced it with their own.'*

*'It is a pity that of the original Estonian culture, I mean, before the Germans ... probably nothing of it reaches into the present day, it was changed that much, took a hard blow, so that whatever has reached us is the outcome of Estonian culture forced into a German mould. I mean what we have now is probably a result of German influence. (...) I feel pity for that.'*

Discourses such as these are on the whole rare and include at the same time their own rehabilitation. The interviewees, after saying things like the above, often go on to start rehabilitating discussions like the following:

*'Those bad times have been forgotten.'*

*'I guess they used to be the conquerors and the bad guys.'*—*'But that was a very long time ago.'*—*'That was a very long time ago. That has been forgotten by now.'*

*'I think it [the attitude towards Germans] has changed a lot.'*—*'It has changed radically. In the Soviet time the Germans were the good ones.'*

### **Germans as negative and positive Other at the same time**

Here the possibility of the Other to be at the same time the positive and the negative Other is obvious: the Germans are the positive and the negative Other at the same time unless we start talking about the Russians—then the negativism is solely seen on the Russian side. One interviewee sums it up as follows:

*'I think that the connection [between Estonians and Germans] is very schizophrenic in our culture. Because on the one hand you see Germans as those who brought written culture to the Estonians, and on the other hand they were the aggressors and the fact they brought us their culture was negative ... I mean how they brought us the culture and how they came and anyway ... I mean*

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*the fact that they came at all was negative. And on the other hand we consider that to be the beginning of our culture, the first written historical sources date from that time, and written culture has its beginnings there. Because [of that] we joined the Christian church and with that ... Central Europe of that time ... I mean medieval Europe. We become an equal part of it like the rest of Europe. (...) On the one hand those events are very negative and on the other hand ... they took place ... and there are some positive things about it...'*

### **East and West in the Estonian identity construction**

The East-West dichotomy in Estonian national identity construction is interesting: although Estonians consider themselves to be Europeans (and if we think of the meaning of the notion of Europe, it suggests that they consider themselves to be Western Europeans), it is not that simple as they do not always have the necessary support for this. The contradiction emerges from the difference between self-perception and the perception by others, the latter providing the necessary support for maintaining the identity. As the label offered by the others of Estonia—Significant Others such as the West—has in the last decades not been unconditionally European but rather mixed, as in the case of all the Eastern European countries, different discourses have emerged.

### ***The older Estonian East-West discourse: backward East – superior West***

According to the older and predominant East-West discourse, Estonia belongs to Western Europe – together with countries like Germany or Finland. The evil, terrifying Other is the East, personified by Russia. The constructed similarities and other positive connections with Germans and other Western nations like Finland support this discourse.<sup>45</sup>

Based on this discourse, the West is perceived positively, as a *Kulturträger*. Estonia is seen as bound to the (Western) European cultural area due to the conquest of German crusaders. Russia,

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<sup>45</sup> For example Korhonen, 2006

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the Other, whose difference is emphasized, remains ‘untouched’ by the West. Russia is perceived as a threat to the Estonian language and culture, and therefore also to the Estonian identity—both externally, because of its political rhetoric, which demonstrates that it still does not fully accept Estonia as an independent state, and internally, because of the large and poorly-integrated Russian-speaking minority in Estonia.<sup>46</sup>

As this discourse places Estonia in the West, the East is seen as alien—backward, incapable of development, uncivilized, and, above all, dangerous. These words are used by the interviewees to describe Russia, whereas Estonia, as a Western country, is seen as hardworking, successful, capitalist, individualist and civilized. This attitude coincides with the centuries-old European discourses contrasting the East and the West.<sup>47</sup>

The perception of Germans as the positive Other supports the older East-West discourse: the role of Germans in Estonian history is seen as exceedingly positive—Germans as *Kulturträger*—‘forgetting’ that the Germans used to be the negative Other in history.

### ***The newer Estonian East-West discourse: East rising, West freezing***

The East-West discourse described above filled the Estonians with keen anticipation as the Iron Curtain fell in the early 1990s: they would be welcomed as the ‘lost son’ into the arms of the West. It was not the hope of material help, but that of psychological acceptance, of emotional support, and of recognition as Europeans and equals, that was disappointed: Western Europe’s reaction to the re-establishment of the Republic of Estonia was full of preconceptions.<sup>48</sup> Politically, the former socialist countries were met with a wait-and-see attitude. Economically, Estonia was treated as an outsider and as a developing country. The younger generations did not even know that Estonia had ever existed as an independent state or as a member of political alliances. The Estonians perceived

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<sup>46</sup> See for example Mertelsmann, 2005; Mole 2007

<sup>47</sup> Quasthoff, 1973; Koch-Hillebrecht, 1977; Stanzel, 1997; Kõvamees, 2005

<sup>48</sup> Bideleux, 2007

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all this as contempt—instead of a warm welcome they felt themselves labelled as inferior. Moreover, the West's equation of Estonia with Russia—viewing it as Eastern, post-Soviet, different—was diametrically opposed to the Estonians' own view of themselves as culturally Western, a victim of the Soviet terror. In short, an act of differentiation instead of inclusion was perceived.

The interviewees comment on this as follows:

*'[When visiting Estonia] I would expect them [the Germans, i.e., Western Europeans] to be arrogant or to have a stuck-up attitude, because ... they've come from their important country to poor Eastern Europe.'*

*'They see Estonia as ... part of the Eastern Bloc – even their correspondence is in Russian. They could at least write in German – as it happens, my German is better than my Russian.'*

The enviably high living standards in the West also played a role in generating the newer East-West discourse, as did the decrease in euphoria after years spent dreaming of liberty and idealizing the West.

Thus, as a reaction, a reversed East-West discourse emerged, positioning Estonia in Eastern Europe. We can even speak of the West as the negative Other here.

According to this discourse the East is seen as modern and the West as uninteresting and degenerate. This view contradicts the first East-West discourse, since Estonia is now seen to be on the same side as Russia. Fifty years of shared history, symbols, myths, and discourses that the West cannot understand form the basis of the perceived differences between the East and the West. In this context, the socialist past is regarded as fertilizing—in order to survive in a socialist system, one is said to have needed a lot of creativity. According to this new East-West discourse, the Western European states are *the Other* and Eastern Europe is perceived as *us*. By changing the viewpoint, the whole value system is altered: the East—young, dynamic, creative, vital—represents a desirable

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alternative; the Western countries (Germany, Finland and so forth), in contrast, are regarded as stagnant, since their citizens have lived for decades in the welfare society that Eastern Europeans had dreamed of, and thus have lost their creativity, spontaneity, adaptability and spirit of adventure.

When describing the way they saw Western Europeans, the interviewees used the following keywords: lack of flexibility, wearing blinkers, lack of skill, inexperienced in everyday matters, and so forth. Here some examples from interviews:

*'Yes, the Estonians are somehow more open. I'd say—the way they think is more open. It seems to me that the Germans think in pretty narrow frames. (...) They seem to wear blinkers. /.../ [The Germans] do not adapt to changes; they keep doing things the old way. (...) The Estonians are better at adapting to changes.'*

*'Quite a lot of Germans visit Estonia, (...) I know some people whose [German] acquaintances are active hunters. Hunters, for example, have a high opinion of Estonia—and Estonian hunters have a high opinion of German hunters because of their culture. (...) Well, if you send him [a German hunter] into the forest, he will be pretty helpless, but if you teach him a few things, he makes quite a good hunter.'*

*'Their [Germans'] efforts have nothing to do with anything but their own well-being (...) They are very comfortable and that makes them rather boring. (...) It is the superiority complex of an Eastern European, I know. I have the feeling that an Eastern European is dynamic, open, striving towards the world, tolerant, interesting. And a capitalist from the West is ... how to put it ... a cliché personality ... someone who is very limited by domestic needs. (...) The last fifty years of our past surely create a difference like that.'*

*'Maybe they do not always notice that they are arrogant. (...) They do not notice that they assert themselves excessively. With the arrogance of a civilized people. (...) I have realized that they do not mean to do it.'*

*'... it is something that has its roots in their society, it does not characterize only Germans but*

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*everybody who comes from ... well, from our perspective, a welfare society. They are much, much more naïve than the Estonians.'*

The following remark by Tunne Kelam, who was elected to the European Parliament in 2004, appropriately illustrates the attitude Estonians have towards Western Europe: 'We go to Europe in order to change it with our own experience and beliefs.'<sup>49</sup>

The Eastern European identity is supported by the following discourses which emphasize its difference from that of Western Europeans, although without speaking of similarities with other Eastern Europeans, or even less with Russians:

### **The different social order in recent history**

*'It shows that they have lived years in a welfare society. (...) Many things are so elementary and normal for them that for us... [are far from commonplace] (...) In that sense, in the negative sense of the word they have been spoiled by that welfare society and they are comfortable. (...) Maybe that reduces creativity. (...) They have seen everything, they are used to [life the way it is], they do things the way they are used to doing them.'*

*'In a welfare society they are brought up in a different way—they are taught to count calories—and money—already as children. I think that we [the Estonians] are more easy-going, and it has to do with our political background.'*

*'Is he [i.e. the Western European] really that tolerant? I mean, is he that considerate? I think he is rather unbending, holds on to his principles (...) He is by far not as flexible as ... as for instance Estonians in their approaches.'*—*'The Estonians are flexible only because they have had to become flexible ... during the recent socialist area, because without flexibility you just would not have made it here.'*

*'[The influence of the Soviet area] is exactly that what makes us different.'*

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<sup>49</sup> Kelam, 2004

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### **Constructing otherness, differentness**

*'[Estonians] ... have had to keep thinking all the time.'*

*'Actually, if an Estonian really wants to, he will always get the better of him [i.e. the Western European].'*—*'Sure we are better!'*—*'The Estonians are actually better.'*

*'Germans (...) try to analyse everything around them all the time. (...) we take what happens around us as inevitable, yeah. (...) It is different in Estonia—here a man goes to a restaurant, he spends all his money partying and then he discovers—damn, there are still two weeks until payday, I have to survive on cabbage leaves until then. (...) Estonians have neither matter-of-fact calculation nor strict discipline. Germans do.'*—*'I do not like people who take the calculator with them to the pub.'*

*'[They are] boring!'*

*'Germans are the most boring people to party with. (...) parties in the student dormitory ... the Germans there were the first to leave or some even ... complained about the noise or something like that.'*

*'[The Germans are] stouter than let's say the average. (...) It is their lifestyle, typically they live (...) a very comfortable life. (...) ... they spend their holidays in one place, sit there, drink beer, watch TV, talk, maybe sing something, a beer song, and play cards or something like that with each other. They are happy among themselves.'*

*'If the law says something then that's what they do. They don't want to break the law. If the light is red, they do not want to cross the road.'*—*'They are brainwashed, that's the thing.'*

*'Me as an Eastern European and a Soviet kid, I do not understand the me-me-me [attitude] ... I would rather prefer ...'*—*'Us, us, us...:'*

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### **Otherness: helpless Westerners**

*'One guy [a German] had heard that wow, great, Estonians throw vodka in the sauna. He wanted to try it out. It took us some time to convince him that he wouldn't survive that.'*

*'People who have grown up in a welfare society they are so wonderfully remote from everyday life. I mean ... but that does not characterize only Germans. (...) if my neighbours were Germans (...) this would be the source of their problems. I might have to ... help them with something.'*

*'You will help them [the imaginary German neighbours] with, I don't know, maybe opening the toilet pipe since he has never done that before and something happens with the drain on a Sunday.'—'That probably is typical for the whole Western world...'*

*'I live in a wooden house with a joint toilet by the staircase. (...) What would they do with such a pot in a sort-of cupboard? It would be interesting to imagine a German in a place like that.'—'Germans wouldn't move into a house like that.'*

*'I happened to flick through a [German] men's magazine. There was for example an explanation how to chop wood. With drawings. (...) it illustrates well the level (...) we will reach as well.'*

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The (imagined) geographical location of a nation is of major importance to its self-perception, as are its Significant Others. Taking into consideration the European East-West logic, the positive Significant Others for the Eastern European countries tend to be in the West, and the links that are made in order to see one's own nation on the Western side, can be manifold and sometimes, for an outsider, farfetched.<sup>50</sup> Yet, sometimes the nation lacks the resources to be able to see itself on the desired side, as the West has always been an exclusive club, to which the membership is not granted easily—a differentiation instead of the hoped for inclusion takes place, forcing the nation to

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<sup>50</sup> For example Cercel, 2011

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construct a different identity in order to maintain a positive self-identity.

It could be argued that the positive Other can always be the negative Other at the same time because of the interplay of inclusion and differentiation that affects the nations that are located at the crossroads of space and time. History provides the tools for identity construction, and yet it is clear that the importance of Germans for Estonian identity formation today lies merely in the way they are seen as the ‘domesticated’ representatives of the West. Considering both Estonian East-West discourses, we see an interesting phenomenon: the historical German stereotype remains rather constant, yet is rated either positively or negatively, depending on the context in which it is used and how it serves the identity position of the Estonians. In the (positive) mirror of the historical East-West discourse the Germans seem in many ways similar to Estonians, legitimizing Estonians’ Europeanness, whereas in the (negative) mirror of the newer East-West discourse differences are emphasized, in response to the perceived act of differentiation performed by the West. In the second narrative, Germany is perceived as a politically and economically mighty Western European state that, like the rest of the West, because of the difference in recent historical experience cannot understand Estonia’s problems. Historical ties can be and are used to legitimize Estonia’s status as a European, therefore Western, country—the ‘German connection’ is the strongest argument whenever ‘a doubt arises’. The shared Finno-Ugrian roots of Estonians and Finns as well as the short period in history in which Estonia was ruled by the Swedish crown represent cultural ties that are of marginal importance in comparison with the Estonian-German historical connection, but which nonetheless serve as handy arguments to support the Estonians’ claim to Europeanness. It is likely, however, that if further in-depth research into these connections were undertaken, strikingly similar results could be expected: on the basis of the clues that exist (for example the studies by Korhonen or Cercel) and because these discourses mentioned in this article take Germans as representatives of the West, presumably the same discourses would be revealed in

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talking about Finns and Swedes (or, though it may sound farfetched here, the British<sup>51</sup>).

Moreover, as Estonia is in the European Union, in the union of Western European countries, and the economic situation has been comparable with that of the West for a number of years already, the act of inclusion has taken place and the discourses that see the West as the negative Other are losing their importance—even if they will not disappear entirely as long as there are people who remember the various transition periods.

Surprisingly, as it was not the aim of the research, the interviews confirmed that there can be no positive other without a negative one: No matter how much Estonia looks towards the West, Russia remains the other important reference point. The West and Russia are strongly linked in the Estonian East-West discourses, and therefore in Estonian national identity construction.

Further changes in identity positions will certainly take place at the crossroads between East and West in the future, as the construction of a positive self-identity is a dynamic process. The struggle for identity, national and cultural self-assertion, and last but not least for recognition from others will continue to be one of the major concerns for Estonians, as for everyone else, in the changing world with, among other things, its altogether changing identity categories.

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<sup>51</sup> The perceived similarity of Estonian and British humour, for example, was mentioned in the interviews.

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