

Surviving finitude: Survival as a constructed foundation of identity

Ott Puumeister

Department of Semiotics
University of Tartu
Jakobi 2, Tartu 51014, Estonia
e-mail: ott.puumeister@gmail.com

Abstract. The article deals with the biopolitical underpinnings of the Estonian national identity construction which is analysed by concentrating on public media coverage of (1) the Estonian Population and Housing Census 2011; and (2) the passing of the Registered Partnership Act in 2014. The object of analysis is the discourse – or the manner of speaking – that becomes apparent in the discussion of these cases. It is called the *discourse of survival*, since the main aim of national identity construction is to ensure the perseverance and preservation of this identity. This enables us to insert political identity construction into a biopolitical framework in which the political subject is understood as a fundamentally finite living being. In conceptualizing biopolitical finitude and the accompanying need of survival as the logic of identity construction, the article suggests the semiotic logic of this type of identity process as auto-communicative solidification of identity that has a presentist temporal structure.

Keywords: biopolitics; survival; nationalism; auto-communication; security; presentism

Introduction

This drive, which rules the highest as well as the basest of human beings – the drive for the preservation of the species – erupts from time to time as reason and passion of mind; it is then surrounded by a resplendent retinue of reasons and tries with all its might to make us forget that fundamentally it is drive, instinct, stupidity, lack of reasons.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science* (2001[1882]: 28)

This article is concerned with one such case of “the drive for the preservation of the species” erupting into “reason and passion of mind”. The paper deals with Estonian national identity construction in public discourse, regarding the media coverage of (1) the Estonian Population and Housing Census 2011; and (2) the passing of the Registered Partnership Act in 2014.¹ Both the Census and the Partnership Act were objects of extensive, and sometimes heated, public debate in Estonia, raising questions about how Estonian national identity should be constructed and, stemming from this, Estonian politics be envisioned.

The cases reveal a *discourse of survival* structuring collective national identity construction; it can be called this since in it national identity is founded upon survival of the fundamentally finite identity. The problem of survival should be understood here in a very literal way: what should one do in order not to die, in order to postpone one’s demise. When one speaks of the survival of a society with a unified collective identity, the political measures to be taken can be justified in non-political terms, and thus seemingly outside of any ideology. Politics that is guided by the problem of survival very often seems to be founded on the necessity of pragmatism. My aim in this article, however, is exactly to highlight the political aspect of survival; in other words, how the problem of survival is, in itself, an ideological operator² and how it is employed in the discursive construction of collective identity. The main problem of the present article can be formulated as follows: what happens to the discourse of cultural self-description if it is founded upon survival?

Unlike Nietzsche, however, we will not be viewing the aim to survive as fundamental “instinct, stupidity, lack of reasons”; instead, it is understood here as biopolitical

¹ I have used mainly opinion pieces from national newspapers and online publishing platforms, and thus my aim is not to offer an exhaustive overview of national self-description, but simply one of its aspects, namely that which deals with the necessity of survival as the foundation of national identity. The paper thus presents one specific aspect of Estonian national(ist) self-description that is not representative of the entire national self-description. Thus, whenever the article speaks of the construction of national identity, the characteristics and modes of signification described should be understood to apply only to the discourse analysed. It is not my intention to generalize the findings to all discourses dealing with Estonian national identity.

² Although the example of the Registered Partnership Act analysed in this article shows the connection between the problem of survival and conservative political ideology, one should be careful to limit this problem to only one strand of politics. ‘Ideological’ does not here characterize left-wing, centrist or right-wing politics, but rather refers to Laclau’s (1996) understanding of an hegemonic relationship in which a particular signifier comes to designate the fullness of a community, or of community as such. Ideology, thus, does not refer to a particular political world view.

rationality³ and not as a fact about the nature of living beings in general. In the context of biopolitics, human beings are governed according to their biological processes and characteristics. The aim to survive is employed by biopolitical government as the logic according to which individuals and collectivities can be rendered governable. Although biopolitics is not commonly seen as primarily dealing with identity construction, it is here that we can find how the connection of biopolitics and identity construction might be thought of: biopolitical government constitutes political subjects by making their identity construction rest on an experience of finitude within which it is fundamental to strive to survive. Section 1 of the paper deals with this connection – the connection of the management of finite living bodies to the construction of identity – and offers a semiotic interpretation of the logic of this type of identity construction on the basis of Juri Lotman's understanding of auto-communication.

Section 2 of the article concentrates on modern finitude and the biopolitics of security and resilience. It is argued here more thoroughly that the experience of finitude and survival are, from the beginning, biopolitical concepts resting on the figure of the modern finite human being as analysed by Michel Foucault (2002[1966]). Here we also touch upon a fundamental temporal structure underpinning identity construction as constant survival – that of presentism as described by François Hartog (2015), in which both the past and the future are seen to be extensions of the present. The presentist structuration of temporality creates an understanding that in order to survive, one must prolong the present state of affairs as long as possible. Survival, in this case, does not signify overcoming of limits and transformation, but constant sameness through time and history.

Equipped with these notions – biopolitics, government, auto-communication, survival, finitude, presentism –, we will analyse the two cases of national identity construction in Estonian public discourse in Sections 3 and 4 of the paper. As already mentioned, this manner of self-description will be called the discourse of survival since the main aim here is not the construction of a specific type of identity but that this identity would survive.

³ Rationality does not refer to rationalization – as Foucault (2000: 299) puts it: “I think that the word ‘rationalization’ is a dangerous one. The main problem when people try to rationalize something is not to investigate whether or not they conform to principles of rationality but to discover which kind of rationality they are using”. Biopolitical rationality, then, should be taken as to mean the logic according to which biopolitics operates and is being legitimized.

1. Power, government, and auto-communication

The analyses of biopolitics do not commonly focus on identity construction. According to Michel Foucault (1978: 144), biopolitics “makes life live” by controlling bodies and managing populations, and it does this by normalization, “at the expense of the juridical system of the law”: biopolitical government deals with human beings insofar as they are understood as living organisms. The operative logic of biopolitics is to be found in the apparatus (or *dispositif*) of security the primary concern of which is to normalize human beings’ life and its milieu by preventing both internal (such as disease) and external dangers (see Foucault 2009). This is why Michael Dillon (2015: 51) has stated that “biopolitics is not initially a politics of identity or political subjectivity [...]”. However, this is not to say that it has nothing to do with identity; Dillon himself continues by saying, “[...] which is not to deny that biopolitical security practices are mined as a rich source of novel subject positions” (Dillon 2015: 51). The present article will explore how biopolitics and identity are connected in the construction of Estonian national identity within the limits of what I have named the discourse of survival.

In order to understand biopolitical government more thoroughly, we should insert it into Foucault’s general understanding of power (relations). Foucault (2009: 1; see also 1978) famously declines to give us a theory of power, or “what power is”. He does not provide a theory of power since, firstly, he sees power as analysable on account of how it operates (and not on the basis of what it is), and secondly, since power is relational. We should thus understand what type of relation we are dealing with and how it operates. Power relations cannot be understood as causal relations; that is, they are not to be conceptualized as someone forcing someone else to act in a way that s/he otherwise would not.⁴ This would mean that power operates in a linear and causal manner. Instead, they are conceptualized by Foucault as constitutive, or in other words, productive.⁵ Power does not force a person to do something, it opens up a possible trajectory of action, or, better, power simultaneously delimits a field of choices and makes it possible.

Consequently, Foucault’s approach to power entails that the object of power (in biopolitics, the life of humans as living beings) is not acted upon or intervened in directly (by means of violence or direct suppression, for example). A relation of power presupposes that the governed or managed object be always recognized as a subject who is capable of choice. Relations of power are thus not acts of direct exertion of force but should be viewed as the conduct of conduct of others instead (Foucault 1982). So, power relation is a relation in which certain behaviours are made possible

⁴ This is the definition of a power relation proposed by Robert A. Dahl (1957: 202–203): “[...] *A* has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do”.

⁵ See Foucault’s analysis on how the apparatus of sexuality creates and constitutes individuals as sexual(ized) social subjects in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1978).

and compelled – not necessitated or caused. Under conduct we should also include self-conduct, that is, how individuals act upon themselves and, essentially, how they construct themselves as subjects. A relation of power is a constitutive relation of subjectification. And government, in this context, can be understood as a structured set of power relations that “structure the field of possible actions of others” (Foucault 1982: 790); the individual is compelled to subjectify him- or herself in a certain manner in this field.

If we insert biopolitics into the more general context of power in Foucault’s work, we should recognize biopolitical government as the production of possible ways of subjectification.⁶ Biopolitics should thus not be viewed as direct intervention into biological material, but as the creation of a possible field of choices⁷ for becoming a political subject that centre on concerns of biological life (health, fitness, aging, procreation, etc.). When speaking of subjectification, however, we cannot avoid the issue of identity construction: becoming a social and political subject means to create a certain kind of identity. Biopolitics is not separable from the semiotic mechanisms of identity construction. Consequently, it becomes important to analyse the effects of biopolitical subjectification on the mechanisms of collective identity construction, and to study how biopolitical concerns influence the semiotic logic of the constitution of political subjectivity.

As noted above, the primary concern for the biopolitics of security is that of the survival of governed subjects; Marc Abélès (2006) has even called biopolitics the politics of “survival” (*survivance*)⁸ that concentrates on the inherent fragility of

⁶ It is not an easy task to differentiate clearly between subjectification and identity construction since these notions are extremely close to each other. Foucault speaks of subjectification in essentially two senses: firstly, how, within the context of knowledge/power, individuals are subjectified by objectification, that is, how they are made governable in the sense that their behaviour can be managed; secondly, how individuals turn themselves into subjects of their own actions, behaviours, states of mind, etc. These two poles are closely tied together: we cannot speak of individuals subjectifying themselves outside the context of power/knowledge. Subjectification is thus always related, in one way or another, to government and power relations (see Foucault 1982). With identity construction, however, we can speak of the internal semiotic logic of how an identity is constructed without focusing on the social and political restrictions and demands it has to take into account. In principle, it is thus possible to analyse identity construction based on its inner structuration; however, in this article, we are analysing the inner structuration of identity as related to biopolitical government, and thus from the viewpoint of the constitution of a political subject (the collective national identity of Estonia).

⁷ On the making possible of certain types of humans, see also Hacking 2002.

⁸ Abélès distinguishes politics of “survival” (*survivance*) from the politics of survival (*survie*) that always refers back to the opposition between the I and the Other. The politics of *survivance* constitutes its subjects as fundamentally insecure and precarious because of their very fact of living and existing, and not because they are threatened by an external enemy.

humans as living beings. It is not the Other, the enemy, against whom a living being is to be defended, but its own inherent processes of life that are always liable to fail. We will deal with the problem of survival – and its connection to the specifically modern human finitude as analysed by Foucault – in the next section. For the moment, we can stress that granting primacy to the notion of survival underscores the needs of self-defense, defense against one's own inherent finitude, and the maintenance of sameness in time which, in the context of collective identity construction, is characteristically framed in terms of “traditional” values and behaviour. In the words of Lotman and Uspenskij (1978: 215), “culture very often is not geared to knowledge about the future, the future being envisaged as time come to a stop, as a stretched out ‘now’; indeed, this is directly connected to the orientation towards the past [...]”. We will return to the problem of how this notion of ‘traditional’ is invented from the present political perspective when discussing the notion of ‘presentism’, but let us now concentrate on Juri Lotman's discussion of two fundamental directions of communication in the construction of culture and identity: (1) communication in which the sender and the receiver are distinct, the ‘I–s/he’ direction; and (2) communication in which the sender and the receiver are identical, the ‘I–I’ direction (Lotman 1990). Based on these directions of communication, we can elaborate the semiotic logic which is created by the primacy of the notion of survival in identity construction.

It is important to stress the distinction between the synchronic or spatial nature of the ‘I–s/he’ direction and the diachronic or temporal nature of the ‘I–I’ direction (Lotman 1990: 21). While synchronic communication entails the exchange of messages in a code that both the ‘I’ and the ‘s/he’ share, diachronic communication signifies that the ‘I’ sends to him- or herself a message that is already known to him or her, and it is the code or context that shifts. Thus a single message could be repeated in different contexts and be interpretable based on multiple codes, during which the meaning of the message transforms. But not only the message; more fundamentally, auto-communication – that is, the ‘I–I’ direction of communication – “leads to a restructuring of the actual ‘I’ itself” (Lotman 1990: 22). We can say that while the ‘I–s/he’ communication establishes speakers’ identities in synchrony (that is, differentiates between the addresser and the addressee), auto-communication underpins the maintenance and transformation of identity:⁹ on the one hand, Lotman speaks of

⁹ Conceptualized in this way, we can understand that concerns of maintenance and of survival are by no means the preconditions of identity creation. As regards maintenance and the aim to survive we are dealing with very specific concerns of symbolic cultural identity in its chronestestic aspect: an identity only needs to survive if it can be imagined to disappear in the future. Identity construction in the ‘I–s/he’ direction of synchronic communication needs no such representation; and even the self-sameness of an individual is capable of persevering in mechanisms of memory without concerns of survival: chronestestic representation of subjective time and memory are entirely different orders of signification (on chronesthesia, see Tulving 2002).

the restructuring of the 'I' in diachronic auto-communication; on the other hand, he says that cultures in which auto-communication is dominant tend to be more static (Lotman 1990: 35). How should we interpret this seeming paradox?

A possible answer would be that while auto-communication opens up the possibility of transformation, it does not necessitate any change or transformation. It is one thing to talk about the fundamental possibility of transformation through auto-communication, but wholly another to say that each auto-communicational act of interpretation leads to change. The 'I-I' direction can just as easily be used for maintenance, stabilization, and totalization of identity. The possibility of interpreting one message according to different codes and in different contexts also opens up the possibility of solidifying the message so that it retains its sameness – despite slight variations – throughout numerous iterations.¹⁰ Re-interpretability does not, then, necessarily entail transformation, or even loss, of identity; on the contrary, identity can be solidified in this mechanism as different codes and contexts can be used to state the same message, the core signification of which does not change. And this mechanism is of crucial importance to the diachronic maintenance of a (cultural, social, political, individual) identity, as opposed to the synchronic differentiation of the identities of the addresser and the addressee in the 'I-s/he' direction of communication.

The view presented in this article holds that the biopolitical notion of survival structures political identity construction in such a way as to render it closed; further, survival concentrates identity construction on the maintenance of this very identity, thus privileging a temporal structure in which the past and the future have to be located in the present. Focus on maintenance in its turn privileges auto-communication, the constant reiteration of the message of identity in different contexts. In this process, the Other comes to be seen not as a partner in communication, but as a possible threat to the auto-communicative identity process.

This is not to say, however, that all the discourses concerning Estonian identity can and should be reduced to a closed and static type of auto-communication, concerned only with the self-preservation. For example, the process of Estonia's integration into the European Union has clearly resulted in a more open type of auto-communication in which change and preservation can even be seen as complementary: only by way of becoming European can one become truly Estonian, a position already voiced in the early 20th century by the literary movement Young Estonia (*Noor-Eesti*) (see Olesk, Laak 2008). Becoming (fully) European is all the more important because of Estonia's liminal position in Eastern Europe between the East and the West (Mälksoo

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida's (1988) concept of 'iterability' deals with essentially the same logic, although from a different perspective: his concern is to show that writing – and the products of writing, that is, messages – has no fixed or final meaning since any statement can be reiterated in different contexts.

2009). Consequently, the process of integration is often conceptualized also in view of security against Russia provided by the EU, yet at the same time, considering the demands of the EU for the naturalization of Estonian Russian minorities,¹¹ it has also been seen as a potential threat to national identity (Kuus 2002; Madisson, Ventsel 2016). As any society and culture is inherently diverse, so is Estonia, and even an entirely superficial look at the problems posed in the process of national identity construction should give evidence of the many types of auto-communication underlying these self-descriptive discourses.

The cases studied in the present article do not give a whole or total picture of Estonian identity construction. However, what I will strive to show is how these cases represent a certain tendency in the process of national identity construction, a tendency focused on the preservation and survival of the identity which is very closely connected to the nature of modern – biopolitical – finitude. The structure of this finitude already tells us that survival, in the end, is impossible, since humans as living beings are fundamentally finite. It is to the problem of finitude in biopolitics that we now turn, in order to further elaborate the connection between survival and political subjectification.

2. Surviving finitude: Biopolitics of survival

The problem of finitude should be understood in connection with the emergence of the modern human being as analysed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (2002[1966]). The modern human being – or ‘Man’ – is constituted in an experience of finitude; that is, death is inscribed within ‘Man’ from the very beginning (Deleuze 2006[1986]: 130). Experience of finitude and the need for survival is thus not to be understood as norms and rules inherent to living beings, but as anthropological modelling of biological norms, most of all connected with identity, and not with living processes in general.

Michael Dillon (1996, 2015) has tackled the task of thinking biopolitics on the basis of *The Order of Things* and its elaboration of the modern analytic of finitude. The first thing to note is that modern Western finitude is no longer understood in opposition, and as subjugated, to an eternity governed by heavenly rules and laws. Finitude thought against the background of eternity is, fundamentally, salvational or “soteriological” (Dillon 2015: 7), and the finite existence of human beings, once it comes to its inevitable end, is transferred to the eternal realm. Death is thus a point of

¹¹ The Russian-speaking minorities are, so to speak, the official ‘internal others’ of Estonia. This otherness can be conceptualized in many ways, and it can acquire either a negative or a positive value, depending on the situation (see Petersoo 2007).

transition and transformation, a moment of salvation and final assurance of existence in another realm. In the framework of modern finitude, however, the this-worldly being of humans is no longer framed by eternity, but contained in and limited by its finitude (see Foucault 2002; 2003a[1963]).¹² Modern finitude has thus no external structure to found itself upon; it is, in this sense, without any transcendental ground and it has to be thought of *in itself*. This also means that all we have and all we can know are simply our empirical finite lives which can no longer be saved from this world; there is no longer any eschatological promise of eternal existence. Dillon (2015: 7) has called this kind of modern finitude “factual finitude” that constitutes modern politics as a “politics of security before it is a politics of anything else”.

Why does modern, factual finitude constitute politics first and foremost as a politics of security? To put it bluntly, its primary objective is to keep living beings alive, to make life live, as Foucault (1978: 138) puts it; in short, politics of security aims to ensure the survivability of species, races, populations, etc. But biopolitics cannot save life from its own finitude: “Persistence in and through the facticity of finitudinal time is the challenge. But the only guarantee offered by the facticity of finitudinal time is that finite forms – however emergent, adaptive, and resilient, according to modern liberal security jargon – are fated ultimately to go” (Dillon 2011: 786). This does not, however, mean that there would not be any eschatological aspects alive and well in biopolitical government. Perhaps it is human life in its empirical finitude that would itself offer some kind of salvation? When Foucault (2003a: 244) analysed the birth of the modern medical gaze, he showed that, indeed, health has replaced salvation; that is, the very material finite life destined to die is now the place in which to find everlasting bliss, so to speak.

The problem is, however, that replacing salvation with health – or more generally, replacing salvation by eternal heavenly existence with salvation in this-worldly finite existence – condemns the *eschaton* to temporality and history, and thus the “end” fails, in principle, to be the end in any proper salvational sense. There is no “better time to come” (Dillon 2015: 7), there is no perfect social order to be achieved, no harmony of the souls, and so on. Consequently, modern finitude is, paradoxically, a journey that “probably has no end” (Foucault 2002: 342). The End has multiplied into ends, fragmented into temporary and fragile goals to achieve: stay fit, have children, carry out a project, etc. There is now an infinity of goals to achieve, and their achievement

¹² In philosophy as well, it was the infinite that dominated over the finite and the latter had always to be understood against the background of the former: “[D]uring the classical age, the notion of the infinite was both central and primary; thus, for Descartes, one can prove the existence of God by the presence of the idea of the infinite in the finite. The underlying assumption is that the infinite has ontological pre-eminence over the finite” (Han-Pile 2010: 124).

offers a paradoxical salvation, one that is only salvational in the present moment, in the *now*. In the framework of modern finitude, everything must be thought of as temporal (since there is no atemporal heavenly realm), and thus even salvation is only temporary. “No last day, then, but every day is potentially an end of days for the finite, not least the politically finite. Thus the *eschaton* that once differentiated between the finite and the transcendently eternal is now continuously imminent as well as immanentized within the infinity of finite things” (Dillon 2015: 37). In order to achieve infinity, it is important to repeat those finite goals and make them last in their present state as long as possible. On the one hand, it is necessary for biopolitical government that the population governed have no definite end – hence the importance of procreation, public health, etc. (individuals in a biopolitical context, while being finite organisms, can make life live beyond their own life spans in the population); on the other hand, this need for the extension of life spans deeply influences the way in which individuals turn themselves into social subjects; for example, individuals are made responsible for their biological constitution by compelling them to take constant care of themselves.¹³ That is, it is important to survive on two levels: on the level of the population and on the individual level; both the lives of collective and individual subjects are to be secured and, moreover, made resilient.¹⁴ The logic of government according to resilience is the following: make living beings such that they would persist in their being, potentially infinitely (although, of course, they are always vulnerable to death).

¹³ Nikolas Rose (2007) has written about the responsabilization of individuals for their biology; responsibility of a subject is seen by Rose as a function of his or her acceptance of biomedical authority: one agrees to conduct oneself in a manner that adheres to the rules and norms of medical expertise.

¹⁴ Security and resilience are very tightly interrelated notions; the difference lies in the attitude towards the future. Foucault (2009: 20) states that the apparatus of security “works on the future” and “refers to the temporal and the uncertain” and here the future is brought to the present; the future and its unpredictability is made calculable by projecting onto it the current state of affairs that must be made to persist. According to this logic, it is possible to prevent unpredictable events from occurring. According to the logic of resilience, however, the future remains in the sphere of the non-calculable: it is impossible to foresee what catastrophic events will take place and inflict their incalculable harm upon the individual. Thus it is crucial to ensure survivability by continuing the present indefinitely, preferably with no future, that is, with nothing unforeseen affecting it. With resilience, there appears a shift from securing the milieu within which the individual lives to securing the individual itself: the living being must be made resilient in order for it to withstand potential future dangers (on the concept of resilience, see Walker, Cooper 2011; Evans, Reid 2013; Chandler 2013.)

We can describe this type of governmental rationality as entirely *presentist*, to use François Hartog's concept. What is presentism? It is a regime of historicity¹⁵ encapsulated in "the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now" (Hartog 2015: xv). Presentism is a regime of historical self-description wherein the category of the present is given dominance over the past and the future. Or, in other words, the past and the future are important solely for the sake of the present, and exist as extensions of the present. Another crucial aspect of presentism and the accompanying effacement of the past and the future is the tendency to view each moment and each event as (potentially) historically relevant or even crucial. Hartog (2005) has called this phenomenon 'heritagization', that is, a strategy according to which almost anything connected to cultural and social identity is transformed into heritage and, consequently, constituted as something to be commemorated.

The temporal structure of presentism is closely related to the solidification of identity in the auto-communicational process: the same message is reiterated in a different context so as to make it the permanent cornerstone of identity; and through this reiteration its presence and present actual nature is assured. The actual presence in the present of an identity here comes to dominate over both its possible future transformations and past variations. The semiotic logic of identity construction, in this case, renders it possible to overwrite the past in such a way as to make it conform to the present, and to imagine the future as a simple extension, repetition of the present. The latter process is underwritten by the former: we have always been like that, this is our historical tradition, and if we are to survive, this tradition needs to be maintained. And this type of temporal structure constitutes what we have referred to as the politics of "survival" (*survivance*) as described by Marc Abélès (2006): a politics that has to ensure the survivability of the living being against its own fallible processes of life, and of course, against the possible transformations of identity which would lead to the disappearance of an imagined core "traditionality" constructed from a presentist perspective.

The presence of the kind of political subjectivity constituted on the basis of biopolitical identity construction as a finite and fundamentally precarious living entity whose identity needs constant saving from disappearance is strongly felt in the

¹⁵ Hartog (2015: xvi) explains why and how he uses the term 'regime of historicity': "[temporality] has the disadvantage of referring to an external standard of time, such as can still be found in Braudel, where the different *durées* are all measure against an "exogenous," mathematical, or astronomical time [...] A regime of historicity is [...] an artificial construct whose value lies in its heuristic potential. And it should be classed alongside Weber's ideal type, as a formal category. Depending on whether the category of the past, the future, or the present is dominant, the order of time derived from it will obviously not be the same".

discourse surrounding both the Estonian Population and Housing Census 2011 and the passing of the Registered Partnership Act in 2014. In this discourse of survival, Estonian national identity is constructed as a fundamentally finite being that, in fact, draws its core of identity from being finite and “towards-death”. Let us turn next to this discourse and see how it presents us with such a subjectivity, a national identity constructed on the basis of biopolitical strategies.

3. Is the Estonian child an endangered species?

This section of the paper deals with the discourse of survival surrounding the gathering of data for and the publication of the Estonian Population and Housing Census 2011.¹⁶ As a sociocultural context for the Census, it has to be mentioned that since the beginning of the 1990s the Estonian population has been decreasing and aging constantly (see EIA 2011), so much so, that talk of a demographic crisis has not been infrequent. This is an important point to remember, because a discourse of survival is always a discourse in and of crisis as well.

The material has been collected from Estonian major daily and weekly newspapers from 2011–2012; both electronic and print sources were used.¹⁷ The discourse *surrounds* the Census of 2011 in a twofold sense: first, it expresses the concerns and problems of the public during the time leading up to and immediately after the Census, and thus it is not a discourse strictly *about* the Census; second, the problems raised in the media during the time that are relevant to this article are at least indirectly related to what the Census counts and quantifies: how many people live in Estonia, how many have left, what is the age distribution of residents, the ethnic distribution, etc. Thus, the discourse is not directly about the Census, but deals with evaluating qualitatively the same problems and phenomena that the Census quantified.

To set the stage, let us quote the then Minister of Defence Jaak Aaviksoo, who explicitly stated that Estonia has, after joining the eurozone, the NATO, and the Schengen Area, taken as its primary objective “to concentrate on standing up for our own survival”.¹⁸ He goes on: “However, this might not turn out to be that simple if we are not able to extend emotional self-determination by way of language, culture, and nation to modern constructs, that is, the state”. In other words, Aaviksoo considers the

¹⁶ The results are available at: <http://www.stat.ee/phc2011>.

¹⁷ The media sources used are mainly mainstream media channels (especially the daily newspapers *Postimees* and *Eesti Päevaleht*) and, to a lesser extent, platforms expressing specific political world views (such as the conservative *Objektiiv*).

¹⁸ Aaviksoo, Jaak. “Infokonfliktid ja enesekaitse [Information conflicts and self-defence]”. *Diplomaatia*, March 2011. Online: <https://www.diplomaatia.ee/artikkel/infokonfliktid-ja-enesekaitse/>.

state as a guarantor of “language, culture, and nation”, but also claims that “language, culture, and nation” must be the main objects of state government through which Estonian national survival is to be made possible. It is telling that Aaviksoo phrases concerns over language and culture in terms of national survival. Consequently, we can speak of “the survival of language” and “the survival of culture”.

Margit Sutrop, Head of the University of Tartu Centre for Ethics, echoes this sentiment by stating that, according to her, “the gravest danger to Estonian language and identity is the emigration of people to foreign countries”, and ties this danger and its actuality to the regaining of independence:

During World War II, when Estonians fled to foreign countries, they took pains to preserve Estonianness in different corners of the world: Estonian schools and houses were created, newspapers and publishing houses founded. However, then people acted for the cause of resistance. It was extremely important to preserve the Estonianness that was being attacked by the occupying forces back home. Nowadays people move abroad for entirely different reasons and the border between Estonia and the great world is not only open, but has begun to blur.¹⁹

Both Aaviksoo and Sutrop refer to the contemporary sociopolitical condition under which national culture and identity might seem a little anachronistic. Sutrop states that now that independence has been regained, we no longer have enough reasons to build a national identity. Sutrop’s statement can be interpreted as her stating that Estonians do not know what to do with their freedom, that is, and this very freedom is a threat to their identity in that it is the condition on which the borders between “Estonia and the great world” have “begun to blur”. As reported by the *Postimees* newspaper, Aaviksoo claims that “with contemporary means it is possible to destroy a person’s will so that one does not want to persist and exist as oneself anymore, but wishes to transform into someone else”.²⁰ In the contemporary context, then, the dangers facing Estonian national identity are seen to be found within the nation itself rather than in a clearly defined external danger as was the case with Soviet Russia.²¹ The statements of Sutrop and Aaviksoo are, in this instance, significant since they

¹⁹ Sutrop, Margit. “Eesti keele ja eesti identiteedi kestlikkusest [On the sustainability of Estonian language and identity]”. *Sirp* 01.12.2011. Online: <http://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/varia/eesti-keele-ja-eesti-identiteedi-kestlikkusest/>.

²⁰ Neudorf, Raigo. “Moodne ühiskond tekitab Eestile uusi julgeolekuohte [Modern society creates new security threats for Estonia]”. *Postimees* 28.04.2011. Online: <http://pluss.postimees.ee/425982/moodne-uhiskond-tekitab-eestile-uusi-julgeolekuohte>.

²¹ This is not to say that Russia is not continually construed as an enemy or a danger to Estonia today. On the contrary, Russia is mostly seen as a potential threat in Estonian media. However, this relation to Russia is not a concern here, and the analysed discourse deals much more clearly with internal dangers and threats.

speak from a position of power and represent an institutional perspective. In order to survive, Estonians need to learn how to remain Estonians, to find a ground for their existence.

But where is this ground to be found? It is to be found in the very same place that threatens the national identity, in the population, the principal subject-object of biopolitical government. It is the population that is construed as a resilient subject endowed with a task of securing Estonian national identity.²² According to Foucault (2009: 21), population in a biopolitical context signifies “a multiplicity of individuals who are and fundamentally and essentially only exist biologically bound to the materiality within which they live”. This materiality and biologism can clearly be seen even when one discusses such phenomena as cultural identity and language, framing them in terms such as survival and vitality.²³ That is, culture and language are similarly construed as objects and subjects of biopolitics, and consequently, as finite processes of life.

The population of Estonia is thus both what is in danger and what is supposed to provide a ground for Estonian culture. We can encounter noticeable concern about the future of Estonian children, one article even proposing that perhaps we should include “the Estonian child” among endangered species:

If an insect or a plant species is about to become extinct, the world rings alarm bells and spends millions in order to preserve the endangered species. But if a whole people [*rahvas*] and the Estonian child are in a state to be included among the endangered species, nobody cares – except for us. Population growth decreases, most children grow up without siblings. The models of a strong family and having many children are those that have supported society for centuries, and those models carry on moral values and social skills that ensure persistence. To save what can be saved, the state needs to value families with many children in every way possible.²⁴

²² Considering that the dominant ethnic minority in Estonia is Russian (according to the 2011 Census, 24,8% of the population – as compared to the approximately one percent of Ukrainians, Belarusians and Finns who are the next largest ethnic minority groups in Estonia), any definition of Estonia as a nation state must take this minority into account. The national identity of Estonia is thus very much concerned also with ethnic issues. This must be kept in mind as well when we come to consider the questions how to ensure population increase – although it is not explicitly stated that the families of ethnic Estonians should have many children, the addressees of the communication performed through mainstream media are mainly of Estonian ethnicity.

²³ Paju, Imbi. “Eestluse elujõud [The vitality of Estonianness]”. Postimees 25.07.2012. Online: <http://arvamus.postimees.ee/918918/imbi-paju-eestluse-elujoud>

²⁴ Pikhof, Heljo. “Kas Eesti laps punasesse raamatusse? [Should we include the Estonian child among endangered species?]”. Postimees, 15.08.2012. Online: <http://tartu.postimees.ee/947194/heljo-pikhof-kas-eesti-laps-punasesse-raamatusse>.

Here we encounter the notion of the “traditional family” that will become particularly important when the Registered Partnership Act comes under discussion, but in that context it is not something called into being to counter “non-traditional” marriages and partnerships. In fact, the “traditional family” is something through which the decreasing and aging population of Estonia is seen to be made sustainable, to be made to persist and resist death. In the discourse surrounding the Census, ‘family’ is not explicitly conceptualized as a heterosexual one, but it is clear that when the “moral values” that have “supported society for centuries”, inherent in those families, are recalled, one does not have in mind new forms of homosexual partnerships. The “traditional family” with its many children is assigned the task of reproducing the population and, through it, cultural and national identity.

It is thus no surprise that even cultural and linguistic identity are framed in terms of economic security. An article entitled “Insecurity prevents children from being born” is exemplary here:

One cannot tell the children that they should wait for five or ten years until the state becomes wealthier, and then they would be able to go to the kindergarten and take up hobbies. Children have no time to wait. They will grow up meanwhile. In the same way, one cannot give birth to children retrospectively. If families have no sense of security, children won't be born.²⁵

The solution to demographic problems and, based on this, to problems of “cultural insecurity” is posed in terms of securing life. Surrounding the time of gathering the data (from 31 December 2011 to 31 March 2012) for and the publication (on 31 May 2012) of the Population and Housing Census, one could frequently come across opinions that both Estonian children and its “traditional family” are in grave danger, that their social reputation is too low,²⁶ etc., and that through these dangers, the whole of Estonian identity is threatened²⁷ with demise and reminded of its finitude. A text by the political scientist and presidential councillor to-be (2013–2015) Iivi Anna Masso even talks of social “autoimmunity” that has become endemic to Estonian society and threatens to eat it up from the inside.²⁸

²⁵ Palo, Urve. “Ebakindlus ei lase lastel sündida [Insecurity prevents children from being born]”. *Postimees*, 20.05.2011. Online: <http://pluss.postimees.ee/443464/urve-palo-ebakindlus-ei-lase-lastel-sundida>.

²⁶ Tereping, Avo-Rein. “Kust tulevad eestlased [Where do Estonians come from?]”. *Postimees*, 16.10.2011. Online: <http://arvamus.postimees.ee/635580/avo-rein-tereping-kust-tulevad-estlased>.

²⁷ Tsahkna, Margus. “Kuhu kaovad Eesti lapsed? [Where do Estonian children disappear?]”. *Maaleht*, 30.03.2012. Online: <http://maaleht.delfi.ee/news/maaleht/arvamus/kuhu-kaovad-estli-lapsed?id=64149191>.

²⁸ Masso, Iivi Anna. “Ühiskondlik autoimmuunsus [Social autoimmunity]”. *Postimees*, 9.01.2012. Online: <http://pluss.postimees.ee/695554/iivi-anna-masso-uhiskondlik-autoimmuunsus>.

During the Census, a large section of the media waited for the confirmation of their fears that Estonian population is shrinking, people are emigrating, and also moving to towns from the countryside. The Census was seen as presenting a “moment of truth”²⁹ to the nation seen to be in decline. The government was considered not to support either children, families, nor the young who were leaving the country and not returning.³⁰ And this, as we have seen, occurred under the conditions and in the context of regained independence, sovereignty, and freedom: nobody else is doing this to Estonians than Estonians themselves.

Thus, the discourse of survival surrounding the Population and Housing Census 2011 in media representations describes the Estonian population – and with it, Estonian society and culture in general – as being in decline and in need of revitalization. One of the principal solutions offered to this decline and degeneration of the Estonian population is characteristic of what has been said above of the resilient subject. For example, the advice given to young people thinking of leaving Estonia is that one should, of course, follow one’s dreams when young, but later one should return home, take responsibility for one’s nation, no matter how difficult and hard one finds it at home. In short, one should accept the unpredictabilities and insecurities of life for the love of the nation and culture. That is, one should change oneself into a resilient subject and focus on changing one’s self instead of changing one’s social, economic, and political environment. The description of emigrées as, essentially, weak-willed makes them the culprits in the potential degeneration of the society.³¹ The principal focus is on the self-government of subjects who should learn to withstand the conditions to which they are subjected. That is, it is the life of the subjects that is to be made self-regulating. As Daniel Chandler (2013: 211) puts it, “Resilience concerns attributes of the population, both as individuals and

²⁹ Braslina, Aija. “Rahvaloendus on riigi jaoks tõehetk [The census is a moment of truth for the state]”. *Postimees*, 25.01.2012. Online: <http://arvamus.postimees.ee/715208/aija-braslina-rahvaloendus-on-riigi-jaoks-toehetk>.

³⁰ “Pärast rahvaloendust paistab Eestimaa kui kreenis laev [After the census, Estonia seems like a tilting ship]”. *Delfi*, 02.06.2012. Online: <http://rahvaal.delfi.ee/news/uudised/parast-rahvaloendust-paistab-eestimaa-kui-kreenis-laev?id=64487122>; Kuus Korv, Agnes. “Noorte lahkumine Eestist levib viirusena – nakkus on kiire ja massiline [Youth leaving Estonia spreads like a virus: The contagion is fast and widespread]”. *Õhtuleht*, 17.11.2012. Online: <http://www.ohutuleht.ee/499923/noorte-lahkumine-eestist-levib-viirusena-ndash-nakkus-on-kiire-ja-massiline>.

³¹ A few years later, in 2014, this type of attitude resulted in the coining of a neologism, ‘emigrée of convenience’ (*mugavuspagulane*), that is, an individual who leaves Estonia for the sole purpose of finding a better life somewhere else; this individual thus has no *reason* to leave, other than being lured away by promises of a better life elsewhere: “Nädala sõna: mugavuspagulane [Word of the week: emigrée of convenience]”. *Delfi*, 27.08.2014. Online: <http://ekspress.delfi.ee/kuum/nadala-sona-mugavuspagulane?id=69613331>.

communities, which cannot be directly provided by state authorities”. Consequently, it is the conduct and self-regulation of subjects that need to be normalized. Still, in this case, normalization means that one should learn to live in a situation of perpetual crisis: the imminent decline of the nation, and the population, the threats posed by social inequality between the countryside and the towns, between the young and the old, etc. I suggest that we should interpret the discursive construction of Estonian national identity exactly in the framework of this kind of fundamental finitude, that is – in the perpetual possibility of disappearance.

This type of self-description – national identity as fundamentally finite, fragile, vulnerable, always already destined to die³² – also transforms quite radically the way how a society communicates and relates to Otherness. When the primary aim of political subjectification becomes the solidification of identity, the Other is no longer seen as a potential partner in communication. On the basis of a fundamentally finite identity that has its main goal in survival, Otherness is seen mainly as a threat, a danger, and, more and more frequently, also as a disease infecting this identity and causing it to come ever closer to its death. To explicate this point, I will turn to the Estonian national(ist) – and here we can already speak of nationalism – reactions to the passing of the Registered Partnership Act in 2014. In support of the “traditional family”, its values, and the persistence of the nation, homosexuality was frequently *othered* to the point of becoming a grotesque caricature. Still, this caricature was then referred back to the ways in which “our society” (an Estonian society belonging to the European Union, adhering to its norms and laws) is corrupt from within and is on the brink of degenerating into a non-viable deformity.

4. The “traditional biology” of the family

The Registered Partnership Act³³ was initiated in the Estonian Parliament (*Riigikogu*) on 17 April 2014 and was passed on 15 October 2014. To analyse the discourse concerned with the Act, I have followed mainly electronic media publications (also blogs in addition to major news portals) from the year 2014. The main sources of the discourse of survival as pertaining to the Partnership Act are nationalist and

³² It is perhaps necessary again to draw attention to the limits of the material analysed. I am dealing with two particular cases and their biopolitical significations and significance. Here, within the limits of the discourse of survival, Estonian national identity is construed as something under constant threat. Estonia’s technological progressivist discourse, for example, could be said to construe identity in a wholly different manner and according to a different logic.

³³ <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/527112014001/consolide>.

conservative (often nationalist-conservative) opinion leaders,³⁴ and it is to their speech that I will primarily turn my attention. The problems posed in relation to the Registered Partnership Act are strikingly similar to the ones emerging from the discourse surrounding the Population and Housing Census 2011: population growth, “our values”, the decline and necessity of the “traditional family”, concerns about the openness of the borders to Europe from where the gender “ideologies” are imported. However, the crucial aspect of problems concerning population growth and family values is added, of course, by the notions of ‘gender’ and ‘sexual orientation’, and especially by the blurring of the boundaries of “traditional” gender roles. So, the Act is often seen as threatening the institution of – again, “traditional” heterosexual – marriage as well, although legally it has no such purpose and authority. We can interpret this cluster of meanings, stating that the discourse surrounding the Registered Partnership Act is the continuation, with a few additions and alterations, of the assertion and construction of the fundamentally finite national identity, and thus it does not come as a surprise that the focal point of this discourse is the question how to survive our current condition (that is inherently corrupt and corrupting, or even diseased).

Let us start a more detailed discussion with the foreignness or Otherness of “gender ideologies” that led to the passing of the Act – a foreignness that renders the Act itself alien to “Estonian traditions”. The foreignness of the Act is interestingly multi-dimensional and -directional. On the one hand, it is seen as legalization of the European values³⁵ that can only mean the start of a decline of our specific Estonianness:

Instead of docile following and application of the values of the European Union, we should bring our political value system to accord with our geographical location and history. Political solutions taking into account the specificity of our situation could turn out to be security guarantees that are in keeping with the sense and goals of international contracts. But to achieve this we need courage both on this and the other side of the border. The same courage as the leaders of our country had at the end of the '80s and beginning of the '90s and that led to our regaining of independence.³⁶

³⁴ While in the case of the Housing and Population Census, the concern for survival was not tied to a particular political world view, here, however, a clear demarcation line between the conservative and the progressive political views can be identified.

³⁵ Salumäe, Raivo. “Kooseluseadus on Eestile võõras [The Partnership Act is foreign to Estonia]”. *Eesti Päevaleht*, 3.09.2014. Online: <http://epl.delfi.ee/news/arvamus/lugeja-kirikooseluseadus-on-eestile-vooras?id=69657465>.

³⁶ Aavakivi, Ilmar-Eerik. “Eesti poliitikutel napib julgust [Estonian politicians lack courage]”. *Eesti Päevaleht*, 31.08.2014. Online: <http://epl.delfi.ee/news/arvamus/ilmar-erik-aavakivi-eesti-poliitikutel-napib-julgust-seda-on-naha-nii-valis-kui-sisepoliitikas?id=69598931>.

Again, we encounter the idea that contemporary Estonia has lost its direction. Losing our direction also means that we let others guide us, we are weak and lack “courage”. In a sense, we are too free, lacking a ground against which to define ourselves, and consequently, we are vulnerable. This vulnerability is taken advantage of by the European Union, subjecting “us” to “their” norms.

On the other hand, an aspect of the discourse sees the passing of the Partnership Act as a return to the ways of the Soviet Union in that the government does not respect the “will of the people” and, in effect, does what it wishes: “More and more people are seeing and voicing their concerns over the fact that the manipulations used to push through the Registered Partnership Act remind them very much of Soviet times”.³⁷ Thus, the process of reading and passing the law is described as “the decline of representative democracy”.³⁸ The government’s decision not to hold a public referendum concerning the Act was seen as especially damaging to society, since, as the polls showed,³⁹ a majority of respondents (58%) were against the passing of the Partnership Act, while 34% were in favour of the Act. Democracy and tolerance were thus seen to be parting ways, the latter not being an integral part of the former any more.

As we have already seen, the “traditional family” became necessary in order to counter this nexus of degenerating norms and authoritarian politics, and the biologism(s) and references to life politics were even more widespread and underlined than in the case of Census and problems of population. In this discourse, we can find confirmation to Foucault’s understanding that sexuality is, indeed, one of the most important means for doing politics (Foucault 1978). Let us attempt to unravel the cluster of meanings associated with gender, sexuality, politics, culture, and the Registered Partnership Act.

For the conservative and nationalist opinion, the term ‘marriage’ signifies first and foremost a sacred bond between a man and a woman, and this definition is often

³⁷ Vooglaid, Varro. “Poliitikud, kes püüavad kooseluseadust vastu rahva tahtmist läbi surude, on demokraadid vaid sõnades, mitte aga tegudes [Politicians who push the Registered Partnership Act against the will of the people are democrats only in word, not in deed]”. *Objektiiv*, 23.09.2014. Online: <http://objektiiv.ee/varro-vooglaid-poliitikud-kes-puuavad-kooseluseadus-vastu-rahva-tahtmist-labi-suruda-on-demokraadid-vaid-sonades-mitte-aga-tegudes/>.

³⁸ “Kooseluseaduse ümber toimunu on märk esindusdemokraatia allakäigust [The events surrounding the Partnership Act are indicative of the decline of representational democracy]”. *Delfi*, 16.10.2014. Online: <http://rahvahaal.delfi.ee/news/uudised/urmo-karusoo-kooseluseaduse-umber-toimunu-on-mark-esindusdemokraatia-allakaigust?id=69962839>.

³⁹ “Üle poole elanikest ei toeta kooseluseadust [More than half of the population is against the Partnership Act]”. *ERR*, 05.08.2014. Online: <http://www.err.ee/517586/u-le-poole-elanikest-ei-toeta-kooseluseadust>.

referred back to the “naturalness” of this type of marriage due to it allowing the possibility of reproduction. An exemplary opinion comes from Varro Vooglaid, the leader of the Foundation for the Protection of Family and Tradition (*SA Perekonna ja Traditsiooni Kaitseks*):

The Constitution states that the family is the foundation of persistence and growth of the people and of society. I truly believe that it is not a mere slogan, a nice trope or symbol, but that it is a deep human reality. Families are, in reality, foundations of the people’s persistence and base structures of society. The family is founded upon the wonderful complementarity between man and woman from which a new human being is born. We must remember that the main function of the family is, in fact, producing and rearing children, and forming a suitable environment of development for them. In addition, in families one passes on the understanding of right and wrong. The child learns primarily through example. He sees his mother and father, understands what it means to be a man or a woman and how husbands and wives must interact with each other. Through all this, the family helps us persist as a culture, carrying the primary values of society from generation to generation.⁴⁰

Man and woman can get married because they can have children, and this is seen to be an ahistorical construct, that is, “it has always been so”. Consequently, a family with a mother, a father, and at least a few children, has “always” been the natural way of structuring human sexual relationships. In one breath, the family is universal, “a deep human reality”, yet also fundamentally political as it has as its main function the reproduction of society and its values through birth and education of children. In its temporal structure, this type of thinking is presentist since it simultaneously confirms a phenomenon’s ahistoricity and its extreme urgency in the *now*. We can say that the “traditions” in the phrase “traditional family values” hold any value only insofar as they are politically employable in the present, and at the same time, are devoid of any relevance as historical descriptions. “Traditional” thus describes what is seen as legitimate *in the now*. With the term ‘traditional’, future is similarly effaced and constituted as a continuation of the present, the latter being something that must be “preserved” and made to survive: the only legitimate future is, again, to be found in the present.

‘Traditional’ is thus not a historical descriptor, it constitutes something presently existing as “traditional” and, at the same time, crucial to Estonian national identity. In opposition to the Registered Partnership Act, the “traditional family” is constituted as something that is in danger of becoming extinct, and the whole Estonian nation

⁴⁰ Taimla, Hele-Maria. “Varro Vooglaid: kõik algab ideaalidest [Everything begins with ideals]”. Teekäija, Oct. 2014. Online: <http://www.teek.ee/index.php/teemad/36-uhiskond/1410-varro-vooglaid-koik-algab-ideaalidest>.

with it. Thus, it is already something to be commemorated, to be understood as national heritage (as interpreted according to Hartog's concept of heritagization). In this context, the Registered Partnership Act can indeed be constituted as effectively damning the Estonian nation to "extinction", since already the discursive construction of the "traditional family" is such that it is already on the brink of death, already dying out, already thus something to be commemorated. Strangely, the "traditional family" has no historical existence, it exists here and now, and its existence is extremely fragile.

The "traditional family" seems, then, a phenomenon that is constituted, called into being as already being in a perpetual crisis, and it is in this situation of precariousness, of a constant threat, that it finds its reason or rationale for being in the first place. In the same manner as Foucault describes the fundamental finitude of the modern human being, the sociopolitical phenomenon of the "traditional family" has nothing else to ground itself upon than its own finitude, its own being-towards-death, to use a Heideggerean concept.

The urgency and actuality is what reveals the "traditional family's" vulnerability and finitude. At each step, with each succeeding generation, the family is seen to be vulnerable to radical change that might bring about its demise. On the one hand, the family's universality places it outside history; on the other, however, its actuality and urgency puts its future existence in danger. And again, it is to exist indefinitely in the present in order to survive. If the whole culture is viewed as founded upon this, as it were, *eternally fragile* institution, the sociocultural identity of Estonia is also constructed along those very vulnerable lines. Either the future is an extension of the present or there is no future for Estonia as we know it.

The ardour with which traditional marriage and family were protected against "homosexual propaganda" is exemplary here. The Registered Partnership Act did not, in fact, speak anything of regulating the institution of marriage any differently than before; what was in question was the legal status of civil partnerships. It was, however, constructed in media discourse as a threat to the heterosexual marriage. As soon as the Act was initiated, statements started to appear such as: "This law damages the rights of mothers and children"; "marriage is a sacred thing in Estonian culture [...] and I will not take a single step to turn homosexual relationships into marriage"; "The understanding of traditional family is taken from over half the population", etc.⁴¹ Of course there was no shortage of calling homosexual relationships perversities, abnormalities, etc., that all threaten the very existence of the survival of Estonianness.

However, the perceived danger to the "traditional family" and marriage cannot

⁴¹ "Kooseluseaduse poolt ja vastu: väljavõtteid saadikute kõnedest [For and against the Partnership Act: Excerpts from delegates' convenience]". Postimees, 8.10.2014. Online: <http://www.postimees.ee/2947463/kooseluseaduse-poolt-ja-vastu-vaeljavotteid-saadikute-konedest>.

be interpreted solely as an external threat, since “society is out of balance”.⁴² The prevailing view expressed is the following: society is out of joint, already declining, degenerating; one might say it is inherently doomed. Why? Because, according to the conservative religious perspective, a homosexual partnership would go against “nature” and “natural norms”: “Two men or two women can never become ‘one flesh’. They are not bound by a natural biological connection, since from their love games no new humans are born”.⁴³ In these two sentences we can see a fundamental issue from which biopolitical self-description cannot find a way out: the identification of deeply embedded cultural norms with biological ones. Here, the biblical expression ‘one flesh’ is inscribed directly onto the biological constitution of human beings; it is not only cultural norms that we encounter, but cultural norms transformed into biological ones and seen as “necessary” foundations of any social relations. As mentioned in the introduction, this type of inscription is describable in terms of rendering the very general and common into the individual and particular.⁴⁴ Sexual relations are common to all human beings – irrespective of the culture, even if this culture is abstaining from those relations, they are still present in their negation –, but a particular type of sexual relation is seen as the only viable one. This particularization of sexual relations simultaneously serves as the operator of the universalization of a particular society: it is now “us” that must be seen as humans proper. The survival of our society can, in this framework, be interpreted as the survival of humanity properly speaking. “Human rights” have become “our rights”.

In this context, Otherness is not experienced only as something external, beyond the borders of “our” society, but something that is deeply inherent to it; otherness is experienced as something that is alive within “our” way of life, and it is, so to speak, eating “us” from the inside, to the point where “we” can ourselves become “Others”. This was apparent already in Aaviksoo’s statement quoted above in which he insisted that, in contemporary world, one could be influenced by various means and technologies into “not wanting to be oneself”, that is, into not persisting as an Estonian with a strong Estonian national identity. This is very much apparent in the fears surrounding the Registered Partnership Act that transform anything other

⁴² Salumäe, Raivo. “Kooseluseaduse eelnõu varjuküljed [The dark side of the draft of the Partnership Act]”. *Postimees*, 3.09.2014. Online: <http://arvamus.postimees.ee/2908117/raivo-salumae-kooseluseaduse-eelnou-varjukueljed>.

⁴³ Pärn, Malle. “Mõned hajusad mõtted koosellumise teemal [Some vague thoughts on partnering up]”. *Meie Kirik*, 24.09.2014. Online: http://www.meiekirik.ee/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4201.

⁴⁴ For a theoretical elaboration of the individualization of the common and its (bio)political consequences, see Roberto Esposito’s (2008, 2010, 2011) work. He uses the terms ‘community’ and ‘immunity’, respectively, for the common/general and the individual/particular, and the process of the particularization of the common, he terms ‘immunization’.

than a heterosexual relation into a monstrosity,⁴⁵ a “natural form of the unnatural”, to use Foucault’s (2003b: 56) phrase. It is important to stress this “naturalness of the unnatural” at this point since it is not seen as something that could be simply ignored as having nothing to do with “us”. Instead, sexual relations standing outside heterosexual relations are perversities, abnormalities,⁴⁶ that is, human behaviours that have gone *wrong*. The preservation of the “traditional family” is seen, in this discourse of survival, as the pillar of survival of proper Estonian society not only because it preserves the social structure of Estonia, but also because it will preserve its “vitality”, and provides defence against the threats of “homo-ideology”⁴⁷ that will attempt to make us all amenable to these abnormalities. It is not, then, that “our” society is being attacked from the outside, but that “we” are, perhaps enemies to ourselves, fragile in “our” identity, not resilient enough – at least this is how the discourse of survival speaks.

Concluding remarks

We have seen how the aim to survive has been emerging as a strategy for constructing Estonian national identity in, firstly, the problems surrounding the Population and Housing Census 2011, and, secondly, the bio-socio-cultural fears concerning the Registered Partnership Act 2014. I argue that these two cases cannot be viewed separately, in isolation from each other. Both put forth the problem of population survival as fundamental to socio-cultural identity. Both focus on how “our” society and population are changing into something that perhaps is not viable, that will not be able to survive, that is, they are seen to be disintegrating from within and not because of an external enemy. Both can thus be seen to represent an *experience of finitude*, or, in other words, the experience of living in the end times, and thus it is crucial to persist, to extend the present state of affairs as far into the future as possible – since this is seen to be the main strategy for maintaining socio-cultural integrity. The auto-communicational logic stemming from the aim to survive can be described as the diachronic solidification of identity by the constant reiteration of messages seen to constitute collective identity. The message reiterated consists most of all of the

⁴⁵ “[W]hat defines the monster is the fact that its existence and form is not only a violation of the laws of society but also a violation of the laws of nature. Its very existence is a breach of the law at both levels” (Foucault 2003b: 55–56).

⁴⁶ “Lihtne Eesti Mees: homoseadus solvab mind isiklikult [Simple Estonian Man: Gay-law insults me personally]”. Õhtuleht, 10.10.2014. Online: <http://m.ohhtuleht.ee/598592/lihtne-eesti-mees-homoseadus-solvab-mind-isiklikult>.

⁴⁷ Vähk, Ülla, “A family of declarations, a life of declarations? [Kas deklaratsioonide perekond, deklaratsioonide elu?]”. Postimees, 4.06.2014. Online: <http://arvamus.postimees.ee/2816314/ulla-vahk-kas-deklaratsioonide-perekond-deklaratsioonide-elu>.

descriptor “traditional” (family, Estonian, gender roles, etc) which cannot be seen as referring to any actual historical referent but to a tradition that is created in the present, in the now.

Both discourses also look for enemies from within; that is, these discourses are used to identify otherness from within “our” society. In the former case, these enemies are primarily those who leave the country and do not return and those that do not have (enough) children; in the latter case, they are those who are not heterosexual and thus cannot conform to the model of the “traditional family”, a model that is seen to be the most certain guarantee of the survival of Estonian identity. The opposition between the “traditional family” and non-heterosexual partnerships is often framed in terms of population survival. Thus, although the two cases may, at first glance, seem to be talking about different subject matters, they stem from the same concerns: how to make the so-to-say “traditional Estonia” persist. It can thus be suggested that not only does auto-communicational solidification of identity construct otherness as inherently dangerous, it also finds dangerous otherness from within itself (Estonian society is seen as not viable since it contains identities that are foreign to “traditional Estonia”).

This “traditional Estonia”, however, is posited, as shown above, as already being in danger of disappearing, as already being threatened by its own inconsistencies and even “illnesses”. It is thus seen as both a saviour of Estonian identity and as being already too weak, too far gone, so to speak. “Traditional Estonia” is transformed into heritage that needs to be protected, since it is no longer capable of living a healthy life itself. This is characteristic of the discourse of survival that we are dealing with in both cases: on the one hand, “tradition” is seen as the sole thing that can guarantee the persistence of an identity, but, on the other hand, this “tradition” is already endangered to such a degree that it cannot function in the required manner. Consequently, the focus is not on ensuring the production of values, of equal opportunities, but on making “tradition” resilient, to make it survive the ever-changing flow of history by arresting it in a potentially infinite present.⁴⁸

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Преодоление конечности – выживание как конструируемая основа идентичности

В статье рассматриваются биополитические аспекты конструирования эстонской национальной идентичности на основе освещения в масс-медиа двух событий: (1) перепись населения и жилых помещений 2011 года и (2) принятие Закона о совместном проживании 2014 года. Объектом анализа является дискурс – т. е. способ освещения этих тем в масс-медиа – который в этой статье называется «дискурсом выживания». Такое наименование обусловлено фактом, что в этом дискурсе при конструировании национальной идентичности сосредотачиваются прежде всего на постоянстве и сохранности идентичности. Постановка проблемы с акцентом на выживание нации и национальности позволяет вставить конструирование коллективной идентичности в биополитическую рамку, в которой политический субъект понимается как принципиально конечное живое существо. Автор статьи приходит к выводу, что семиотическая логика подобного процесса идентификации объясняется как закрытая в пространстве и времени структура автокоммуникации, главной целью которой является укрепление идентичности.

Lõplikkuse ületamine: ellujäämine identiteedi konstrueeritud alusena

Artikkel tegeleb Eesti rahvusliku identiteedi konstrueerimise biopoliitiliste aspektidega, mida analüüsitakse kahe sündmuse meediakajastuste põhjal: (1) 2011. aasta rahva ja eluruumide loendus ja (2) kooseluseaduse vastuvõtmine 2014. aastal. Analüüsi objektiks on sellest meediakajastusest välja kooruv diskursus – s.t asjadest kõnelemise viis –, mida artiklis nimetatakse 'ellujäämise diskursuseks'. Nimetus tuleneb asjaolust, et selles diskursuses keskendutakse rahvusliku identiteedi konstrueerimisel ennekõike identiteedi säilimisele ja kestmisele. Rahva ja rahvuse ellujäämisvajadust rõhutav probleemiasetus võimaldab kollektiivse identiteedi konstrueerimise siduda biopoliitilise raamistusega, milles poliitilist subjekti mõistetakse fundamentaalselt lõpliku elusolendina. Mõtestades identiteedi konstrueerimist biopoliitilise lõplikkuse ja sellega kaasneva ellujäämistungi loogika alusel, jõutakse artiklis järeldusele, et sellise identiteediprotsessi semiootiline loogika on selgitatav suletud ja presentistliku autokommunikatsioonina, mille peamiseks eesmärgiks on identiteedi kindlustamine.