

That Small Nations Might Be Free

Reimagining Estonian and
Northern Irish Pasts and
Futures



*Scenes from the
1988 documentary
A Tale of Two Visits*

Fegan, 2023 (40:50-42:03)

B-Roll: Army vehicle driving down a busy street. Vehicle's siren fades into narrator's voice.

Narrator: On to Belfast, and to the all-too familiar sounds of sirens. But what do our visitors make of it?

BELFAST, CAR-PARK, NIGHT.

Older Estonian Man: I don't know... it's tragic I know, and I feel a deep sympathy and sorrow for what's happened and what's happening there... (looks intently at the interviewer off-camera) and there are some... some similarities between the situation in... some parts of the Soviet Union.

B-Roll: Soldiers carrying rifles on residential street, civilians looking on.

BELFAST, CAR-PARK, NIGHT.

Young Estonian Man: I have followed the news about the things that take place there. Not that I'm afraid! But, but it is... (pauses, resumes speaking slowly) It's just that the situation is very... similar in some parts of Estonia already, it may happen, things like that... (trails off, looks towards the ground)

SCENE END.

Text: Della Pirrie

(University College London/University of Helsinki)

When studying in Estonia, a professor called Tallinn a 'divided city'. I remembered a novel we'd had to read in school about Glasgow's sectarianism, called (naturally) *Divided City*. Three boys, a Catholic, Protestant, and an asylum seeker from the Balkans, become friends as Glasgow's role as a microcosm of *The Troubles* wanes¹. It was the first time I understood that Glasgow and the wider Northern Irish conflict were considered an anomaly in Western Europe. The novel questions this idea, that this violence was something found to the East and South of the North and West, in the Balkans or elsewhere even further. But Tallinn as a divided city felt odd: to me, the fact that inter-ethnic relations between Estonians and Russian-speakers were difficult, but non-violent exempted Estonia from this moniker. This revealed my own biases; a city can be divided without bombings backing it up. But how did Estonia avoid this? And why then is the conflict between Catholic-Republicans and Protestant-Unionists (or indigenous Irish and settler descendants?) different?

Estonia often found me tired. Tired of my own people, in Glasgow, Scotland, and Ireland, for somehow not fighting like Estonia for sovereignty, language, culture. Are we so pathetically apathetic? So comfortable with colonial status quos? Too ignorant to learn our own languages? Tired of others' opinions on the disintegration of our national movements: too violent, too angry, not peaceful, popular, constructive. Tired of Estonia, envious, twistedly resentful: what did they do that we did not, to have what they have, and what we do not? Tired of my ignorant, incessant coveting of Estonia's situation. A successful independence campaign doesn't negate the pain, violence, and suffering. Many in Russia would invade the Baltics tomorrow, existing interference and espionage insufficient for ravenous territorial expansion. How could I envy such a situation? Regardless of lingering colonial inclinations, many in England now care little for Britain's unity; not enough to fight for it. Tired of cyclically hating myself and my choices: studying the languages of Eastern Europe while my own rot at the back of my tongue. And tired, as ever, of the legacy and maintenance of violent imperialist structures in the British Isles going unquestioned – but that was nothing new.

¹ Massive historic Irish migration to Glasgow meant the dynamics of *The Troubles* played out on a smaller, relatively less violent, scale.

This was a culmination of the then three years I'd spent in London studying Eastern European history, languages, and culture. How many hours had I devoted to the Habsburg Empire's national awakenings, Polish revolutionaries, the plight of Eastern Europe's small nations a constant refrain? As a famous ballad goes, Irish soldiers fought and died in World War One that small nations might be free, while British forces massacred those in Ireland seeking the same². There was a frequent funny feeling: in a classroom in the British Imperial core, next to someone making an intelligent point about the harmful legacy of Ottoman ethnic quotas. Before class began, they'd made fun of my accent and questioned how I got into the university, given the inferiority of Scottish education.

Historians often used Scotland and Ireland as examples when analysing Central and Eastern Europe's national movements; when we were assigned such a reading, I arrived in the seminar biting my tongue. Do you know what I know? Do you see what I see? Despite knowing it was self-centred, annoying, off-topic, I still sometimes raised my hand when the parallels were utterly unavoidable. The professor would nod and I would scan my classmates' faces. Will you see what I see? Will you take this knowledge further?

Universities tell prospective students that area studies degrees offer 'transferable knowledge and skills'³. This is done to encourage



applicants from any background, irrespective of their initial interest in the region. And the universities aren't wrong. I've learned to recognise authoritarianism through studying interwar Hungary; analysed propaganda techniques via Czechoslovak soap operas. A strength and pitfall of Eastern European studies is that few of the area's perceived 'problems' are unique – they're merely more recent or clear-cut. I'd even say that if you graduate from an area studies programme with only specific knowledge about the area in question, and no ability or willingness to apply this knowledge, you've failed.

Through an Eastern European prism, I understand my own country, my own national identity, more than ever. So what? What good

² From *The Foggy Dew*, lyrics by Father Charles O'Neill, 1919.

³ See SSEES at UCL listings for prospective students for BA programmes, particularly Politics and Sociology, HPE, and Economics.



threatened by Russian aggression. Yet they endure – even thrive.

Alternate histories are pop-history. YouTubers imagine the implications of Germany's continued partition, Trotsky gaining power over Stalin. They're entertainment, reductive by nature. But the exercise of revisiting world-shaping events and imagining outcomes for seemingly minor changes has value. It challenges assumptions of history's concrete nature, introducing creativity and flexibility to a discipline some still insist seeks one, objective truth. Quantitative papers often compare Estonia and Northern Ireland: similar demographics, industries, social problems (rates of alcoholism, suicide etc.). I'll push this further.

does it do, to notice socio-linguistic patterns in Russification and British policies towards the Scots language, to see Irish national awakens in the Austro-Hungarian parliament? To see my entire life, my mother's, my grandmother's, with new eyes, unsure if I'm hallucinating? For my studies, it's more detrimental than anything else. I'm distracted, seeking my own identity in studying others'. No real comparison is possible: too many variables, too many differences. And who cares? Any parallels are irrelevant, curiosity and coincidence, something entertaining at dinner parties.

But I can't help myself. If comparison is the thief of joy, studying Eastern Europe robbed me blind. As it stands, these small nations have what mine never will. They succeeded, and are celebrated for it. It came at unimaginable costs, tireless efforts and lives lost, still

The following are imaginary versions of real newspaper articles and maps: one from 1989 covering the Baltic Way demonstration, the other from 2023 on Northern Ireland's so-called 'Peace Lines'. I've altered some historical details, names, and placenames to imagine each country in the place of the other; the articles remain otherwise unchanged. Some disbelief needs to be suspended but nevertheless, I hope my reimagining and analysis of Estonia and Northern Ireland show despite comparison's futility, alternate histories provide new ways of looking at what is thought to be understood. The enduring idea of Eastern Europe's (generally negative) exceptionalism limits Western self-examination: ignoring our own problems and limiting any ability to learn. Area studies degrees provide 'transferable knowledge', but one might find similar knowledge at home. It may simply be more comfortable seeking this knowledge in the other, rather than in the mirror.

Tallinn's Peace Walls: Potent symbols of division in Estonia are dwindling - but slowly.

Riina Padar once had compelling reason to appreciate the high walls that separated her Estonian part of Tallinn from the adjoining Russian neighbourhood. For five dreadful months in 2000, she and other mothers had to walk their daughters to the local Lutheran school past an Orthodox mob who hurled insults, rocks and bottles. Even by Estonian standards it was a vile protest and made headlines around the world. Walls did not cover the whole school route, but Riina still valued them as a bulwark. "I'd never felt that hatred before."

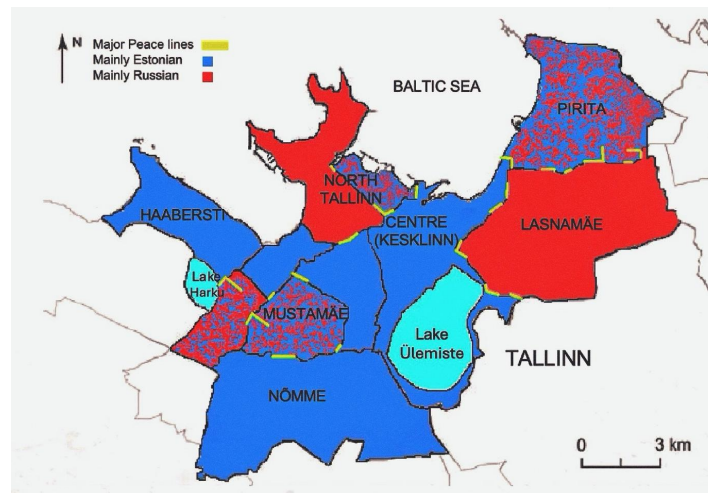
Retaining "peace walls" from the Smuta (Estonian - Raskused, translated as The Troubles) between Estonian and Russian areas seemed advisable even though the 1999 Peace Treaty had supposedly ushered in an era of peace and reconciliation for the autonomous region of Estonia. In 2015 one of Riina's teenage daughters, Katre, fell in love with an Orthodox boy. It was a shock. Questions abounded. Was he a bigot? Was Katre safe visiting his area? Was Sergei safe visiting their area?

Eight years later the couple are still together and have their own children. The Padar family love Sergei "to bits", enjoy visiting his family, and support the recent removal of a barrier that had separated their Estonian area from the neighbouring Russian one. "You just realise, we're all the same," said Riina, who is now 54.

Yet society and politics are sectarian and dysfunctional. Estonian and Russian paramilitaries still wield control in some communities. Children still tend to go to Lutheran or Orthodox schools, families living in Lutheran

or Orthodox areas. Peace walls still proliferate, especially in Tallinn and Estonian-majority Tartu-Moscowtartu, where the conflict began in the 1960s, Russian-majority police force attacking Estonians marching for civil rights. One wall between the neighbourhoods of Lasnamäe and Pirita stands 45-feet tall, three times higher than the Berlin Wall, and in place for twice as long.

Research shows a sharp decline in sectarian incidents and much greater mixing between Estonians and Russians in workplaces and socially. A recent survey showed 24% of relationships were mixed, triple the 8% recorded in 1999. But the most potent symbols of division - the barriers erected in the 1970s and 1980s to deter killings are dwindling very slowly.



For some Russians the walls are protection against perceived nationalist ascendance. Estonians now outnumber Russians, the Estonian Popular Front has become the biggest party, making Kaja Kallas the region's putative first minister, and Russia's increasing isolation has revived the spectre of an independent Estonia. All are psychological shocks.

"Only one side benefited from the agreement, and it wasn't the Russians. It was a stitch-up," said Grigorii, a 67-year-old retired soldier. Peace walls were one of the last defences against encroaching Estonians, he said. "The minute it's down they'll be over and move into our housing."

The 1998 agreement was a collective leap of faith - a declaration that separate identities could govern together while seeking different destinations. The hope that accompanied the agreement today feels naive. Politics churns with rancour, squabble, crisis. But the killing stopped, and horror, grief and despair ebbed. The result is limbo: a messy, inchoate, post-conflict dispensation. It is not pretty. And yet, compared with what came before, it gleams. - **Rein Kender, Estonian Correspondent** (Adapted by Della Pirrie)

Irish Mark Partition Anniversary with Human Protest Chain

UKGBNR: Hundreds of thousands of Irish people linked hands across their homelands on Wednesday in an act of peaceful protest, demanding the right to restore their "independent and reunified statehood".

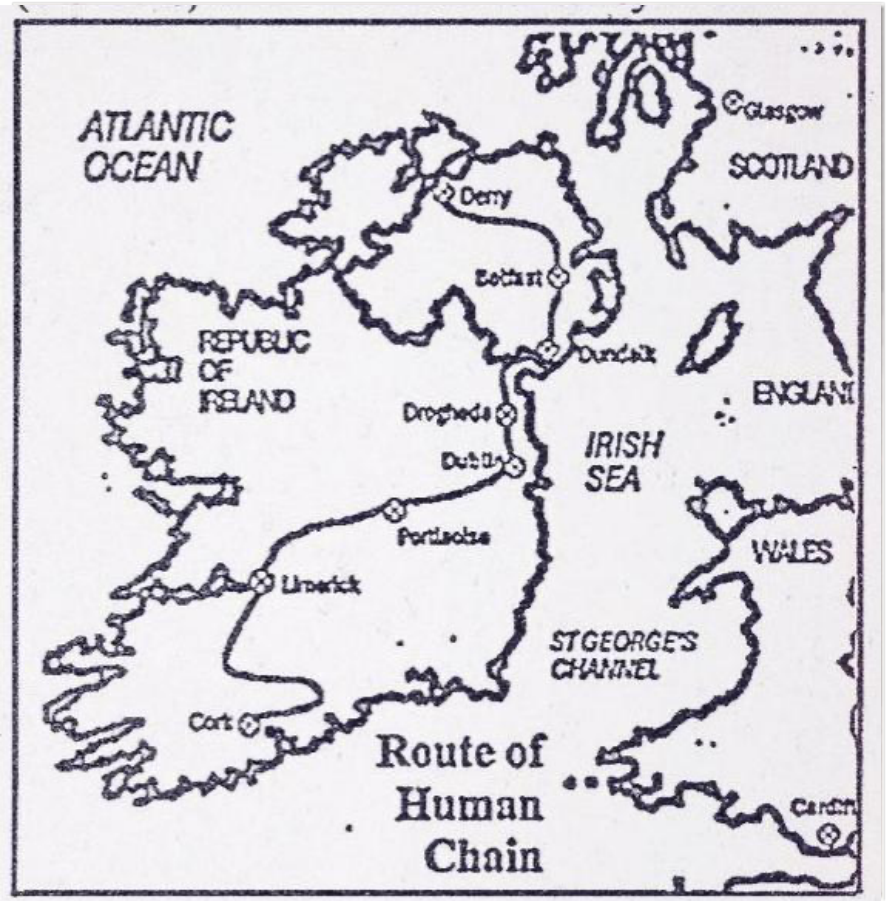
Some government officials joined the leaders of independent political movements in a sharply worded declaration issued to mark the anniversary of the British partitioning of Ireland, preventing six counties in the province of Ulster from joining the Republic in independence.

The statement said that Britain had "infringed on the historical right of the Irish nation to self-determination, presented ruthless ultimatums, now occupies the North of Ireland with overwhelming military force and, under conditions of military occupation and heavy political terror, carried out their violent annexation."

The statement, which advocated the right of the Irish to determine their own political futures, was drawn up jointly by representatives of popular front movements from both the North and the Republic of Ireland.

"Self-determination is the natural desire of all nations," said the President of the Republic of Ireland, Patrick Hillery, speaking from atop the medieval Walls of Derry, originally built by the British imperial state to protect colonial settlers from the indigenous population in the 17th century, to a vast crowd gather below about to begin a human chain across the island.

Organisers estimated that nearly a million people stood side-by-side in the evening chill, hands clasped in a human chain from the cobbled streets of Derry-Londonderry more than 500 kilometres (311 miles) across the border to the city of Cork near the island's southern coast.



The crowd estimate could not be confirmed, but aerial film broadcast on Irish television showed a nearly continuous line of people stretching across the countryside.

The day was marked by defiant but measured declarations of independence, reflecting the growing passion for freedom and uncertainty about what London will tolerate.

"During this past year, we have come ever closer to the ideals our people have carried in their hearts for 70 years," said Maura Ó Leathlobhair, a leader of the Northern Irish Popular Front and a deputy to the British parliament. "All of us want to have freedom, and freedom without independence is impossible," - **Aaron N. Vein** (*Adapted by Della Pirrie*)

Analysis

In August 1989, the Baltic Way was covered and praised in Western media as a powerful demonstration of popular will, solidarity, and peaceful protest against the USSR. In Northern Ireland, no such event occurred: the 20th anniversary of the British Army's deployment to Northern Ireland passed eleven days before.

Many view Soviet collapse as stemming from the oppression of national identities, their independence a necessity and a victory. Attitudes towards similar situations were not always so positive. In 1991, Margaret Thatcher said "All of us, I think, agree that the Baltic republics, which were illegally taken...should have their independence," (Matus, 1991). This drastically differs from the narrative on Northern Ireland – particularly hypocritical coming from Thatcher, who significantly contributed to the escalation of violence in Northern Ireland. Some claim that any British atrocities during The Troubles were necessary: the IRA were terrorists, at war with Britain. This prevents analysis of the conditions causing the conflict. Peaceful demonstrations in the 1960s for Catholic civil rights were met with violence from Protestant-Unionists, escalated by British troops, prompting retaliation from the provisional IRA⁴ (Melaugh, n.d).

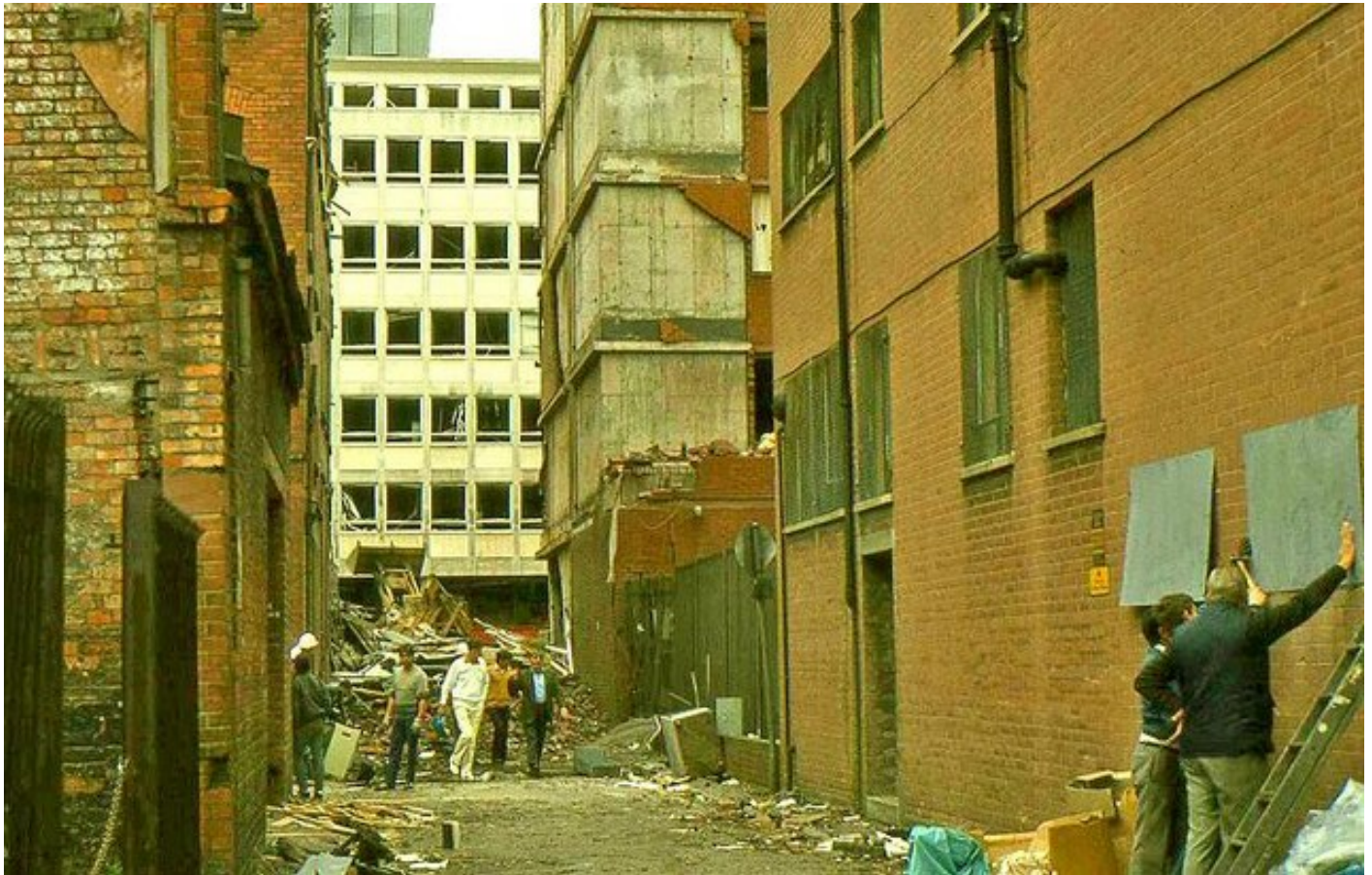
Crucial support for Estonia's peaceful demonstrations came in the late-1980s, when activists were joined by the Estonian political establishment (Beissinger, 2002:165-170). Solidarity between Eastern Bloc and Soviet independence movements provided legitimacy, strength, and protection. In Northern Ireland in the 1960s, state institutions were overwhelmingly Protestant-Unionist, one of the civil rights issues causing The Troubles' outbreak; as the conflict escalated, Catholic-Republicans had limited

outside support due to the consequences of appearing supportive of IRA terrorism⁵. Estonian activists capitalised on international and domestic institutional support that was not available, to either nation, in years previous. Historians now often claim the Singing Revolution was able to flourish due to glasnost' and perestroika (Ryynanen & Talviste, 2023). Estonian dissidents in years past were unable to act as successfully as their successors, through no fault of their own; the growing weakness of the colonising state allowed peaceful protest to deliver a critical blow. Peaceful protest partially helped end The Troubles, but civic action met with violence had sparked it. For both, the more powerful party controlled the outcomes of non-violent protest.

A strength of the Baltic independence movements was their legal argument. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that caused their annexation and subsequent occupation was declared criminal and void, constituting a legitimate claim for reverting to inter-war independence (Tedla, 2011). The partitioning and continued occupation of Northern Ireland was 'legal'. The Irish Free State's government accepted partition in 1921 (prompting a civil war), after years fighting the war of independence. They were depleted and feared that Britain, recovered from World War One, would destroy them. But does this acceptance, made under duress, negate any legal claim to reunification? Not quite, especially today. The terms of the Good Friday Agreement that ended The Troubles require a referendum to be held if a majority in Northern Ireland desire one. Recent polls indicating as such have yet to be acted upon (Butterly, 2022).

⁴ Examples of such issues included blocking of access to social housing and extremely limited voting rights. Described in texts such as O'Dochartaigh (1997). *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and The Birth of the Irish Troubles*.

⁵ Clandestine support was another story, with weaponry provided by external sources, such as Irish diaspora communities in the US, Libya, and supposedly the USSR under Andropov.



I in no way want to imply the USSR was benevolent, progressive, or peaceful – even perceived independence aspirations were often violently suppressed. But one reason Northern Ireland’s civil rights movement led to war and Estonia’s non-violent campaign led to independence was the colonising state’s response. Britain in the 1970s was primed for a full-scale military operation, interning and torturing thousands for ‘suspected’ Republican sentiments, funding paramilitaries and prompting terrorism, beginning a cycle of retaliatory violence (Melaugh, n.d). The USSR in the late-1980s was at its brink – the timing was critical for Estonia’s success in pushing them over the edge.

Haas’ paper on Estonia’s non-violent inter-ethnic relations notes that Soviet control limited civilians’ access to weapons (1996:57), vastly different to Northern Ireland. Soviet ideology was officially opposed to Russian supremacy; independence activists were chiefly criticised for stoking ‘nationalist sentiment’ (Haas, 1996:52). Aggrieved

Russian-speakers had limited means to weaponize their own national identity in counter. Crucially, Russian-speakers never felt seriously physically threatened. Estonian criticisms focussed on the Soviet state: Russian-speakers a symptom, not a cause. Haas believes they experienced discomfort, not danger, producing little cause to seek support from the Russian federation – unlike Protestant-Unionists who turned to Britain and militarily organised to defend themselves (1996:60). The Russian state might take the Baltic Russian-speakers’ cause upon themselves, but Estonian Russian-speakers haven’t organised in a legitimate manner to argue for such intervention.

Moreover, Estonia’s Russian-speakers are not homogenous: the name describes language, not ethnicity. Many have roots in Estonia, Ukraine, Poland, Armenia, etc., meaning no unified identity with which to agitate. The fact Estonia’s Russian-speakers largely arrived during the Soviet period further limits their unification. A

Protestant, British-loyalist community has existed in Ireland for centuries, the population of ethnic ‘Britons’ in Ulster being partition’s justification (Ulster’s lucrative industries in shipbuilding and mining – unrelated).

Estonia is highly irreligious, even prior to Soviet annexation (Haas, 1996). Religion scarcely factors into perceived differences between Estonians and Russian-speakers. This removes an additional divider that could be exacerbated in a situation of escalating violence. This is wholly different from Northern Ireland and many other sites of ethnic conflict. Yet increasing secularism in Northern Ireland, particularly amongst youth, means less differentiates Protestant-Unionists from Catholic-Republicans. The Protestant population is also ageing; new immigrants to Northern Ireland are often neutral or even supportive of reunification, culminating in the 2021 census showing Protestants as a minority for the first time (Butterly, 2022).

Estonia’s prosperity promotes co-existence. It is materially a better decision for Russian-speakers to maintain Estonia’s (and their own) stability (Tammaru et al., 2015). The material argument is one prompting hope for Irish Reunification; worsening socio-economic prospects can limit feelings of loyalty towards Britain. The north of Ireland was historically wealthier but deindustrialisation, economic downturn during The Troubles, British austerity, and Brexit reversed this dynamic. Northern Ireland is now among the most deprived areas of Western Europe; the material benefits of reunification now apply to the North, not the Republic (Barrett & Bergin, 2025). My mother once said that if my grandfather were alive to hear that, he’d have fallen down where he stood.


Language is the most blatant barrier to Estonian social cohesion. Yet the only reason language is not as similarly divisive in Northern Ireland is because there is little chance Irish will return as even the Republic’s dominant language. Anglicisation has been thorough the world over, but nowhere so much as the British Isles. In an imaginary reunified future, non-Irish citizens would manage as many Irish in the Republic do. The fact there are Estonians who speak only Estonian is something so inconceivable for Ireland (or Scotland) that I truly cannot imagine a world where it is so. Setbacks in defending the Estonian language can be extremely painful, and it remains a problem for society and the state, but the fact the problem exists at all is, to me, a beautiful thing.

There is one Northern Irish development Estonia could look to: efforts of civil society, charities, organisations, and individuals to improve cross-community relations: sports, travel, arts, every hobby and leisure activity you can think of. Similar projects have existed in Estonia, but further community organising could hasten Russian-speakers integration. Yet this demonstrates the issue’s lesser importance compared to Northern Ireland. Many Estonians (rightfully) feel integration is not their responsibility, unlike Northern Ireland where citizens must actively seek reconciliation and co-existence, as violence was perpetrated between communities and civilians. Mass-emigration from Estonia post-1991 saw those with strong ties to Russia leave. Those remaining have chosen the new Estonia, with all that that entails (Haas, 1996:58).

If Estonia had fallen into the violent, escalatory cycle Northern Ireland did, if Russian-speakers



and Estonians formed paramilitaries killing civilians at home and abroad, the Russian government supporting one side and largely controlling the conflict's narrative, how would perceptions of Estonian independence be impacted? If Northern Ireland had sang their way to freedom, would outsiders be more open to the cause? The question of why Estonia and Northern Ireland's independence campaigns diverged, in method, public perception, and results, seems less to do with the cause itself, and more about how their systems of oppression responded. The structures subjugating Estonia totally collapsed. They must manage the legacies of Soviet occupation and threats that that entails, but now on their own terms. In Northern Ireland, the structures remain, slowly chipped away at but still standing, propped up by fears that past grievances remain flammable.

My degree gave me transferable knowledge. Yet I rarely got the impression they meant for us to consider the other as better. My admiration of Estonia is only ever marred by an unfair envy. Assumed Western supremacy and beliefs that the East will forever lag behind is incorrect and harmful; as it stands, it's a fairytale helping those clinging to the last slivers of imperialism sleep at night. I constantly invoke Estonia as inspiration for my own country: their trains and recycling system, their defence of their own small nation's right to thrive. I keep close to my chest a small hope that I might someday also live in a country with the imperial past like a bad dream, having gained independence with an old union's collapse, not through violence but by someone being convinced that we deserve it. Imagining alternate histories is futile, but aspiring to an attainable, better future is not. I know it exists, I've seen it. 

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