



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
PRESS

Raili Nugin

The 1970s:  
Portrait of a Generation  
at the Doorstep

Politics and Society  
in the Baltic Sea Region 3

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### **Politics and Society in the Baltic Sea Region 3**

*Politics and Society in the Baltic Sea Region* is a series devoted to contemporary social and political issues in the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. A specific focus is on current issues in the Baltic states and how these relate to the wider regional and geopolitical challenges. Open to a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences as well as diverse conceptual and methodological approaches, the series seeks to become a forum for high-level social science scholarship that will significantly enrich international knowledge and understanding of the Baltic Sea region. All books published in the series are peer-reviewed.

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## The 1970s

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## Foreword

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When I was a child during the 1980s, I had several dreams about the person I would become. My ambitions included a worker at a chocolate factory, an actress and a librarian in some remote rural village library. None of these professions are very close to anything I have been doing as my adult life has progressed. With this realization, I am no exception. Children usually dream of becoming someone they see around them doing something they comprehend (or think they do). When I grew older, however, my perceptions of future career paths became rather confused. In fact, I had no idea what I could, would, or should do. This is, of course, not very exceptional for young people reaching a certain age. What was exceptional in my case, however, was the fact that the confusion was not only caused by my age (or my gender), but to a considerable extent by the fact that the very notion of “who to become” was changing. To be sure, the chocolate factory was still working, and one could still become an actress or a librarian, but the social and institutional set-up around me was rapidly changing; several new institutions emerged, new professions and new fields opened up for exploration. Yet, these were still rather vague and not easy to put a finger on.

So, when the time came to make a decision in 1993, I chose to study history. I was not particularly interested in the subject as such, but my abilities in science subjects were limited and there was not much choice available at the time among other subjects, unless you wanted to study philology. Social sciences were only just being established in Estonia at that point and they required a maths exam, which made enrolment impossible for me. Moreover, subjects such as anthropology, public relations, cultural studies, international relations, or anything else along these lines were at that stage not as yet offered in Estonian higher education. I had no idea though, what I would do with my education and it annoyed me when I was asked about my career plans. Usually

questions would include more or less openly hidden suggestions like “Will you become a teacher then?” or “So you want to work in the archives? Museum?” At the time, I was terrified of these perspectives (since I was possessed by the prevalent clichés about these jobs). As these questions became routine, I developed a standard answer. In this answer, I referred to a famous business lady at the time, Tiiu Silves, a maths teacher by training, who became immeasurably rich by trading metal – a common but temporary way of making a quick buck during the transition period. If you have enough wit and guts, I reasoned, you could become anything, and the subject you study is secondary. Looking now at the people who studied with me, this was not that far from the truth. Though there are dedicated teachers, museum-workers and well-known historians among my former course mates, many of them ended up in fields which have little or nothing to do with what we studied back then.

My own development into a social science researcher was also not exactly a linear path, to put it mildly. Having specialised in art history and world literature, I was still far from knowing what my true calling could be. Art history students were offered a study year in Tallinn, at the Estonian Academy of the Arts. As I was originally from Tartu (where I lived at home during my studies), I now had to think about how to survive as the financial support I got from my parents barely covered the rent. So, during the first week, a co-student proposed that instead of looking for job ads, we should go and ask for a job ourselves. The closest institution to the Academy was the State Archive, so we stepped in. The head of the personnel department told us that they had no vacancies, but when we were about to leave the head of the archive walked into the room. Taking in the situation he appreciated what he called a rare occasion when young people take initiative and offer their services. He asked us to come back the next day promising to find something for us, which he indeed did. We started off as guards, then reading room assistants (close to my librarian dream), but our careers in the archive advanced further quickly thereafter. In less than one year I was counsellor to the head of the archive and soon after graduating the university (aged 23) I found myself leading an Information System Department (and I had never even been especially friendly with computers). Though being fascinated by the experience of witnessing the building of the new systems (besides the Information System development the entire national archive was in the state of development and reorganisation), the world of budgets, administrating and managing people got me thinking that I was too young to be buried in all this. So I resumed my studies, first in history, then in social sciences, which eventually led me to where I am now.

The reason for giving this personal review of my own career path is that even if a certain degree of coincidence and spontaneity probably characterises many young people's early ventures into adult life, the specific situation of social and institutional transformation which characterises the environment in which this took place for my age cohort merits greater attention. This book will do exactly that: it will pay attention to and analyse the specific features of the cohort which came of age during and right after the regime change in Estonia aiming at a portrayal of what I came to call "The Generation at the Doorstep."

This project was originally started in 2003 because I realized that there was a discourse taking place in the Estonian media, harking back to the late 1990s, that focused on the younger people's position in society after the end of the immediate transition period. Part of this discourse evolved around the concept of the "winners' generation": how a certain group born in the middle of the 1960s had managed to claim key positions in society. Another part of it concentrated on how the "cult" of young people had conquered Estonia, and how youth as such had turned into a capital on the job market: newspaper ads searched for employees under 30. I wanted to explore the topics of both discourses more deeply and see if there was more to them than met the eye. Firstly, it seemed to me that those born in the 1960s were not the only "winners". Even though sociologists had paid attention to the social mobility of an even younger age group (those born in the 1970s), this age group was less focused upon. I started to wonder why. Was there anything different about them? Could they be compared with or included in the so called "winners' generation?" Secondly, seeing rather young people occupy high posts in state institutions and companies, I started wondering what would happen to the young people coming after my age group, if all the posts were already occupied. Could youth still be considered such a strong symbolic capital or was this changing? To what degree is the environment for young people today created by those who were socialised during the time of change?

This book will consider some of these questions. However, its main aim is to contextualise the narratives of those born during the 1970s as part of the wider social scene. By starting out with my own biography, I am admitting that in many ways this book is a self-reflexive portrait. In a way, it explores the question of whether my own experiences and career search finds a resonance in the broader social development of my country. By painting a social portrait of those born during the 1970s, based on both statistical and qualitative data, my aim is to identify social and discursive patterns which may or may not justify calling this cohort a generation. I am aware of the fact that in doing this I

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probably take part in the very construction of that generation, something that will be addressed in later parts of the book. But be that as it may, the book will take you on what I hope to be an interesting journey which not only explores the life courses and worldviews of many of the proponents of this age group, but one that will also give you a broader insight into the social processes which have taken place in the small, but particularly dynamic post-communist country that is Estonia.

## Introduction

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In February 1995, the most popular Estonian weekly newspaper featured a text called “manifesto” with the title, “Thoughts about the brains of the new becoming generation”. The manifesto was written by three Estonians and described a generation of yuppies, or, *pintsaklipslased* (suit-and-tie-wearers):

When we analyse Estonian society and its labour market there emerges a clearly distinguishable group, formed by people who are under the age of 25 years. There is a particularly strong concentration of members of this generation in the institutions that have only recently come into being and are connected to the economy and judiciary (such as banks, foreign ministry, security police etc.). The respectable positions [these people hold] /.../ determine also the way those under 25 years look to the outside world: the keywords here being in suits and ties. This suit-and-tie generation was generated by a chance. Officially, this chance is called the “singing revolution”. (Funk, Toots and Vahter, 1995)

This was the first time that the age group born during the 1970s was described in a public forum and given a generational label, something that circulated for some time afterwards in various discursive fields and gained quite some popularity. Though the authors really referred to only a small social group within the age cohort (not to mention the strong male bias already provided in the very label), the generalisations they made suggested that the values carried by this “suit-and-tie-generation” enjoyed popularity among all those born within the same time-frame. Through a somewhat self-ironic prism (as the authors themselves were born in the 1970s) the generation was described as being without soul: workaholics who never exit the urban environment, nor do they go to family funerals or classical music concerts while worshipping mostly materialist goods and values.

Ten years later, in 2005, the label had lost its appeal. One of the authors of the article, Karlo Funk, dedicated an article to the fate of the suit-and-tie-generation, asking if it still existed and rhetorically calling for the readers to notify him if anyone has ever seen a true representative of that suit-and-tie-generation. According to him, the phenomenon had been as much time-specific (triggered by the reconstruction of the society in the 1990s) as it had been age-specific: by 2005, most of those young people had reached their thirties, started families or changed their lifestyles and were no longer solely orientated towards work or material values. Though the term still resurfaced from time to time after that, it was employed usually to describe a more *ad hoc* specific group of people which happened to be very young, influential and visible on the social scene.

The emergence of such a label for this age group, however, is significant within the framework of this book in several ways. Though perhaps not very sustainable in time and not pinning down the characteristics of the entire age group, it was the first public discussion of the characteristics of this particular age group. The authors clearly distinguished this age group from others which were only slightly older, i.e. those born during the 1960s, who held the key positions in the business world at the time and who became known as the “winners’ generation” (a label still very much present in today’s discursive fields). There thus seemed to be a need to distinguish both groups from each other. This may be explained simply by the speed of social changes at the time, which often increases the temptation to develop labels for every new age group entering adulthood. However, as this example also shows, these labels may not last and their character is bound to change. Now, after twenty years have passed since that “manifesto”, it is time to explore this particular age group from a more distanced and systematic point of view, thus highlighting and analysing the distinct dynamics which characterise this group’s processes of coming of age. This book thus sets out to provide a more thorough analytical insight into the development of this age group and asks if there is ground to label it, indeed, a “social generation.”

Generation as a concept is an object of construction and reconstruction in academic as well as other discursive fields and thus, often highly debatable. Who constitutes a generation, is a question of the interplay of collective identities and social discourses – all of which are in dynamic construction and hence, in constant change along with the society. While some labels (“babyboomers” in U.S., or, “winners’ generation” in Estonia) are pretty well defined and widely understood, others are less straightforward and constantly questioned and

redefined. At times, members of a particular age group associate themselves with a specific generation based on their age, however, no label exists to frame it or make it tangible. This is also the case with the generation which this book deals with – in fact; many would argue that there is no distinguishable “generation” consisting of those born during the frame of 1970–1980. Having been born during the Soviet era, most of them were still children during the turmoil of changes which tore down the Berlin Wall and peaked with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Their coming of age coincided with the time of the rebuilding of society within the framework of liberal market economy. While they were not part of the active adult segment of society during the political events of 1988–1991 (which is not to say they did not participate in some of its core events or were unaware of the political change), they took part in the reconstruction of Estonian society during the first decade of state building and democratisation. They were also the first cohort to negotiate their transition to adulthood during the newly regained independence. In many ways, they started new patterns of socialisation (opening paths for younger cohorts to come) while also sharing some experiences and socialisation patterns with the previous generations.

One of the central aims of this book is to paint a nuanced portrait of a generation based on in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups with representatives of the cohort (N=47), using different open and axial coding methods as well as qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000). The interviews were conducted over a period of ten years (2003–2013) and consisted of different stages, each with its own slightly different focus. However, in all of them the central questions were posed around social change and its impact on the respondent’s life course decisions. In addition, the study makes use of statistical data as well as analysing media discourses to contextualise and further sharpen the contours of this age group. The generational portrait that is being drawn this way, however, does not represent all social layers of society. Rather, it concentrates on those who have a “voice” in society and who are thus the ones shaping the discursive patterns generated about and by this age group.

Thus giving a sociological “face” to the 1970s age cohort from an elite-centred approach, the book also seeks to close an empirical gap in contemporary sociological research in and about Estonian society. Part of the lack of attention paid to this group may be owed to the already noted fact that this age group shares some of the traits with both the previous and next cohorts, thus making it hard to clearly delineate the group’s generational features. On the one hand, the people coming of age during the period 1988–1998 share memories from

their Soviet childhood as well as experiences of the social changes during the dissolution of the Soviet Union with older cohorts. They also share some of the advantages which the change to a market system offered, enabling them to make use of the chances for upward social mobility regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. However, in many respects, this cohort also differs from the previous one, for example, in their experience of coming of age during a time when the traditions and institutions which usually frame the transition to adulthood were in a state of flux. Thus, belated parenthood, partnership instead of marriage, hectic educational routes and chances to study or work abroad are some of the life course patterns that defines this age cohort, making it to some extent more akin to younger cohorts than to the older. In other words, if we need to find a label to attach to this cohort we may as well call it the “threshold generation”, or “twilight generation” or even the generation “in-between”, or the “sandwiched” generation. This being in-between of different trajectories of social change and -practices does not necessarily diminish one’s sense of generational belonging. In fact, the analysis of interview data has shown that representatives of the 1970s cohort often draw some kind of qualitative distinction between themselves and both previous and later age cohorts, pointing to the particular circumstances of their early adulthood and socialisation process.

The second main aim of the book is thus to provide a theoretically informed and empirically substantiated discussion about generational construction, its emergence and dynamics. The empirical data collected and analysed will offer unique insights into the ways in which social and political change influences the life courses of those coming of age during that period, how this experience is turned into a symbolic resource in various discursive fields and how it contributes to the emergence of generational consciousness.

The existence of generational identity expressed in the interviews raises broader questions for social science methodology in generational research: if sociologists distinguish social generations by relying on criteria such as socio-economic well-being, digital literacy; youth employment, or demographics, how do we then determine where these generations start and end? As the visible generational processes never happen overnight, there are always cohorts who precede or follow specific changes in society, sharing some of the traits with previous generations and others with the next ones. However, as social scientists tend to focus on the centre, the fringes of any generational cohort are often overlooked, though they themselves may very well distinguish themselves from the previous as well as the next generations. Hence, the questions arise, how



should we define the cohorts that lie in-between of established generations? Do we have a right to ignore their self-consciousness as a different generation? On the other hand, though they might distinguish themselves from other age groups/generations, does this distinguishing last through time? As the example discussed at the beginning of this chapter shows, labels can come and go. Age groups that stand out at particular moments may “merge” into other age groups later, and vice versa. Even though this study does not pretend to give a prediction about the future fate of generational constructs in Estonia, it may still provide some answers about what traits the generational consciousness of this age group relies on. Such knowledge can perhaps help social theorists to better reconstruct and understand the processes of self-affiliation and the collective identity construction of different age groups within a society and to assess the analytical value of the socially constructed models of generations. Indeed, given the analytically rather vague and at times contradictory notion of generation one may ask why this study chooses to place the concepts so prominently in its analysis of a specific age group. The answer is that it is precisely this vagueness and ambiguity of the concept which allows us to show the different dimensions of this phenomenon and determine its analytical usefulness in specific social contexts and situations.

Last but not least, this book aims to contribute to the general literature on post-socialism describing the experiences of those who lived during the changes which shaped Europe during and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There are several recent anthropological and sociological studies which address the issues raised here, namely how youth has negotiated its transitions in the post-socialist scene, how change has affected life courses and how young people reflect on those changes (Pilkington, 1994, Pilkington et al., 2002; Wallace and Kovacheva, 1998; Dmitrieva, 1996; Williams, Churpov and Zubok, 2003; Adelman, 1994; Vogt 2005). However, a focus on the generational approach is not so common among them. Where generation has been used in conceptualising the post-socialist youth (Pilkington et al., 1996; Kelly, 2007; Nehring, 2007), the question of how and where to draw the boundaries between generations remains rather underexplored. Surely, drawing generational borders is a most challenging task and the criteria for doing so may vary depending on the specific country context and the questions asked. We can assume that the different stages in the process of social change which took place in the post-socialist space each had their impact on the different age cohorts in society and it seems worthwhile to spell these differences out. Indeed, they are rarely acknowledged, and there is little theory on the topic of the variety of similar

processes on different cohorts. In other words, rather than talking about a “generation of change” one could talk about several “generations of change” as the various stages of change may have created many generations that reflect differently on the change as they found themselves at a different life course stage during the stages of the change. Also, there is a tendency to homogenise the experiences and attitudes of all the post-socialist youth. However, the contexts around the young people in those states differed sometimes quite remarkably.

## Outline of the chapters

The book starts off by introducing the concepts crucial to the analysis of transitional societies, showing how classical sociological concepts such as identity, time, class and capital are utilised within the framework of this particular research about transitions. The chapter tries to point to the ways where these concepts as analytical tools are appropriate and what their particularities are in the post-socialist context. The second chapter will provide a brief overview of the specific trajectories of Estonia’s political and socioeconomic transition during the past two decades and places it within the broader post-communist context in order to provide the historical backdrop for the analysis of life courses and emerging perceptual patterns. The third chapter introduces the reader to the age group under scrutiny from a numerical point of view. Mapping out some of the statistical data which characterises this particular age group, such as education, employment, income etc., the ambiguous position of this cohort as being “in-between” will be further substantiated. Moreover, using statistics on educational and career patterns with demographic data, the chapter will demonstrate to what extent the change of personal transition patterns which occurred in post-socialist transition have their starting point among this cohort, even if there is no unified pattern across the 1970s age group. In fact, those born during the beginning of the 1970s and those born during the late 1970s differ remarkably in their socialisation practices. The fourth chapter introduces the qualitative interview data and analyses the various discursive patterns which emerge from the respondents’ personal reflections. The fifth chapter concentrates on one aspect of the interviews, namely how the respondents conceptualise their own generational belonging – where and on what basis they identify generational boundaries. As it appears, many of them base their generational construction on features which are hard to capture in statistical terms such as childhood experiences and memories

of the transition. As memories and the meaning of the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet time seem to inform an important part of the identities expressed in the interviews, the sixth chapter will analyse in more depth what the particularities of these memories are. It will look at what patterns are used to present the memories of the Soviet times. The final chapter will focus on the public discourses about generations in Estonia based on media analysis. This analysis focuses in particular on the extent to which the narrative constructions and discursive patterns identified in the interview data find a wider resonance in society. Moreover, the images created about the 1970s cohort in the media, both by themselves as well as by others, will be revealed here. The concluding chapter then sets out to bring both the theoretical insights and empirical results together and poses the question of whether there is sufficient ground to define the 1970s cohort as a distinct social generation in today's Estonian society.



# 1. Transition, time and generation: discussing key concepts

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“Whenever a theory appears to you as the only possible one, take this as a sign that you have neither understood the theory nor the problem which it was intended to solve.”

— Karl Popper

This book is not framed under one theory, nor has it worked out any new strong theoretical frameworks. Instead, it aims to conceptualise the empirical material into different sets of theoretical reasoning, trying to pose questions about these concepts, sometimes calling for the broadening, sometimes for the narrowing of the meanings attached to theoretical notions. In this opening chapter, I will try to address some of the core concepts discussed in the book. It starts off pondering on the conceptualisation of generation, followed by framing the perceptions of the transition period and how it has been studied thus far. In addition, the key sociological concepts of identity, class and capital will be discussed within the context of this study, thus providing a conceptual skeleton for the body text (the empirical analysis) to come.

Human beings as fundamental social animals need a group identity, a sense of belonging and continuity over time in order to build a coherent identity. Generation can provide this sort of identity, along with other strong markers such as class, race, gender etc. (Corsten, 1999, p. 264; Mizralski 2003). At the same time, as many studies into the construction and de-construction of such social identities have demonstrated, few of them (if any) are carved in stone and immutable. Moreover, there is not just one social identity of an individual, but rather it is a matter of the given social context and everyday situations, where and which particular side of an identity becomes important for an individual.

Contemporary theorists imply that people tend to be more conscious about their generational identity compared to their belonging to other social groups (see Marada, 2004, p. 152). The rise in generational consciousness may be caused by changes in society, which have reached a surprising pace and extent (Eisenstadt, 1988, p. 102; Myszal, 2003, p. 85). Socioeconomic developments and normative shifts in society during the past decades have left the borders of classes increasingly blurred and political developments eradicated some of the more clear-cut ideological divisions which once defined global order such as communism and capitalism (Corsten, 1999, p. 249). Some social theorists are therefore observing a crisis in collective identities in the so called Western world that is defined by a steady decline in the meaning of notions of cultural change such as class, religion, region or race (Giesen, 2004, p. 36; Weisbrod, 2007, p. 26). This does not mean that class and race as social categories have ceased to exist. Being born in a certain class, region or race may strongly shape one's future chances (depending on the social position, enhancing or limiting your choices), but they do not determine this the way they used to (being a son of a miller or a tailor does not necessarily mean that one would take over one's father's profession). Therefore, identity construction based solely on these social characteristics is getting weaker. Identities have become more complicated and include other features determined by cultural taste, consumption and lifestyle (to name a few) (Miles, 2000).

Parallel to the social changes which are taking place, the cultural knowledge and values that were previously passed on from generation to generation in stable societies to strengthen class-consciousness or religious identity also weaken under the changed social conditions. Radical social changes such as those following a regime change from communism to democracy and market economy can create generational conflicts or even traumas which leave new generations cut off from the past as they find the knowledge from their parents to be useless for their current lives. Moreover, they may also feel cut off from the future, as they are lacking clear role models who would give them the required knowledge (Eisenstadt, 1988, p. 91; Sztompka, 2000; Edmunds and Turner, 2002, p. 7). Thus, new birth cohorts have to create their own new socializing patterns and the quicker the pace of the development of the society, the more often new socialisation patterns emerge. This observation has inspired youth researchers to generate numerous generational labels, which may coexist and

overlap.<sup>1</sup> The actual boundaries between these multiple generations tend to be levelled, and generational conflict is not always obvious (Giesen, 2004, p. 38).

How then is a generation defined? Though the term itself dates back to an antique epoch (Misztal, 2003, p. 83), its theoretical understanding was shaped much later and most prominently by Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), who was inspired by the youth movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and tried to define the term for the first time for social research (Lovell, 2007, p. 2). Indeed, the terms “generation” and “youth” have been sometimes used as synonyms, indicating that each socioeconomic period is identified via the young that lived during that era (Lovell, 2007, p. 7; López, 2002, p. 111). Mannheim argued that generational identity is formed during the formative years of an individual’s life, i.e. roughly from age 17 onwards (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p. 43–44). According to him, the generation is formed because at a certain age young people reach the point where they feel the need to reflect on and understand their social surroundings. In other words, the young person awakens to the social world around her/him at a certain age, and if this happens during a period of major change or upheaval, those changes need to be reasoned. Along with social change, new values and dispositions are emerging and young people are especially receptive to these during their development years.

Mannheim states that a generation is a social entity, members of which have a certain “bond” and “generational consciousness”, yet the connection between the members is not as tight as in groups which members depend on each other (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p. 33). In addition, members of this particular group must share a common place in history. Thus members of a generation are defined by “a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them to a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action” (generation as “location”) (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p. 36). Moreover, they are assumed as partaking towards “participation in a common destiny” (generation as “actuality”) (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p.46). Within generations, Mannheim continues, there are several “generational units”, meaning people who “work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways” (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p.47). Thus, a generation does not have to be a homogeneous entity, but can have multiple generational units, each with its own agenda (Edmunds and Turner, 2002, p. 4). According to Mannheim, then, there are three important

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<sup>1</sup> For example “Generation X, C or Y”, “The Digital generation”, “The Computer Generation”, “Generation Me” etc. (Giesen 2004: 37–38, Bruns 2006, Wyn and Woodman 2006: 496, Siibak 2009: 10, Twenge 2006)

characteristics required to form a generation: a) generation as a location (in time); b) generation as an actuality and c) generational units (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p. 53). However, Mannheim also noted that generations are constantly being constructed and reconstructed: generations are in a continuous state of interaction and thus, interrelated. Different groups negotiate the characteristics of their own and others' generational characteristics by constructing them in everyday interactions, but also in different discursive fields (for instance, in advertisements, cultural texts, media etc.).

The recent spread of the generational concept has been accompanied by a degree of confusion. Several interpretations of Mannheim's original theory compete, complement and contradict each other. Some authors focus their attention on what Mannheim might have thought when talking about "generational consciousness". Michael Corsten, for example, argues that it is crucial for generations to form shared "discursive practices", creating a certain semantic order by which time is organised while forming a mutual "generalised other" (Corsten, 1999, p. 258–260; see also Weisbrod, 2007, p. 21). Other authors focus more on Mannheim's "generation as location" stressing the need for a generation to have a mutual cultural identity. At the same time, they concentrate on the social circumstances which favour some generations in comparison to subsequent age cohorts. Brian S. Turner calls those who have favourable social conditions, "strategic generations", which means that social change is brought about by generational cohorts who have strategic advantages which are in turn consolidated with moral or hegemonic leadership (Turner, 2002, p. 13–14). The "strategic generations" are reluctant to give up the structural opportunities and advantages which they have achieved and therefore create a lag in social opportunity. In Turner's view, the members of strategic generations are "active generations" usually followed by "passive generations" (Ibid, p. 18).

At the risk of oversimplifying matters, we may distinguish between two main approaches to the conceptualisation of generation. The first concentrates on intangible features which carry the generational consciousness (studies in memory, biographies, discourse etc., see Corsten, 1999; Miształ, 2003; Marada, 2004; Jõesalu, 2005; Weisbrod, 2007; Kõresaar, 2008; Grünberg, 2009; Petrescu, 2014). The second concentrates on social and demographical structures while constructing generations (studies in demographical behaviour, on career opportunities structures, income, social transitions etc: Titma, 1999; Turner, 2002; Katus, Puur and Sakkeus, 2005; Chauvel, 2006; Thane, 2007). Rarely, however, has the social analysis tried to integrate *all* the aspects of Mannheim's theory – the social conditions (generation as location), generational consciousness, mutual ways to react in social context (generation as



actuality) and generational units. This is perhaps because it is truly complicated (if not impossible) to capture a portrait of a generation in its entirety. In his works, Mannheim has defined generations in general, yet leaving enough room for different disciplines to interpret the notion differently. Furthermore, Mannheim's essay – though influential in social sciences – is far from being the only work to define the concept. In short, there is no agreement in terms of how to construct a generation even within one discipline, let alone across different study branches.

While in its qualitative part this book is focusing on a relatively narrow elite of a particular age cohort, it nevertheless aims at combining both approaches to generational research by using both demographic and survey data as well as autobiographical and discursive data to analyse the 1970s generation. While it may not come to a final conclusion concerning clear generational boundaries, it still provides a more diverse and thus more comprehensive picture of this particular social group and its location within today's Estonian society. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data in the analysis of a particular age cohort, moreover, reveals the many different dimensions of the phenomenon of generation and thus ultimately allows us to get a better understanding regarding where and when this concept is useful to understanding social dynamics and change.

## Defining and framing transition

In order for a social generation in Mannheim's sense to emerge, a radical social or political change or major event has to take place during the coming of age of a particular age group. For Estonians born during the 1970s, this was clearly signalled when the Soviet Union collapsed and their country embarked on the path to state independence, democracy and market economics in 1991. Though nobody questions the enormity and radical nature of this change, its evaluation remains heterogeneous in the literature, depending not least on different disciplinary approaches and concepts. A myriad of terms have emerged to describe the processes which started during the late 1980s in Central and Eastern Europe, sometimes used synonymously, sometimes to denote distinctly different phenomena. Such terms include “post-communism”, “post-socialism” and “post-Soviet” to designate the era after the change; and “transition” and “transformation” to describe the process of change. It would be tempting to claim that the usage of a particular term simply denotes a particular discipline and thus certain terms are reserved for political scientists and perhaps

economists (e.g. post-communism and transition) while others “belong” to sociologists (e.g. post-socialism) or anthropologists (e.g. transformation). Yet, the picture seems to be more complicated and it is not easy to draw clear lines between these terms or their use. Though this study takes a rather pragmatic approach, using these terms more or less as synonyms, it seems nevertheless worthwhile to discuss some of their distinct meanings in order to clarify their use in general.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the term “transition” means “the process or period of changing from one state or condition to another”. In other words, “transition” by definition seems to presuppose that it is a temporary state, which should have a clear articulated goal (“another” state or condition) and a fixed end-point is presupposed. Thus, the transition should end if such a point is reached (see Blokker, 2008; Burawoy, 2001; Stark and Bruzst, 2001; Stenning, 2005, p. 113; Verdery and Burawoy, 1999, p. 4). Starting from the term “transition”, an entire research branch – transitology – emerged during the 1970s, and focused its research on the democratisation processes of southern Europe and Latin America. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the theoretical models of transition established in these studies were often used to explain transition processes after the end of communism as well (see Gans-Morse, 2004). In the realm of everyday political discourse, at least in the Baltic states and much of Central Europe, the goals of the post-communist transition to democracy are often described in international institutional terms, thus not just to achieve stable democratic institutions and procedures, but also as reaching the goal of joining the European Union (EU), NATO or the European currency zone. This simplified version of transition in popular discourse indicates that the transition process is a convergence with Western structures (rather than divergence). However, this raises an inevitable question: if such goals are achieved, does the society cease to be in transition? Also, this model presupposes that social developments in all post-socialist countries aiming for these institutional goals are similar, which risks overlooking some essential differences (for a critique, see Blokker, 2005, p. 504).

“Transformation”, by contrast, is defined by the OECD as “a marked change in form, nature, or appearance”. As this term semantically does not imply a change from one fixed state to another but rather sees change as a process, some scholars prefer this term to indicate that these shifts in different societies can appear in a variety of forms and over longer time periods (Verdery, 1996, p. 15–16). Thus, the emphasis is on “transformation *from*” rather than “transition *to*” to mark the importance of the starting position instead of the end point (Gans-Morse, 2004). Yet, despite these discussions and attempts to

distinguish the two terms, many authors use the terms interchangeably and ignore the sense of “transition” as something with fixed goals of institutional development (e.g. Hörschelmann, 2002; Miller, Humphrey and Zdravomyslova 2004). Indeed, as Katherine Verdery and Michale Burawoy point out, transition as a concept in the social sciences does not inevitably have to be defined as a development with a predefined destination. For them “a transition [cannot be conceived of] as either rooted in the past or tied to an imagined future. Transition is a process suspended between the two” (1999, p. 14; see also Stenning 2005, p. 124).

Whatever the term used, such overarching social science concepts can be useful to describe generalised and indeed shared phenomena across a larger number of cases, without necessarily overlooking essential differences among them (Humphrey, 2002, p. 12). Many authors thus suggest not to look for uniformity or universal signifiers of post-socialist societies, but rather talk about specific commonalities while acknowledging the differences as well (Stenning, 2005, p. 114). An example for such an approach is Michael Kennedy’s (2003) usage of the term “transition culture”. According to him, the term “transition culture” should not be used with clear boundaries in mind: “In fact, it is better not to think in terms of boundaries at all” (2003, p. 10). According to Kennedy, a transition culture is a culture that sees itself as focused on “forward movement” and, hence, certain questions come into focus, such as constant re-evaluation of shared norms and expertises (*ibid.*, p. 9). Paradoxically, when a society rearranges its future prospects, it also becomes obsessed with reconstructing its history as the past sets the moral agenda for the present (*ibid.*, Poole, 2008). The power of a transition culture, Kennedy argues, does not come from clear goals and linear development, but rather from its lability and “capacity to articulate with a wide variety of actors and other cultural formations”. Here, liminality, the sense of being in-between (Blokker, 2008, p. 260),<sup>2</sup> comes into focus, as does its reflection among the participants in that culture. In other words, even if the

<sup>2</sup> The term “liminality” is operationalized mainly in anthropology to mark the liminal period during rites of passage. It was coined by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969). It marks a period in an individual’s life when he/she is in between two life stages (e.g. between youth and adulthood). Lately, it has also been used to characterise wider processes in society and mark transitions in social levels, not only individual life changes. The rhetoric of transition was not absent from Soviet society, either. Official propaganda declared the clear goal of a communist society, and people had to work to achieve the goals set by communism (Lenin). Yet, the period of late socialism (1960–1980s) can be characterised as a period of stabilisation, in which people acquired certain behavioural patterns and routines and did not perceive the era as transitional (see Yurchak 2003, Jõesalu 2005).

goals are not clear and the movement is clearly not linear, the social actors by themselves perceive movement, or some kind of shift, even though the goal may be poorly defined and utopian (Vogt, 2005). In fact, during the transformations of the 1990s, different kinds of utopian goals existed simultaneously. In other words, there was a “plurality of utopias”: the future was conceived as open and fundamentally undefined (Vogt, 2005).

Although specialised and shaped by communist-era practices, post-socialist societies are also influenced and moulded by developments in other parts of the world (Stenning, 2005, p. 124; Vihalemm, Lauristin and Tallo, 1997). Uncertainty, rupture and fragmentation, which are often used as keywords for transitional societies, have also become common characteristics used when discussing most Western societies (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992; Stenning, 2005, p. 113; Zittoun, 2007). The time period preceding this late modern era is depicted as linear and secure (Giddens, 1991). Thus, sometimes the differences between the “West” and post-socialist societies are not easy to detect and one is even tempted to ask: is there any reason to distinguish post-socialist countries and talk about post-socialism in general (Stenning, 2005, p. 114). The difference between the two groups lies, in my view, mainly in the perception and the character of certainty during the Soviet time and the uncertainties during the aftermath of the collapse of the system. The character of these certainties and uncertainties will be discussed in chapter III. Suffice it to say, the certainty of socialism:

“closed the horizons of the future and freedom ... – and ‘certainty’, being imposed on the society from ‘above’, eventually turned against itself” (Vogt, 2005, p. 125).

Thus, even though the post-socialist transition had a specific manifestation in every given country, it had certain general features: the sense of liminality and asking questions about one’s identity, the shared past of “closed” certainty and a variety of uncertainties. Even though these questions were addressed and answered differently in each society, it is useful to conceptualise the research done in these societies within the framework of the post-socialist transition, as an analytical tool. In this book, I often use “transition” and “transformation” as synonyms, and the terms in the context of this research signify the open-ended processes of identification, a sensed liminality and perceived shift in society.

## Framing the 1970s cohort in the context of transition studies

There are several ways to look at the way change has affected the lives of the people living through it. Some studies have concentrated on how people in post-socialist societies *cope with* or *adjust to* the uncertainties that surround them (Aarelaid, 2006). A sudden change in social structures, political scene and values can be sources of shock or even of cultural trauma (Sztompka, 2000), and people have to come to terms with sudden difficulties on a practical or psychological level. Another way is to look at how they “creatively reconstruct” (see Sampson, 2008, p. 219) their everyday lives and identities under new conditions. This approach presupposes that change is in some ways seen as an advantage rather than a burden. To be sure, all aspects – adjusting, coping and reconstructing – exist on a personal level. Here, a lot depends on the angle from which the researcher chooses to analyse the research objects (respondents) and what questions she/he asks.

This study aims to examine how those who were on the brink of their adult lives created (rather than adjusted) their lives and how this period of transition gave meaning to their lives and identities. In 1990s, the members of this sample group were at the stage where they were in the process of building their identities and everyday practices even if the social order had not changed. Transition is a stage where a lot of questions are asked, and it is a time of “identification”. People wonder: “Where am I headed? Who are my travel mates? How will I get there?” (Sampson, 2008, p. 220). This involves not only “coping with neoliberal uncertainties” but also “how to creatively re-work neo-liberal limits” (*Ibid.*, p. 223).

The age group studied in this book was at the life stage of “identification”, as was society. In this context, questions of identity become crucial and a lot depends on how the dilemmas of the identity search are resolved. Thus, identity and subjectivity can be seen as strategic resources (Dunn, 2008, p. 231), as they serve as a meaning-making apparatus (Vogt, 2005, p. 35; Zittoun, 2007). In the case of this age group, the acuteness of identity questions was present on a personal as well as on a social level. Hence, the awareness of identity as a strategic resource became vivid precisely because of the vast structural changes that were taking place around the respondents (Dunn, 2008, p. 231). This period was seen by many among the respondent group as an “era of possibilities” (Vogt, 2005, p. 77; Nugin, 2008, 2010). The ambivalence in society during the 1990s proved,

at times, to be positive, since it forced people to reflect upon their conditions (Vogt, 2005, p. 121).

One of the critical issues when studying post-socialist change is detecting the agents of change. In the political sciences, the agents (or actors) studied are often political elites or outstanding social figures. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are a number of modernising agents (Blokker, 2005, p. 505) as well as other, perhaps less active social groups which influence the development of transitions. Thus, rather than seeing this group as the one that had to cope with the new social reality, they can be treated as active agents moulding and shaping this reality, though not on a grand scale. Often, this approach is lacking in existing studies of post-socialist youth transitions, treating young people as victims of social change (see e.g. Williams, Chuprov and Zubok, 2003).

## Perception of time in contexts of radical change

As stated above, a transition in society is seldom a linear process with clear boundaries. In fact, as a country passes through a major process of change, it experiences multiple transitions influenced by a variety of factors and each with its specific end point. In addition to the transition from a socialist economy to a liberal economy, the society goes through global developments, not least the change from modernity to late modernity (Giddens, 1991).<sup>3</sup> In terms of theoretical modelling, it is important to distinguish the transition to post-socialism from the transition to late modernity. In practice, however, they are intertwined and these developments have taken place simultaneously (the transitions from modernity to late modernity, however, started somewhat later). The cohort of the 1970s in Estonia and the broader post-socialist world was certainly influenced by both transitions and the particular combination of both processes in their transition to adulthood probably had a specific influence on them.

Post-socialist Estonia changed from a socialist economy to a free market economy, a model which was most prominently promoted by Western democracies and transnational institutions (the International Monetary Fund and

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<sup>3</sup> There are endless debates over how to label the period which comes after modernity. The most commonly used labels are reflective modernity, late modernity, liquid modernity, post-modernity and risk society (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 1998; Bauman, 2000), as well as multiple modernities or varieties of modernity (Schmidt 2006). I will not indulge in discussion on the differences between these terms due to the limits of this book. I mostly use the label “late modernity”, while bearing in mind the generalised conception of the new era.

others). However, even though the institutional model introduced was connected with late modern society (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), it took some time before the values of Estonians started to shift towards those common in Western countries. The following discussion will thus sketch out the borders of the risk society and compare it with the “transition” society which shaped the perceptions and attitudes of those who came of age during the transition. The aim here is to highlight the differences in the character of these two transitions on both a theoretical and empirical level, thus explaining some of the differences between the societies experiencing both transitions (communism to post-socialism, and modernism to late modernity) and societies experiencing only one of them (modernism to late modernity).

The discussion on how to describe the society which has emerged after the fading of the modern (or industrial) society is diverse and far from agreed upon. However, there are some traits that many agree on and which seem to be important when trying to distinguish a late modern society from a post-socialist society in the early transition phase (1988–1994, for periodisation, see Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2009). There is a certain danger that such modelling leads to rather simplistic representations that ignore the diversities in different regions during those changes. For heuristic purposes, I will use several labels to describe these societies; these labels, however, indicate only general trends and directions and are not meant to describe inclusively all the aspects in those societies.

One of the most important traits separating the characteristics of these societies is the attitude towards the time of social developments. Modern society (as the one preceding the late modern/risk society) is usually seen as having started from the Enlightenment, with its belief in science and progress in society, in which the future was seen as open (Bauman, 1998, p. 24; Beck, 2005, p. 17; Reith, 2004, p. 383). The pace of social changes was perceptible, their directions known, the future was perceived as certain, the paths of biographies well-known and social norms were shared. Even in the case of grand ruptures and periods of chaos, such as wars, the discourse on the social level justified the ruptures in terms of collective goals for the future, and wars were justified with “rational” excuses grounded in the past (Bauman, 1998). By contrast, the pace of social changes in late modern/risk society is blistering and their direction is unpredictable, the future uncertain (i.e. full of risks that are not calculable). Standardised biographies have been replaced by choice biographies, social norms are heavily individualised and they change in any given context (Beck, 1992; Reith, 2004). People have to negotiate their identities in multiple contexts, which leads to strong individualism (Bauman, 1998;

Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). As a result, the past becomes less relevant (if not irrelevant)<sup>4</sup> and, instead of one unanimous linear future perception, single episodes acquire their own past and future (Leccardi, 2005). The very meaning of the future, being uncertain, changes constantly. During the modern age, the direction in which to move was known, the future could be planned and set as a horizon for overall social action. In the late modern society, thinking about the future means thinking about how to diminish the level of uncertainty, to avoid possible risks or, paradoxically, to prevent the future from happening (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 2005; Leccardi, 2005; Reith, 2004). In short, the future is replaced by an endlessly extended present.

As indicated in the previous sub-chapter, the time during and shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union had many similarities with late modern society: rupture, uncertainty and fast changes. In fact, some authors have applied the concept of the risk society to post-socialist Russia (Williams, Chuprova and Zubok, 2003). Indeed, the pace of changes and the level of uncertainty were probably higher than in Western democracies. But, as mentioned, the certainty governing Soviet society was substantially and ontologically different from the one prevalent in Western societies during modernity. As Henri Vogt (2005) has defined it, it was a “closed certainty”, which was seen as restrictive. In other words, the social side of building up one’s biography was established by certain patterns: schemes for acquiring a municipal apartment or mechanisms of transition from school to work were firmly established during the Soviet years. These mechanisms of social organisation of biographies (for instance, via assignment of jobs after university) were often despised and seen as restrictive, but the patterns were nevertheless roughly known. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the future suddenly became uncertain (the institutional patterns fell apart along with Soviet institutions), but it was mostly seen as open, promising and full of (rather vague) social utopias (Vogt, 2005). To bring the Estonian example, the building of the new (“our own”) society was depicted in national media in most euphoric colours, and the past (the national history) was the basis on which to build visions for the future (Nugin, 2003). The modernist mode of thinking which was common during the Soviet era still prevailed to a certain extent. People believed in linear future development in general: the

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<sup>4</sup> This notion of the past has been challenged by many researchers. In fact, it has been suggested that, because of the future being uncertain in contemporary society, people have become obsessed with the past (see Nora, 1989). What is important in this context, however, is the trend that the shared grand narratives of the past as the source of “the truth” have gradually been losing their impact.



notion of one road to the future. The modes of thinking resisted changing as fast as the institutions were rearranged. The people just exchanged the communist utopia for another, that of democracy and a liberal economy (without actually being aware of what they meant and sometimes attributing a mythical character to them – see Nugin, 2003; Vihalemm, Lauristin and Tallo, 1997; Vogt, 2005). In other words, the uncertainty that replaced the harsh frames of socialist society was labelled as uncertainty retrospectively by social scientists. Often, the uncertainties were not perceived as such by those living through them. To be sure, goals and norms were changing, but the goals were perceived as set by the Estonian people instead of coming from “above” (from Moscow). The notion of “being on the move” (as characteristic of a transition society) can provide people with enthusiasm and make them care less about future career paths.

	Modern	Late modern	Soviet era	Early transition period (1988–1994)
Road to the future	Linear	Non-linear	Linear	Linear (perceived)/ non-linear (actual)
Future	Open	Risk	Closed	Open
Destination	Certain	Uncertain	Certain	Uncertain
Past	Single past, important in constructing the future	Multiple pasts, fragmented stories	Double competing pasts claiming the truth (official and oppositional)	Single past, important in constructing the future

**Table 1:** Characteristics of modern, late modern, Soviet, and early transition periods.

In other words, the uncertainties governing the lives of those coming of age were of a different character compared to the ones that exist today or those which surround young people in Western countries. Jens O. Zinn (2005) has argued that the construction of social reality also influences the perception of uncertainties.

## Forms of capitals in the study of social transformations

In the attempt to understand how these social perceptions of uncertainties emerge or why they differ, it seems useful to look into Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capitals (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2005). While trying to solve the classic sociological dilemma of structure and agency, Bourdieu gave primacy to relations and differentiated, first, between different *fields* that make up the social world. He conceptualised these fields as structured spaces with their own laws of functioning and their own power relationships. Second, he identified individual agents with their specific *habitus* (i.e. an acquired way of behaviour and dispositions), who operate in different fields of conflict and competition by acquiring certain capitals (economic, cultural, social and symbolic). Both *fields* and *habitus* have specific structures, and are simultaneously unique and standardised. In other words, as individuals operate in certain fields, their actions are structured by complicated social relations, as well as by individual agency, which in turn is socially situated (Evans, 2002).

How is this model relevant for understanding post-socialist transformations more broadly and the time of transition in Estonia in particular? When looking at this specific case, we see that the structures and laws in the *fields* (i.e. the structured spaces) began to change, and so did the power relations within them. The interdependence of *fields* and the *habitus* of individuals operating within them meant that the individual *habitus* were affected by this change, too. However, as the influence according to Bourdieu is mutual, the *fields* must also have been influenced by the *habitus* of individual agents. The core of the *habitus* is laid down in an individual's childhood. Hence, it probably is more resistant to sudden change and changes at a slower pace than the *fields*. Thus, the *habitus* acquired during the Soviet era must have played a role in restructuring the *fields* as the "players" in the field came from the Soviet era. The *habitus* of the respondents in this research developed under the influence of both regimes. Their *habitus* also served as a bridge between the regimes to help them manoeuvre through their lives. The perception of uncertainties and the mode of uncertainties can also be defined as parts of a person's *habitus*.

Bourdieu applied his theory mostly to France, with its relatively stable class structure, while speaking of reproducing this class society. According to Bourdieu, people acquire and accumulate various capitals (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) and exchange them in order to dominate in a particular *field*. In Bourdieu's theory, there is not much attention given to how his model of the social world operates during a time of radical social change and

institutional rearrangements, or how the changes affect the acquiring of capitals. Yet, several other authors have applied his model to post-socialist countries (e.g. Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley, 1998). Even though “discontinuity” is a common term used metaphorically when talking about transition during the 1990s, it appears that the accumulated capitals individuals had acquired during the Soviet era were useful in creating continuity in individuals’ biographies. For instance, social capital acquired during the Soviet era was useful when moving upwards in the new society (Clark, 2000, p. 444; Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley, 1998). However, as the *fields* were being reconstructed, the character of these capitals changed and the capitals were partly redistributed.

While these findings are certainly relevant for understanding social dynamics and elite politics during times of change, it is rather more challenging to apply Bourdieu’s concepts to the study of a generation or age group which experienced its coming of age precisely during that very period of capital redistribution and change. According to Bourdieu, the foundation for the different kinds of capitals is laid by the social background of the parents, and the acquisition of capitals starts in childhood. However, in a situation of massive reconstructions in both the economic and social world, it can become rather difficult to identify, measure and analyse most of these capitals. Economic capital, for example, was not of crucial importance, or at least not the core basis of social stratification during the Soviet era, as the income differences were not severely pronounced (Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley, 1998). As the young people started their transition to adulthood during a time encompassing economic scarcity but also equality, this leads us to assume that, perhaps, their parents’ economic capital had less of a determining influence on their personal transition. Yet, the essence of the various capitals changed as well. For instance, during the Soviet times one could use an educational degree from a Marxism-Leninism University<sup>5</sup> as cultural capital to move up the career ladder. The value of these degrees, however, quickly declined in the new regime. The same thing occurred to various forms of symbolic capital: the prestige of being a Communist Party member, a pioneer leader or respected person in the old system could gain the opposite effect after the change. Social capital also changed its meaning, as old social ties acquired and useful during the Soviet era may have become useless or even a liability after the change. On the other

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<sup>5</sup> Marxism-Leninism universities were designed to give ideological education. During the 1970s, there were 352 universities of Marxism-Leninism, with a total enrolment of approximately 334,000 students, of whom 209,661 were members of the CPSU (Source: The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition (1970–1979)).

hand, some of the capitals dangerous during the Soviet occupation turned out to be most useful after the collapse of the regime, e.g. the secret networks of the dissidents. Yet, one should not forget that nevertheless certain types of social, economic or symbolic capital gained during the Soviet era retained their value and could be put to use after the change (Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley, 1998). In other words, even though all of these caveats need to be kept in mind when studying generation formation during times of radical social change, it remains an intriguing and useful, albeit challenging task to determine the form, origin and meaning of capital acquisition among this particular age group.

Indeed, it is particularly interesting to look into what Bourdieu defined as symbolic capital and how it is defined as a source of prestige, the latter being a vaguely defined concept itself. Symbolic capital can also be understood as a form of acknowledgement and can involve, depending on the symbolic order<sup>6</sup> of the society, not only individuals, but also groups. For instance, during the transformation period, young people and youth itself became a symbolic resource in Estonia. The high social mobility of young people after the change led to the perception that being young meant being “successful” (Nugin, 2008). Also, young people were seen as uncorrupted and sincere, compared to the adults who had held various positions and functions during the former regime (Marada, 2004).

Due to the individualisation processes (the need to create an “authentic self” with biographical originality (Honneth, 2004)), symbolic capital becomes more important. This is because in late modern society material wealth (economic capital) might at times matter less than the need to achieve some kind of recognition (symbolic capital) in society. In other words, the need to express an individual voice, which is heard, has become crucial. There are various resources for this kind of symbolic capital, one of them being economic capital. However, another resource is experience, or knowledge. Today, one of the forms of symbolic capitals can be conditionally called the generational capital (Misztal 2003). In the case of this study, this may mean the right to claim to be part of a generation to have seen the transition and to have participated in it, or having lived during the Soviet times, thus knowing the “true” meaning of hardships and being capable of evaluating this time adequately.

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<sup>6</sup> Symbolic order here is defined similarly to Geertz’s definition (1972), involving a set of long-lasting moods favouring some sorts of action or fashions, by “formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (90).

## Class and identity – a basis for generational consciousness?

Closely tied to Bourdieu's forms of capitals is the concept of class, which has been one of the core concepts in sociology. Recently, class as a concept has again become a source of heated debate among social scientists (see Crompton, 2001), with some theorists claiming that it has become useless as a heuristic tool for describing the processes of social change (Beck, 1992). Indeed, studying East European societies, it has been claimed that classes are still under construction (Titma and Trapido, 2002) and, thus, not suitable for modelling social reality.

Others however have claimed that class as a concept remains central in dealing with the formation of post-socialist identities (Schröder, 2008, p. 3). No doubt, class lines and class identity, or the mutual interests of one class, have ceased to be obvious today (Beck, 1992; Schröder, 2008; Skeggs, 2004). Class has become not only a social category, but also “an ideology in its own right” (Buchowski, 2008; Sampson, 2008, p. 220). In other words, class can be seen as being a constantly constructed and reconstructed cultural category, in which members have symbolic resources and in which lines are formed on a symbolic discursive battlefield by setting agendas and defining the “other” (Skeggs, 2004). Class in contemporary society does not inevitably embrace only material wealth, but also access to practices, social relationships and cultural resources (Schröder, 2008) and is increasingly heterogeneous. In this sense, material wealth is not the only criterion which helps to define the members of privileged classes; cultural and symbolic resources also become important.

In the social sciences, there has been a reorientation of studies of “class-consciousness” toward the somewhat broader concept of identity with the argument that identity is, similarly to class, a “claim for recognition” (Devine and Savage, 2005, p. 12). Identity is a perception of the personal “self” which develops inter-subjectively during interactions between the individual and others in society. The feeling of “self” accompanies all of us in society. However, sometimes, articulating identity itself becomes a privilege (Devine and Savage, 2005, p. 17). Self-reflexive identity may become a resource: its articulation and ability to make itself visible and audible in society may not be available to all layers of society, but only to what is often referred to as the middle class (Skeggs, 2004).

The notions of “generation” and “class” seem to be based on entirely different grounds, the former being based on age (regardless of class background), the latter on economic and other resources (regardless of age). However, I would claim that the distinction is anything but clear-cut. Indeed, these two

concepts might have more in common than it seems at first glance. When Mannheim wrote about generations, he stressed that generations consist of various “units”, as he identified those who manage to take part or initiate social or political change. In the Mannheimian sense, then, generation is not necessarily a universal term, applicable to anyone born in a specific time frame, but rather applies to a privileged few, who have managed to realise their potential, granted to them by favourable social conditions (see also Weisbrod, 2007, p. 21). In other words, generational identity can be available only to a small elite, who have enough resources and means to express this generational identity (both discursively as in the social scene). In light of recent class theories, then, which stress the importance of other capitals besides economic capital and which consider the articulation of self and symbolic resources crucial, generational identity can also become an important resource as part of class identity. A generation provides the feeling of commonality and belonging, and is based on the chronological/demographic principle and similar discursive practices (Corsten, 1999). Just as reflexive identity construction may be a privilege of advanced social layers, so may generational consciousness and its reflexivity. In other words, it works both ways: being born in a certain time frame can contribute to hegemonic class position by providing the symbolic capital of being part of a certain age group; however, it requires resources (symbolic and cultural capital) to express generational identity and to make use of it in discursive battlefields.

To conclude, time and the perception of time are crucial in studying post-socialist societies. On the one hand, it is important for the researcher to consider how time is perceived in a given society. Is the society oriented towards planning the future or avoiding it? Do the people in this society perceive uncertainties as risks or opportunities, a source of gaining experience or a burden? These perceptions can become key in posing questions and using such analytical concepts as late modern society or post-socialist society. On the other hand, experienced time can become important in constructing one’s identity. During the period of individualisation, identity itself becomes a resource in which reflective construction is not available to everyone. Having lived through certain past eras can become a resource in itself. Experienced time can also become a basis for generational identity, which may be perceived as a specific type of symbolic capital. In this theoretical framework, it is thus appropriate to ask if the turbulence experienced during the developmental years of a particular age group is overwhelming enough to create a generational consciousness. If so, then how exactly does the group construct its generational

consciousness, what is this construction based on and how do they construct meaningful “others” to distinguish their generation? In view of the specific age cohort studied in this book, we may thus ask whether we can call the 1970s cohort a specific “generational unit” in the Mannheimian sense? In a transitional society where capitals are being redefined and where the class lines are rapidly changing these questions become especially interesting.

## 2. Estonia's path to independence: a socio-historical overview of developments

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On 9 November 1989, one of the main symbols of the Cold War – the Berlin Wall – was torn down. The night in Berlin was broadcast around the globe. Though this event might have triggered many different and even contrasting emotions in different people, it nevertheless has remained the strongest symbol of the political transformation that swept over Central and Eastern Europe, signifying the end of an era and the beginning of a new one for the entire region. However, the processes leading to the end of that era were long and heterogeneous, and the date in 1989 was not necessarily the end of the era in many countries (or the start of something new, for that matter). Even for Germany, one could stress other dates (e.g. the unification of Germany in 1990) that can be considered to have influenced the course of change equally or even more significantly. For Estonia, the process leading to the regaining of independence and liberation from Soviet rule lasted roughly from 1987 to 1991. In this sense, the November 1989 events in Germany, though followed by virtually everyone in Estonia, were less significant compared to other events before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The events in question were also located closer to home. This chapter will provide a brief historical background to the analysis by first, sketching out the main trajectories of Estonia's transition to independence and democracy a secondly, by contextualising the changes which took place in Estonia within a broader context of post-communist transitions while identifying some of the key differences between the Estonian (and arguably Baltic transitions) and those in other countries of the region.

As stated in the theoretical section, the notion of post-communist transition (or post-socialist transformation, if you like) is an umbrella term for processes which had a similar character, yet different development routes (and



sometimes drastically so). As much as acknowledging the commonalities of the character of the processes, it is also vital to notice and be aware of these differences. In fact, already the experience of the communist regime in different parts of the region was essentially different even within the Soviet Union, let alone in the People's Republics of the so called "Soviet bloc." Estonia's developments exhibit many of the characteristics that link the country to the "Soviet bloc" states while also marking it off from other ex-Soviet states such as Belarus or Moldova. It is therefore important to take a differentiated look at the historical developments and not fall into the trap of easily categorizing this small state in either one or the other post-communist "camp." Indeed, being particularly small in terms of population (today, Estonia's population is only 1,3 million people), makes this a specially dynamic state which is flexible to quick changes and amendments where necessary. At the same time, its smallness keeps it from being especially influential in processes beyond its borders.

## Stages of Estonia's transition

To understand Estonia's quest for freedom during the transformation, it is important also to give a brief overview of Estonia's recent past. Having been part of the Czarist Russian Empire since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Estonia's young national elite took advantage of the shaky international circumstances during the First World War and after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 to declare the country independent in February 1918 and embark of state building. However, first the nascent independence needed to be defended during the following two years in a war that was later called "The War of Independence." The interwar state lasted from 1918 to 1940 and served as the legal entity on which the restoration of independence was built again in 1991 (known as the legal continuity claim). In 1940, following the secret agreement between Hitler and Stalin to divide up Central Europe among themselves, Estonia along with the other two Baltic states was first occupied and then annexed by the Soviet Union<sup>7</sup>, becoming a Soviet Socialist Republic. This was followed by a wave of mass deportations and killing of political opponents and nationally minded Estonian elites. After Nazi-Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, Estonia was occupied by Germany until 1944, when thereafter the Red Army returned and

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<sup>7</sup> With the same pact, Poland was divided between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. The Red Army occupied Eastern Poland and united it with Ukrainian and Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republics.

re-established Estonia's status as a republic of the Soviet Union. The post-war period was a difficult time in many ways – poor economic conditions owing to the war were further worsened by the atmosphere of Stalinist terror, which reached its peak in the mass deportations of March 1949, when around twenty thousand people were deported to Siberia. Though the political repressions became milder after the death of Stalin in 1953, the entire Soviet period is generally seen as a time of continuous repression. The physical terror clearly subsided as a means of repression, yet the suppression of individual freedom and choice remained. The age group under scrutiny in this book spent their childhood during the era of “late socialism” (Yurchak, 2003). Though under late socialism the system rarely offered a threat to someone's physical security (but it was not entirely missing, either), the life at that time was still shadowed by a lack of certain personal freedoms (such as the right to travel freely in and outside Estonia) and an increasing shortage of everyday commodities. People had acquired a certain political *modus operandi* under the system (see Fürst, 2010), but the hidden and growing dissatisfaction with the political as well as material well-being resulted in the quest for radical change, which accentuated itself in later developments under the political transformation of the end of the 1980s-beginning of the 1990s.

The restoration of state independence was a gradual process that happened at a much slower pace than, for instance, the unification of Germany. Yet, compared to previous decades, things happened extremely quickly, and their direction and end was largely unpredictable for those who took part in them. It is not easy to determine the actual start of the political transition or its exact end, though the term “transition” presupposes such milestones. One of the most commonly acknowledged turning points marking the start of the transition is arguably Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985. However, the signs of discontent in the Soviet republics and in other socialist satellite states (e.g. Poland) were already there before that, indicating the need for a change in the system. Setting a clear date for the start of the transition would thus be arbitrary and would violate some aspects of transition processes. Yet, in the interest of clarity, a starting point has to be chosen. A very useful periodisation for Estonia's transformation process has been proposed by Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vihalemm (2009, p. 5) (see table I). It starts after Gorbachev had been in office for almost three years: in 1988.

Time period	The name of the period
1988–1991	Breaking with the old system, the “Singing Revolution”
1991–1994	Radical reforms, constituting a new political, economic and social order; a time of “extraordinary politics”
1995–1998	Economic stabilisation, start of the period of integration with the EU and NATO
1999–2004	Preparations for EU accession, growing internal tensions
2005–2008	New challenges of the post-EU accession period, identity crisis, the change from economic growth to slowdown

*Source: Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2009, p. 5.*

**Table 2:** *Periods of Estonian transitions.*

The first period of change, the actual regime transition, took place between 1988 and 1991. That was when the crucial decisions were made leading to the restoration of the Estonian Republic. As stated above, the starting point of this periodisation is always a question of debate, as many processes had started before 1988.

The list of important events during these initial years is probably always arbitrary and inevitably incomplete.<sup>8</sup> However, the aim of the following review is not so much to provide a full list of historical events, but rather to capture the underlying tenets of the processes which were occurring at this time. Moreover, the chapter as such aims to provide the socio-historical background for the later empirical analysis (i.e. the interviews with the 1970s cohort), this is why in a later section, the various periods outlined in table 2 will be discussed in relation to how they were experienced and perceived by this particular age group.

Straight after Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985, the atmosphere did not change much. Even after he launched his campaigns of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, many people were cautious regarding how to react and were sceptical of the real intentions behind these campaigns. The old political routines and rhetoric largely continued. By this moment, people had acquired certain practices in performing the activities of a political façade, without really believing in it (see Yurchak, 2003). However, after a nuclear disaster in Ukraine in 1986, people started to realise that the regime had started to disclose subjects which were previously left unsaid. On 26 April, there was an explosion in reactor four of

<sup>8</sup> For a more thorough chronological list of events, see Appendix II.

the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant, which consequently dispersed large quantities of radioactive fuel and core materials into the atmosphere. Normally, in the Soviet Union, disasters such as plane crashes were kept from ordinary people. However, the scope and consequences of this accident were unprecedented and caused a serious health threat to millions of people living close to the region. Also, as foreign media started to publish articles about the rise in the level of radioactive waste in the neighbouring countries, the information was in any case leaked to many within the Soviet Union. All in all, the disaster and its disclosure raised awareness of the problems of industrial production and their threat to nature and it seemed increasingly possible to talk about these issues in public. In Estonia a civic movement developed out of this realisation, fighting against plans to open up new oil-shale mines along the North-Eastern coast line of Estonia, thus standing to increase the pollution caused by the mining. In addition to the environmental concerns, activists also had a hidden national agenda, namely to prevent the further influx of immigrant workers from other parts of the Soviet Union. At this time, the share of ethnic Estonians within the population had already decreased considerably due to Soviet labour migration, making up only about 61% of the population. The environmental movement organised several gatherings and demonstrations especially during 1987–1988.

During this period, a number of other civic organisations emerged, each with its own agenda, yet all in one way or another were involved in a common political cause which eventually led Estonia to independence. Participation in these organisations was increasing steadily: at the peak of the transformation processes (1988–89) about 70% of the ethnic Estonian population was involved (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2009, p. 7). In addition to environmental matters, the issues of the past were among the first subject areas that began to be spoken about in the public sphere, once censorship became gradually loosened. Step by step, even in official media, the historical importance of previous communist leaders began to be questioned. While the heritage of Stalin had been critically assessed since the Khrushchev years (1958–1964), his crimes against the Baltic and other peoples of the Soviet Union had not been widely discussed in public before. In Russia, a historic association *Pamyat* (Memory) started to discuss the topics of the past, organising several open gatherings (including illegal events). In Estonia, analogous associations and organisations emerged organising different public events, the first among was the Hirvepark Meeting in 1987. There, thousands of people gathered in a park in the capital Tallinn to listen to speeches against the Soviet regime, demanding an open discussion of Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 and its consequences for the prewar independent Baltic

states. In April 1988, Heritage Days (*Muinsuskaitse Päevad*) were organised in Tartu, where several lectures, film screenings, meetings and a mass procession took place with the national flag and other symbols of pre-war Estonia.

During most of these events, mass meetings and gatherings, people sang patriotic songs about the Estonian nation, about freedom and the past. Some of these songs dated back to the years before the Soviet occupation and were forbidden during the harsh years of the Soviet regime; others were newly created during the process and became very popular. In the summer of 1988, people began to gather spontaneously at the national Song Festival Grounds in Tallinn and Tartu to sing into the late night hours. These *ad hoc* singing events were so significant that the entire process of transition became known as the “Singing Revolution”.

During the first years of the transition, the general atmosphere was one of silent hope and slight confusion. People in all spheres of life were beginning to negotiate the borders of the system. Some of them had more courage, others were more cautious, but it is important that in most areas of life this kind of atmosphere began to take form. In the political sphere, local party organisations began to search for more democratic ways of governing. In 1987, a manifesto entitled “Self-Managing Estonia” (*Ise Majandav Eesti* – IME, the abbreviation itself meaning “miracle”) was published in the official party daily *Rahva Hää* (Voice of the People). The three authors of the manifesto were all members of the Communist Party and the document suggested that Estonia could independently manage its budget within the Soviet Union. This kind of manifesto certainly constitutes a form of revolution when compared to Brezhnev era standards. It suggested autonomous self-government, which would have been unthinkable only few years before. At the same time, the document illustrates that not everyone had the full restoration of the state independence readily in mind. This was illustrated by the suggestion to rather change the existing system by implementing reforms within. These beliefs – to become a more democratic and autonomous republic within the borders of the Soviet Union – were shared by many people at the beginning of the transition (Raun, 1998). It took two years until this manifesto was turned into actual legislation and Estonia's economic independence was confirmed by the Supreme Soviet in Moscow (in July 1989). By that time, however, the political goals had already become far more ambitious. As early as November 1988 a declaration of sovereignty had been passed in the Estonian Supreme Council (the parliament at the time). On 23 August 1989, to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and to call for freedom, over one million people

from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania formed a human chain which spanned the Baltics from Tallinn via Riga to Vilnius and became known as the “Baltic Way.” By this time, the belief that Estonia should restore its legal status as a national independent state, was already wide-spread.

While at the beginning of the political transformation the ideas behind the political goals had been hazy and the atmosphere was filled with beliefs that the Soviet state was capable of acquiring a “human face”, these hopes were beginning to fade with the unfolding of events. On 9 April 1989, an anti-Soviet demonstration in Tbilisi (Georgia) was suppressed by the Soviet military, resulting in 20 casualties and leaving hundreds of people injured. In January 1990, the ethnic and territorial tensions between Azeris and Armenians were “solved” by the Soviet military in Baku (Azerbaijan), causing around 130 deaths and leaving approximately 500 injured. In January the next year, the Soviet regime sent its internal security forces to Lithuania and Latvia to suppress the national movements there, resulting in 13 deaths in Lithuania and 6 in Latvia, while hundreds were injured. These events turned the peaceful negotiations concerning the borders of freedom into a more serious and determined form of combat. By indulging in violence, the Soviet state showed its true face as a rigid system which would not tolerate different thinking and national aspirations. This strengthened those who strove for radical solutions in the form of independence and turned hopes for a peaceful process leading to sovereignty into a fight for freedom. While in the beginning, the Soviet state was not necessarily the enemy, but a possible partner in change, by the turn of the decade it was clear that there would be an unavoidable confrontation with the Soviet regime. Yet again, this confrontation was not as clear cut as it may seem in retrospect. Many local Communist Party leaders sided with the civic movements and shared their sentiments, though the level of agreement on questions of detail varied. Therefore, when the *coup d’etat* in Moscow failed in August 1991, the last attempts at thwarting Estonia’s independence by force were quickly ended and Estonia restored its status as an independent state without any casualties.

The majority of those interviewed for this study were too young to participate in organising or being active members of the movements which emerged at that time. However, many took part in demonstrations with their parents, sang at the spontaneous “Night Song Festivals,” stood in the “Baltic Way” or watched various events on TV. They might not have fully understood the quest for freedom or the burden of the Soviet regime, but they did sense that something extraordinary was happening. Also, when the tanks in Vilnius and Riga were shown on TV (in January 1991) or, when they saw military vehicles

during the *coup d'état* in Moscow on the roads of Estonia (in August 1991), they might have felt that they were in actual danger. Within the atmosphere of these political events, when the majority of the population was involved in discussing political issues, they probably could not have lived through that time without the overall atmosphere of change having an impact on them.

During the second period (1991–1994), when the establishment a new order and the introduction of radical reforms were taking place, the respondents were older. Many had finished secondary school, started their studies in universities or begun working. During this time, the emphasis of society was not on the political euphoria of establishing an independent state, but on how to rebuild its structures, from the educational system and state institutions to the overall structure of the economy and private ownership. Those in school (or university) faced uncertainty, as curricula were in the process of change, but they also faced dilemmas regarding future careers, as there were no clear role models. Those in business or working for state institutions had to deal with changing laws and occasional lawlessness while also having the chance to participate in the restructuring of society.

The restructuring of the economy also meant that the old mechanisms of economics and trade had to be reorganised. While the economic situation during the last decade of the Soviet Union was anything but prosperous (also because during the end of the 1980s the regime tried to suppress the quest for freedom with economic sanctions), the first years of the 1990s sometimes witnessed acute poverty and severe social problems. Most of those interviewed witnessed the harsh times of the beginning of the restored republic, with GDP rates dropping and inflation rates going up, the fuel crisis and a short period of food coupons. During these years, state institutions found trouble fulfilling the employer's monthly payrolls, unemployment rates rose. At the same time, this time was also a period when some people became wealthy very quickly. Fundamental aspects of the old economy no longer worked; factories as well as collective farms (*kolkhozes*) were closed, ministries, governmental and financial institutions reorganised or created anew. But the new forms of economics were relatively hectic, resting on shaky legal grounds. This enabled some to use the opportunities this presented to quickly enrich themselves. This was also the time when many young people filled the positions which were newly established. In fact, this was the time which gave inspiration for the writing of the manifesto of the yuppies (the "generation of suit-and tie") which I described at the start of this book. To put it briefly: this was a contradictory period which was economically very challenging, meaning poverty and hardship for many, but for some offering new opportunities to become rich or gain status.

This period was also marked by radical reforms leading the country towards a liberal market economic model. Indeed, Estonia has been called a laboratory for reforms (Saar & Helemäe, 2006). In many fields, this meant that there was a sharp decline to be followed by a quick recovery: these processes are quite common to shock therapy in general. State companies were privatised at a pace which was one of the quickest in the region, leading to many bankruptcies, but also to many newly established successful businesses. One of the important laws passed in June 1991 dealt with the restitution of private property which had been nationalised or otherwise confiscated by the Soviet state. The most common object of restitution touching the lives of the majority was that of real estate – houses and apartments – which were given back to their previous owners and their relatives. The respondents to this study were clearly too young to have owned anything which could have been restituted, but some saw their parents or grandparents regain old property. Others still experienced their families losing homes they had lived in for decades, as the new landlords got rid of Soviet-era tenants. Yet, majority of the respondents saw the restitution process take place from an outsider position and they were too young to take any of it personally. Even though there was a debate in society regarding the restitution process creating new inequalities, the overall attitude to reforms was relatively positive among Estonians compared to, for instance, other post-Soviet republics (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2009, p. 11).

The third period, 1995–1998, was the start of economic growth in Estonia after the first rough years of economic decline. The foundation of the new institutional system had been established, yet it was far from stable. With the start of economic growth, even more new companies and new jobs emerged. The overall atmosphere of the Estonian change was favourable for young people. Young people were often without sufficient work experience or education but were nevertheless selected to fill professional positions. Thus, social mobility was especially high for young people at the time. Several of them tried to continue their higher education while working full-time.

During the last two periods (1999–2008), there were less milestones which would have impacted on the transition to adulthood for the specific 1970s age cohort. The majority of them had reached the age of more stable development. However, while the events which occurred during this decade (such as the joining of the EU or NATO), could be seen as important markers in some respondents' lives, their impact on actual life courses or career choices was not comparable to that of earlier processes and certainly did not affect the entire group in a similar way.



## Placing Estonia in context

Estonia's development during the transformation years is similar to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, yet there are some notable aspects which have to be kept in mind when making these comparisons. As noted before, Estonia shares similarities with both the Central European ex-communist bloc states as well as the ex-Soviet republics which gained state independence. On the level of everyday life experiences at the start of the transition process, people share more with those in other Soviet republics. This is also reflected in the recollection of childhood memories among the respondents to this study, when memory is connected to Soviet-era items such as cartoons, everyday appliances etc. Moreover, the events which happened in other parts of the Soviet Union affected Estonia more immediately than the Visegrád or Balkan states – the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl, the deaths in Tbilisi and Yerevan, the civic movement *Pamyat* in Russia. All these events were happening within the same ideological space, affecting the developments in Estonia (just like Estonian developments were influencing the processes in other parts of the Soviet Union). However, the transition processes quickly diverged among ex-Soviet republics with rather different outcomes displayed across the region. First, excluding the Baltic states, all the other former Soviet republics became involved in one way or another in the newly created Commonwealth of Independent States (*Содружество Независимых Государств* – CIS) which was formed in December 1991. Thus, their development (economic and in some cases, also political) remained closely tied to the Russian Federation and the former Soviet space, while the three Baltic states restructured their economies with the clear aim of fully integrating within European (EU) structures. Second, many ex-Soviet states failed to undergo a radical change in their institutional, legal as well as elite structure and authoritarian state structures, high levels of corruption and inefficient institutions have remained to be problematic there. Thus, on the level of post-Soviet reforms and elite change, Estonia experienced radical changes which align the country with the much more successful economic and political transformation in Central Europe. With regard to elite change, it probably even went further, as the new parliament elected during the first democratic elections in 1992 saw a high number of new members swept into national politics which had not been members of the Communist Party or the ruling elite (*nomenklatura*) of Soviet Estonia. The degree of elite change also concerned the economic sector where the numbers of “old” elites in the newly emerging business world remained moderate, thus

making it possible for the young people to enter the scene and be part of the “new” society. The reforms which were radically implemented restructured the economy resulting in a relatively quick economic recovery and subsequent growth at the beginning of the new century. This upward development added to people’s belief that the reforms were necessary and justified. Thus, the sentiments of restoring the old order in order to grant a better economic condition which exist in some of the former Soviet republics (but also in some Central European post-communist states), are almost completely absent in Estonia. Finally, on a historical level, the Baltic states also differ from former Soviet republics as they could, in many ways, build (both legally and symbolically) on the experience of interwar national independence.<sup>9</sup>

The comparison with the states of the former communist bloc is even more heterogeneous. Again, the greatest difference can perhaps be found at the level of perception, i.e. in the ways in which the previous order (state socialism as opposed to Soviet-style communism) is perceived. In the case of Estonia, the Soviet period is widely defined as foreign rule which was imposed on Estonians from outside, initiated by the invasion by the Soviet military in 1940 and again in 1944. The transformation process of the late 1980s is seen as a movement for freedom and national independence separate from this external rule. In those countries which were ruled by national communist leaders, the perception of the former regime is more complicated, as communist rule was “home-made” and dependence on Moscow was far less straight-forward than in the cases of other Soviet republics. One of the examples of the complicated relations with Moscow was obviously Yugoslavia, which, though considered to be part of the communist bloc, was actually in opposition to Moscow. However, Yugoslavia consisted of several different republics with different ethnic backgrounds; all were subordinate to Serbia and Belgrade. These republics treat the former central power of Belgrade often in a similar way as Estonia treats Moscow. Yet in several other Visegrád states, the leaders were part of the local elite, who had to negotiate the degree of political and economic independence/dependence with the Soviet Union, yet were clearly far more autonomous in their decisions. The degree of complexity with matters of independence in relation to Moscow can be exemplified with the cases of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, where the attempts to democratise the state in 1956, 1968 and 1981 respectively

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<sup>9</sup> This makes them more similar to the countries of the Soviet bloc in Central Europe. However, not all Central European countries which emerged during the transition process had the chance to refer to their legal status before and were established as new states. Such were the examples for instance of Slovakia and several Balkan states.

resulted in invasion by the Soviet military or, in the Polish case, with the threat of it. That is, the level of autonomy depended on how far the republics went with their independent moves. Therefore, either out of the fear or just diligence, in some republics, everyday life could have been dedicated even more to communist propaganda than in the Soviet Union itself.

There are many more differences and similarities, yet for the purpose of this study, it suffices to say that the classification of the post-communist countries according to the patterns of political and economic transition is a rather complicated issue. Rather than classifying the states, it would be perhaps more fruitful to bear in mind the several different aspects in every country which form a unique picture, though consisting of separate parts which are similar to others. I consider the development paths as well as their perception and evaluation important, as they form a skeleton upon which the memories of the transition and can be based also on the general attitudes towards one's personal development at the time.

### 3. How do the 1970s look in numbers?

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In 2014, Estonia was shaken by a political manoeuvre. Slightly more than a year before the regular elections, the incumbent prime minister, Andrus Ansip (b. 1956), announced he was stepping down from political office to hand over the duties of the prime minister to Siim Kallas (b. 1948), who formerly had held both the roles of prime minister and head of the National Central Bank. Kallas was working as European Commissioner at the time. After Ansip and his cabinet had resigned, however, Kallas announced the withdrawal of his candidacy, explaining this sudden change of mind in connection to allegedly cruel media attacks and claiming he could not work in an atmosphere of witch-hunting.<sup>10</sup> After some confusion, the ruling party had to come up with someone else quickly, and so they did: proposing the Minister of Social Affairs at the time, Taavi Rõivas. With Rõivas, Estonia suddenly found itself with an extremely young prime minister – born in 1979.<sup>11</sup> In the new government which was subsequently formed together with the Social Democrats, another six positions were occupied by men and women who had been born during the 1970s or even later. What can we make of these numbers? Can we presume that the 1970s cohort is taking over the leadership of Estonia? Can we smell the change of generations? Perhaps. However, taking another rough look at the numbers in the political field, namely the composition of the *Riigikogu* (the Estonian Parliament) we see that the 1970s cohort was actually not overwhelmingly presented at the time of Rõivas's first government:

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<sup>10</sup> Kallas was accused of issuing guarantee letters as the head of the National Central Bank in 1994 which were not backed at the time with financial resources. The accusations did not find proof.

<sup>11</sup> Taavi Rõivas, however, was not actually the youngest prime minister ever to have served the Estonian state. Mart Laar (b. 1960), who was prime minister from 1992–1994 had been even younger.

out of the 101 Members of Parliament in 2014, 33 were born in the 1950s, 31 in the 1960s and only 21 in the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Whether the strong representation of the 1970s cohort in the government is a coincidence, owed to the young age of the prime minister or something else, can be left for others to find out as this study does not analyse political elites. What the numbers indicate to me, however, is that the 1970s have reached the age or stage of their lives in which they can influence important processes within the state and society. They are, in fact, visible on the scene in many fields of society. It is thus all the more important to learn further about their socialisation experiences and to ask if there is anything special about this experience among those born in the 1970s?

A look at the official biographies of the government members in 2014 reveals one (rather predictable) difference to those of older cohorts. All the ministers born during the 1970s have started their careers during the period of regained independence. While both the previous prime minister Ansip and the EU commissioner Kallas had been members of the Communist Party at some earlier stage of their lives, the new prime minister was not even old enough to have a history of being a pioneer.<sup>13</sup> It is probably possible to find compromising documents about anyone, who was occupying influential positions during the 1990s – i.e. at a time of legal uncertainty and insufficient mechanisms of state control. As a matter of fact, among the previous government of Ansip, three ministers (born on 1957, 1964, 1965 respectively) had visible “gaps” in their biographies. Thus, in their CVs which were published on the government’s official pages, they had chosen to leave out four to seven years of their career.<sup>14</sup> The exact reasons for leaving these years out cannot be determined at this stage, but the gaps can be seen as indicators of the more bumpy and less presentable career paths of these ministers. Quite by contrast, the CVs of the ministers born in the 1970s contain no suspicious gaps and look rather straight-forward to the outsider.

There are, however, other notable patterns in these CVs apart from their lack of “vulnerability.” Four out of the seven ministers in the Rõivas government note down their first employment before (not after!) the conclusion of their tertiary education. In other words, the first jobs worth mentioning in an official CV were held by these four ministers before any of them got a decent degree. The positions reported prior to education completion include: reporter

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<sup>12</sup> The rest of the parliament seats were held by persons born during the 1940s (8) and 1980s (8).

<sup>13</sup> Communist Party youth organisation.

<sup>14</sup> None of the referenced ministers continued in the new government. The gaps were 1980–1986, 1983–1990, and 1991–1995.

at leading daily newspaper and news editor at the national radio news programme; administrative secretary at one of Tallinn city district governments; adviser to the Estonian Minister of Justice; and department head of marketing at a company dealing with the production of building facilities. The ministers marking their first jobs after university graduation, however, report rather “decent” positions as well (e.g. adviser to the Estonian Minister of Justice; assistant researcher at university; analyst in one of the biggest banks). Now the question arises – do these positions have anything to do with their birth dates or have they just been a few lucky and hard-working young people? Without doubt, those reaching the high corridors of ministries in their 30s or early 40s should be brighter and more hard-working than their coevals. However, could there be more to these patterns? Are there some life course patterns that are universally different from other cohorts or age groups in Estonian society? The aim of this chapter is to have a closer look at the statistical data available which concerns the socialisation experience of those born during the 1970s and try to find at least some trends which characterise the given cohort.

## What kind of numbers?

Mannheim states that a prerequisite for a generation to emerge is that the members were born within the same structural and social conditions (Mannheim, 1993[1952], p. 36). According to him, new social generations form, when radical social changes coincide with personal development, i.e. transition to adulthood. The young are the first to experience and negotiate the new social conditions during their socialisation years (Corsten, 1999, p. 250; Chauvel, 2006, p. 2). After sudden and traumatic changes, young people have to search for their places in society within a new context. In the process of adjusting and developing their *habitus*, they live through common social experiences, which differ from previous cohorts and give them their own shared perspective on time and events that happened during their socialisation (Eyerman and Turner, 1998; Misztal, 2003, pp. 89–90). Yet, not every generational location becomes actuality or creates collective impulses, as generation formation depends on social and cultural factors (Mannheim, 1993[1952], pp. 51, 53) and as Eisenstadt argues (1988, p. 91), the circumstances for a generation to emerge must be exceptional. The social changes that Estonia experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union can be considered exceptional because the restructuring of the state and society was overarching and affecting literally everybody.

However, sometimes even under exceptional changes, cohorts fail to form a coherent identity. For example in Germany, according to Weisbrod (2007, p. 21), neither the changes of 1949 (the establishment of the two German states) nor of 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) created any generational identity among the nation's youth. Nevertheless, an examination of the socialisation experience this age group had in Estonia during the time of societal restructuring seems still useful to pursue.

While Mannheim stated that the exceptional social change has to happen parallel with personal coming of age, he actually did not pinpoint the exact numerical frames of that process (stating only that it takes place around the age of 17 or so, see Mannheim, 1993, p. 44). Becoming an adult, however, is a process that is in constant flux not only in different cultures and times, but also in the way it is conceptualised and measured in the academic literature. This chapter aims to discuss some of the most common ways in which the transition processes of becoming an adult have been measured in the sociological literature. The purpose is to provide the theoretical backdrop to the statistical data presentation which is at the core of this chapter. It will help to understand better how sociologists construct generations based on quantitative data while at the same time highlighting the weak points of such an approach, as it tends to overlook the transition as a mental process by concentrating on institutional and demographic side.

When describing the coming of age in the sociological literature, particular transitions are considered crucial in this context: those into employment; towards an independent household; into a partnership and into becoming a parent (Cook and Furstenberg, 2002; Katus, Puur and Sakkeus, 2005). These are biographical events during an individual's life course, yet social surroundings and structures have a significant effect on these demographical markers. In recent decades, these markers have been increasingly difficult to measure, as instead of normative and linear one-off transitions, young people are described as negotiating their transitions rather than completing them, bouncing back and forth between various choices (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Pais, 2000).

Age ranges for each of the described transitions vary from country to country. One of the processes which causes delay in the transition period is the increase in access to higher education and the practice of simultaneous work and study. Postponement of parenthood and having a steady partnership are also common denominators, as well as the widespread increase in cohabitation without being married. These changes started in Western societies around the 1970s and therefore young people who have come of age since then are

sometimes called the “post-1970 generation” (Wyn and Woodman, 2006). As the timing of the aforementioned transitions (to labour market, independent household, marriage and parenthood) have changed, becoming more blurry and harder to predict, many researchers have started to look for new labels which characterise this phase in life, and instead of “youth” terms such as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000) or “post-adolescence” (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000), are used. In many of these studies, the authors suggest that young people are somehow deviating from a “normative” transition (see Wyn and Woodman, 2006). This makes one wonder how to define a normative transition and ask whether anything like that even exists (as a heuristic theoretical tool against which to measure the transitions at hand, see also Mørch, 2003; Skelton, 2002). Usually, the “norm” which these actual transitions are compared to is the transition routes during a relatively stable but short time period of the 1950s and 1960s, after the post-war stabilisation of lives (Wallace and Kovacheva, 1998). In the case of post-socialist societies, the period of relatively standardised transitions lasted until 1989. Before that (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example), the transition patterns differed along class-, gender- or national lines, and the timing of transitions may not have been very different from transitions today.

Several authors have argued that during the last decades, standard biographies have been replaced by “choice biographies” (e.g. Beck, 1992) and linear transitions have turned into “yo-yo transitions” (Pais, 2000) – the transition to adulthood is changing and harder to describe, thus instead of one standardised transition, multiple “individualised transitions” take place (Beck, 1992). The widely used term of “individualisation” to describe youth developments, is a concept that embraces and explains a number of shifts which have happened to transitions to adulthood. At the same time the concept of individualisation is often loaded with divergent meanings and different authors conceptualise it from rather different angles. Thus, in terms of theoretical clarity, it would be useful to break the term down into its basic components in order to see its multifaceted nature. In discussing individualisation, researchers have focused on processes of (de-)institutionalisation, (de-)standardisation, pluralisation and (de-) differentiation (see Brückner and Mayer, 2005, p. 31). As this list shows, individualisation entails a number of parallel and at times paradoxical processes. For instance, the responsibility to make choices is increasingly assigned to the individual rather than communities of whatever sort. At the same time, while the individuals indulge into self-realisation and consumerism, their choices become increasingly influenced by other outside forces, and



they become puppets in the hands of fashion, circumstances and the market (Beck, 1992, p. 131). The amount of individual choice in life grows, but every choice brings more responsibility and more ties to institutional systems (Beck, 1992, p. 135). Thus, both de-institutionalisation and institutionalisation are taking place: institutions are not responsible for young people's choices but, to realise their choices, individuals have to rely more on institutions. The same goes for other terms listed above; each of these processes assumes many faces and are anything but clear. In addition, the individualisation process affects young people from different class backgrounds differently – sometimes the pluralisation of choices (or even prolonged transition to adulthood) is available to young people from higher social strata, while for disadvantaged social strata the choices are limited (Bynner, 2005; Shildrik, Blackman and MacDonald, 2009). Moreover, the de-standardisation of life choices still has not led to the surmounting of differences between social strata. In fact, social background still determines one's transition to adulthood to a great extent (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007, Shildrik, Blackman and MacDonald, 2009, Furlong 2012). In addition, the need to create an “authentic self” with “biographical originality” has become a must in today's society and an institutional demand, to such a degree that many young people feel that the pressure to create an individual self is a burden (Côté and Bynner, 2008; Honneth, 2004, pp. 466, 473; Roberts, Clark and Wallace, 1994; Skeggs, 2004).

Another question concerning the concept of transition, in characterising the age phase of youth, is the centrality, importance and stress on the word “adulthood” when talking about this transition. For some, transition to *adulthood* is the main meaning of this life phase and youth should be studied from this perspective. However, transition processes have prolonged youth and transitions sometimes take fifteen years instead of three. Therefore, it seems that there should be more goals for young people themselves in this period than just the aim of becoming an adult or completing certain transitions. Hence, to see the meaning of youth as an age phase of transition to *adulthood* has become inadequate (Mørch, 2003; Skelton, 2002; Wyn and Woodman, 2006).

Therefore, in this context transition can be interpreted similarly to the conceptualisation of political transition discussed in the theory section, in which it is not seen as necessarily linear and the goals are not fixed by certain borders. Instead, the stress is on reflection and acknowledging the state of being “on the move” or the need for “identification” – asking questions about where one is going and why (Sampson, 2008, p. 220). Sven Mørch (2003) has suggested that since youth has lost its main function as a “successful” transition

to adulthood, it has become a life period with an independent status and position. In his opinion, adulthood has ceased to exist as a development model for youth. Tracey Skelton (2002) adds that youth is no longer a time of becoming, but a time of knowing; young people learn something about themselves at this life stage. Both ask if “adulthood” as a model is about to disappear.

“Instead of specific stages of life, we are confronted in the modern Western world with new circumstances of fragmented contextualisation: we live in a world in which more contexts are functioning as a network, producing different aspects of development” (Mørch, 2003, p. 58).

In addition, what the transition sociologists have found to be crucial may not be considered as critical in the process of becoming adults by the young themselves (Arnett, 2000; Arnett and Galambos, 2003). There are a number of transitions that are not measured and they do not necessarily end when one becomes an adult: it may be said that the entire life-cycle is organised around transitions (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005, p. 20).<sup>15</sup> However, it seems that, even though the identity search may last throughout one’s life in contemporary society, the foundations for these processes are laid during adolescence and “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000).

There are a multitude of debates trying to explore the reasons of the change in the processes of becoming an adult and there is not enough space to cover all of them. Risking simplification, one can say that the triggers for these processes lie in the victory march of the (neo-) liberal economy. As structural measures for the neo-liberal economics were introduced in Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2009), those processes began at the same time as the transformation of society. Therefore, the age group under scrutiny was the one that was the first to negotiate their transition in a situation where linear transition routes were ruptured by the turbulences in society. Individualisation (in its diversity, with all its pros and cons) as a process was taking shape at the same time they came of age. A lot of what was described above had its start with, and can be used to describe, the age group studied in this research.

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, the transition from adulthood to old age has also been undergoing shifts. The retirement age and process varies from person to person.

## Educational patterns and social conditions during the coming of age

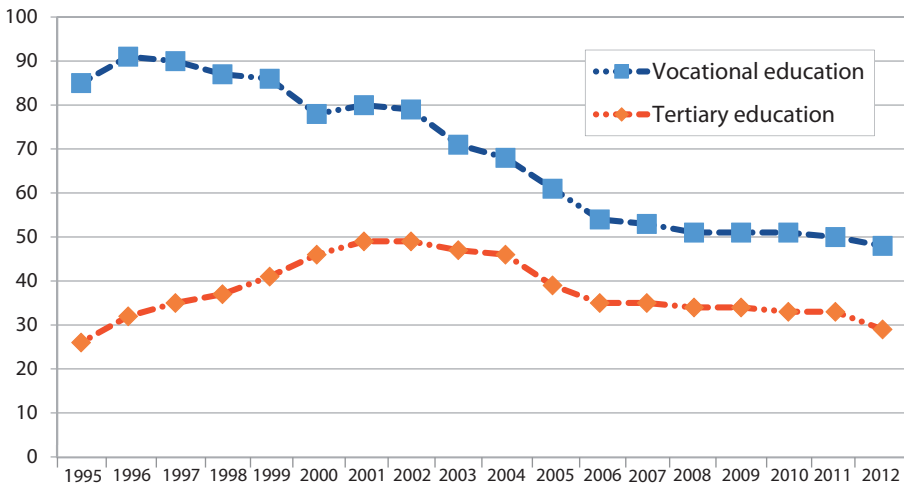
The age group chosen in this study is controversial in a general post-socialist context. Some researchers of Eastern Europe have presented this age group as the one which was on the “loser’s” side. The institutions supporting the transition to adulthood collapsed and new ones had yet to be established; young people thus had to find their way in fragmented conditions (Gazsó, 1992; Kovacheva, 2001; Roberts and Pollock, 2009; Tisenkopfs, 1995; Williams, Chuprov and Zubok, 2003). At the same time, the picture in the Estonian sociological literature is somewhat different, describing favourable structural conditions for upward social mobility for this age group (Kogan and Unt, 2005; Saar and Helemäe, 2006; Titma, 1999; Toomse, 2004). Of course, the picture was not black-and-white and not all young people in Estonia profited from these structural conditions (Helemäe, Saar and Vöormann, 2000; Saar and Unt, 2010).

The educational field in post-Soviet Estonia went through several processes of restructuring. Some of the changes started already during the last years of the Soviet era. The communist regime is known for its standardisation practices and stiff rules including school uniforms, regulated study programs, compulsory subjects, standardised exams. All this entailed rather little autonomy for the schools or the students studying within it. Yet this started to change during Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, as educational institutions began to de-standardise and autonomise the system. Step by step, starting from abolishing school uniforms and adding optional courses to the curricula, the institutions began to gain their own individual appearances and structures. No doubt, the period of rearrangements also involved much confusion, lack of organisation, even chaos. Loosening of the rules could mean that things happened which were unthinkable before or after the stabilisation period. People finished schools having dropped one or two subjects from their curricula (I myself graduated without completing the gymnasium program of physics), or applied (and got accepted) to universities without a certificate of an appropriate educational unit (e.g. spending the last year of gymnasium abroad and having a class certificate from the U.S. instead of completing the necessary exams in Estonia).

These developments probably had an impact on the young people attending these institutions as well. Lack of standardisation may cause uncertainty, but combined with the euphoric restructuring of the society (and the feeling that finally the Soviet rules were disappearing), the effect was probably more complicated. Being part of a system in change, young people were not always mere

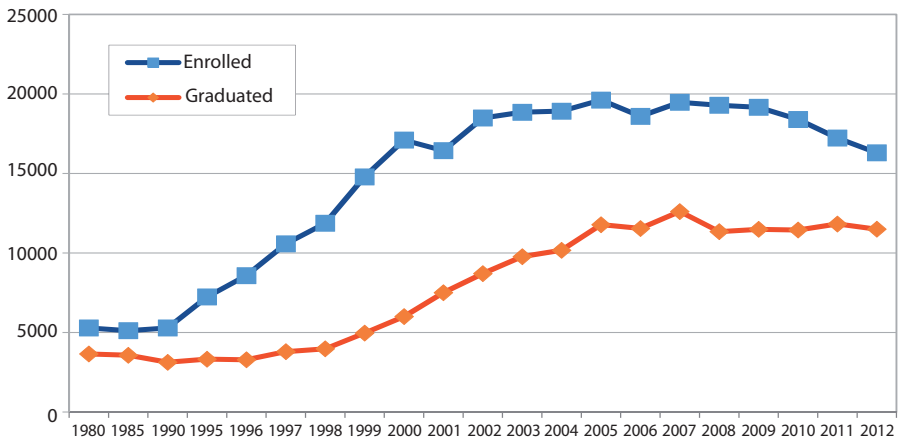
pawns in the hands of those changing the system. Largely as a counter-reaction to the stiff Soviet system where students had little or no say in the course of their study programs, now a lot of decisions were put down to the level of the individual student (what subjects to choose for gymnasium, how to compose one's own university program). Thus, such developments probably gave many a sense of being in control or having a chance to shape one's own educational career, but also being part of change.

One of the most remarkable changes in terms of transition to adulthood in Estonia is the expansion of tertiary education, also common in other post-socialist countries (Kogan and Unt, 2005, p. 226). Not only did the state universities expand, enabling to enrol also those who could pay for their education, but a number of new tertiary educational institutions emerged. While until 1996 the number of vocational schools also rose, they declined again shortly thereafter. As we can see from *Figure 1*, the number of higher educational institutions rose until 2001, peaking with 80 tertiary schools, which is a rather big number considering the population of Estonia (1.3 million). As one can expect, the market of universities soon started to consolidate and became more regulated and standardised. Thus, the number of higher educational institutions fell again after 2004. At the same time, the number of students did not fall at a corresponding pace. So, rather than being abolished, these schools merged with others.



**Figure 1:** Institutions offering tertiary education (source: Statistics Estonia).

During the Soviet time, the number of those who entered higher education was approximately 20% of the cohort (the numbers differ however with regard to gender, see Katus, Puur and Põldma, 2008) and approximately 70% of those enrolled, also graduated. This model started to change in the 1990s. The first thing to change was the sudden rise in the number of enrolled students. During 1990–2000, the yearly number of student enrolment at universities grew by 223%, while the number of those who graduated did not change significantly (probably because many students worked simultaneously and postponed their graduation). Thus the first decade of the regained independence saw a considerable expansion of the higher education field, more than the next decade when student numbers rose merely by 12%. After 2008, the numbers started to decline, reaching the same level of the year 2000 by 2012, which has mostly to do with the demographic developments of the early 1990s which saw low birth rates thus reducing the cohort of new potential students considerably. However, the number of those graduating from universities did not grow as fast as numbers enrolling in them during the first ten years. While during the 1990s, the number of graduates rose by 92% (from 3129 in 1990 to 6003 in 2000), the first years of the new millennium saw 96% of further growth (from 6003 in 2000 to 11786 in 2005). We thus see a total growth of 276% in just 15 years.

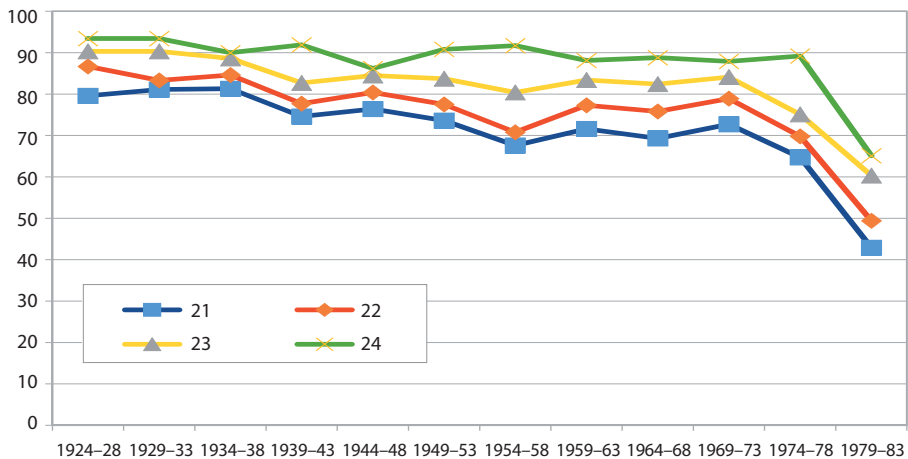


**Figure 2:** *Acquiring tertiary education. Year, number of enrolled and graduated (source: Statistics Estonia).*

## The 1970s

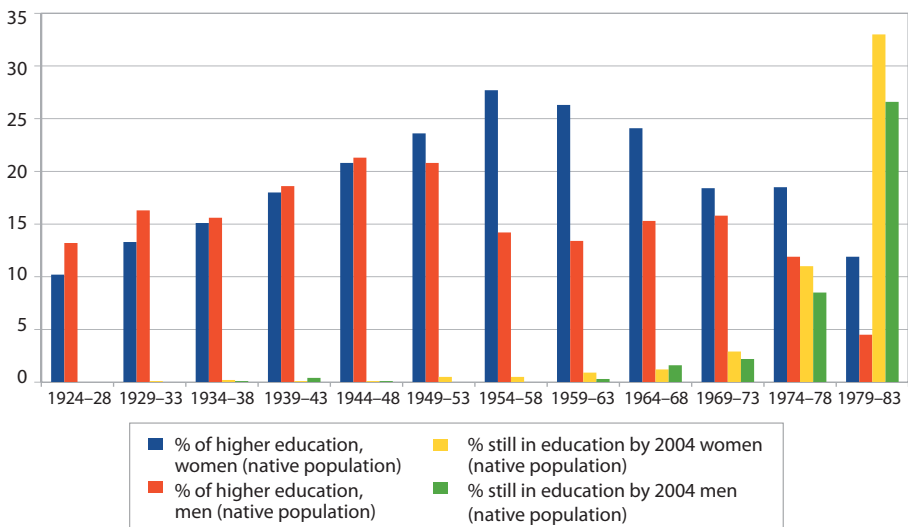
To sum up, the age cohort we are concerned about had a specific response to the social conditions in Estonia – they gladly welcomed the new universities and enrolled in them, but few had time to finish their degree programmes in time. Thus, another important trend that had its start at that time was the prolonging of the period of education.

If we look at the age of students, we can see that while in 1993 the number of those still studying at the age of 24 was only 9.5%, this number had more than doubled by 2000, when the percentage was 22% and grown further by 2012, when the number was 31%. This indicates that the prolonging of the educational process did not involve all of those born during the beginning of 1970s, but certainly concerned a large number of those born in the latter half of that decade. While 72.7% of ethnic Estonian women born between 1969–73 had completed their education by the age of 21, the numbers among subsequent cohorts (1974–78 and 1979–83) were 64.7 and 42.9, respectively (see *Figure 3*). The proportion of men who had finished their schooling by the age of 21 among the ethnic Estonian population was larger (73.6; 72.3; and 58.1% respectively), indicating that women were more flexible to react to the changes of the higher education landscape. However, the overwhelming dominance of female students had its start in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which suggests that the 1970s cohort did not start this pattern.



**Figure 3:** The percentage of people aged 21–24 in tertiary education according to their birth year, in 2005 (source: Katus, Puur and Põldma, 2008).

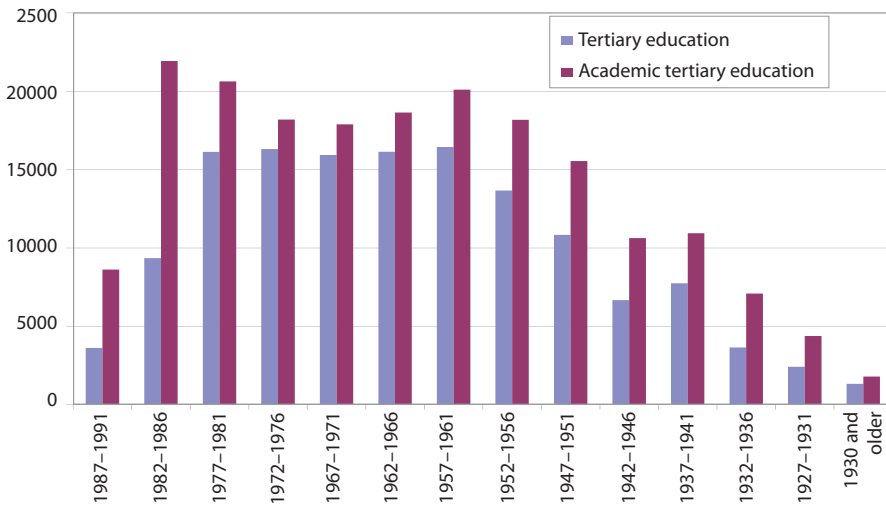
All the previously stated numbers seem to suggest that those born during the 1970s are significantly more educated compared to previous cohorts. However, according to the Estonian Family and Fertility Survey conducted in 2005, this was (yet?) not the case. The percentage of the native population having higher education had actually fallen. Even if we consider the number of those still in education by the time of the survey, we can see that prolonging the stay in education is really common (see *Figure 4*), but probably these numbers also indicate that they started the habit of simultaneous work and study (see also Kogan and Unt, 2005).



**Figure 4:** The percentage of acquired tertiary education and those still in tertiary education among different birth cohorts in 2005 (source: Katus, Puur and Pöldma, 2008).

Yet, as we can see from *Figure 5*, though the number of those still in education among the cohorts in focus is rather big, the numbers from the 2011 census indicate that the sudden growth in enrolment in universities during the 1990s does not reflect the numbers of highly-educated. The proportion of those highly educated starts to grow again among those born during the second half of the 1970s, rising only slightly higher than among those born between 1957–1961.

## The 1970s



**Figure 5:** The number of those acquired tertiary education according to census 2011 (source: Statistics Estonia).

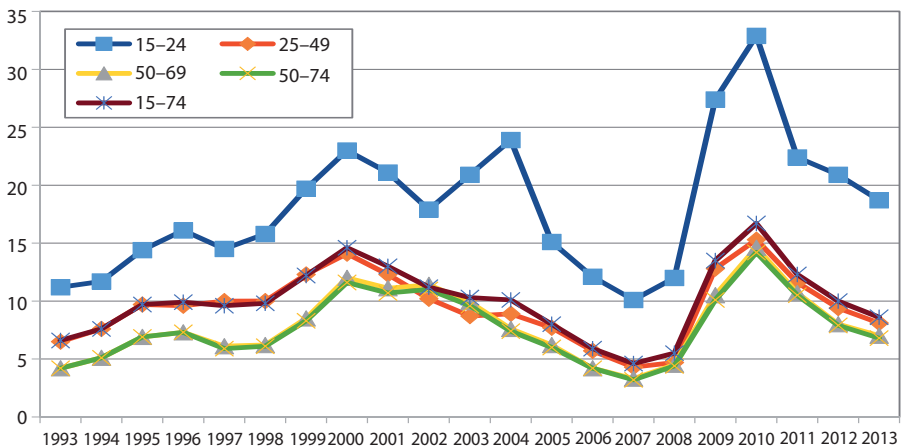
## Transition to work

Estonia adopted a model of liberal economy which has also been called “shock therapy” or a “reform laboratory” (Saar and Helemäe, 2006). The liberal market economy reforms were rather sharp and overwhelming. The ongoing changes in the labour market can provide some explanation to the noted discrepancies in the educational field. Paradoxically enough, even though the enrolment in universities started growing at an unprecedented pace, the link between the level of education and the jobs which were considered prestigious (higher specialists, leaders and alike) began to weaken and were almost non-existent during the most turbulent times of the mid-1990s (Kogan and Unt, 2005, p. 225). In fact, Saar and Helemäe suggest that between 1995 and 1997, education did not show any effect on upward or downward mobility (2006). In other words, the structured social hierarchies in stratification mechanisms lost their importance during the time of restructuring: entering the labour market with a low level of education was a common reality (Kogan and Unt, 2005). That means that even though the 1970s cohort was enrolled in universities in greater numbers compared to previous cohorts, not all of them had time to graduate from tertiary education, as they were drawn into the labour market prematurely.



Though Estonian economic development after regaining independence has sometimes been described as a “success-story”, the overall conditions were far from a walk in the park during the 1990s. Shortly after 1991, Estonian GDP fell by 22% with consumer price inflation reaching 1069% (Saar and Unt, 2008, p. 327). The fall in economic activity was caused mainly by the sudden radical reforms which directed the country towards liberal market mechanisms; this also meant a breakdown in the economic relations which still existed with the former Soviet Union as well as cuts in state subsidies for many branches of the local economy. The latter resulted in the closing down of many industries as well as in a decline in labour demand. The employment rate fell steadily from 76.4% in 1989 until the stabilizing point of 60.7% in 2000 (Saar and Unt, 2008, p. 327).

If we look at *Figure 6*, we can see that, as expected, the most dominant age group in terms of unemployment is the youngest one. However, looking at the chart we can see that those entering the labour market in the first half of the 1990s had less probability to become unemployed compared to those entering it later. This means that the cohort born during the 1970s is again not quite homogeneous in this respect. Those born during the early 1970s had better labour market conditions compared to those born on late 1970s. Yet, none of the 1970s belonged to the group of 15–24 year-olds which saw a rapid increase in unemployment in 2008, when the economic crisis hit, reaching its peak in 2010.



**Figure 6:** Unemployment rate according to age (source: Statistics Estonia).

Even though many of the people interviewed for this study had a difficult time to cope during scarce times in the economy, quite a number of them were also excited about the new possibilities the new society had to offer (Vogt, 2005) and seized the opportunities that opened up in the emerging liberal economy (Helemäe, Saar and Vöörmann, 2000, p. 38; Tallo and Terk, 1998, p. 15; Titma, 1999, p. 10). The combination of scarcity yet opportunity meant on the one hand that parents had less resources to support their studying children, on the other hand it meant that children could relatively easily earn money by starting a business or taking up employment (for illustrative cases, see Nugin and Onken 2010; Nugin and Hatshaturjan, 2012).

The claim of favourable employment conditions for the 1970s cohort is well exemplified by the data of Mari Toomse (2004), when she explored the transition from school to work among young people. She studied the rank of the first job among those leaving educational institutions (high schools and universities) between 1992 and 2002, and divided the jobs into four groups. According to the data, 23 per cent of young people leaving school during 1992–1994 and 19 per cent of those leaving school between 1995 and 2002 ended up assuming higher managerial or professional posts as their first job.

The Time of Leaving School	Higher Managerial and Professional Occupations	Intermediate Occupations	Skilled Manual Workers	Workers	Total
1992–1994	23	22	27	28	100
1995–2002	19	20	27	34	100

*Source: Toomse, 2004. N=491.*

**Table 3:** *The first job among those who left school between 1992 and 2002 (in %).*

In her study, Toomse also shows that at the beginning of the 1990s the relative impact of a person’s own level of education as well as that of the father on the ranking was significantly smaller than it was towards the end of the decade (Toomse, 2004, p. 26). These numbers confirm what were discussed earlier regarding class structures within the transition society being in rapid transformation. It is not easy to track down the data of class impact on the transition from the Soviet society, not only because the sociological surveys were few at the time, but also because it is difficult to define “class” according to any of the established models that usually reflect Western social structures (see also Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley, 1998). The analysis of structural change of the

class structures during the transformation is therefore outside the scope of this book. Yet, in the context of my respondent group, it would be important to keep in mind that during the hazy restructuring, the impact of class background on social mobility came to matter less than it does today (or did during the Soviet time). In terms of the debates of the relations on class and transition to adulthood that were referred to above, this also illustrates the differences with the Western world, where class constructions have been far more stable.

One of the indicators of economic status could be the income numbers of this age group. If we look at the income numbers during the period of 2003–2011, we see that the age group of 25–34 is not the only one whose yearly income is the biggest, it is also the one whose income grew proportionally the most during the period 2003–2008.<sup>16</sup> During the economic crisis, however, the age group who lost the most proportionally, was 16–24. By 2010, most of the 1970s cohort had reached the age cohort between 25–34 and the chart indicates that this is the group recovering the quickest after the crises. The fact that this cohort has the biggest income can be perhaps explained also by the life stage of the young people: those at the end of their twenties may not have a family yet, and as the income numbers brought here indicate the income per household, their income is not divided between their dependants. However, if we look at the age group 0–15, we see an interesting trend – their household income has also grown proportionally faster than that of the other age groups’.

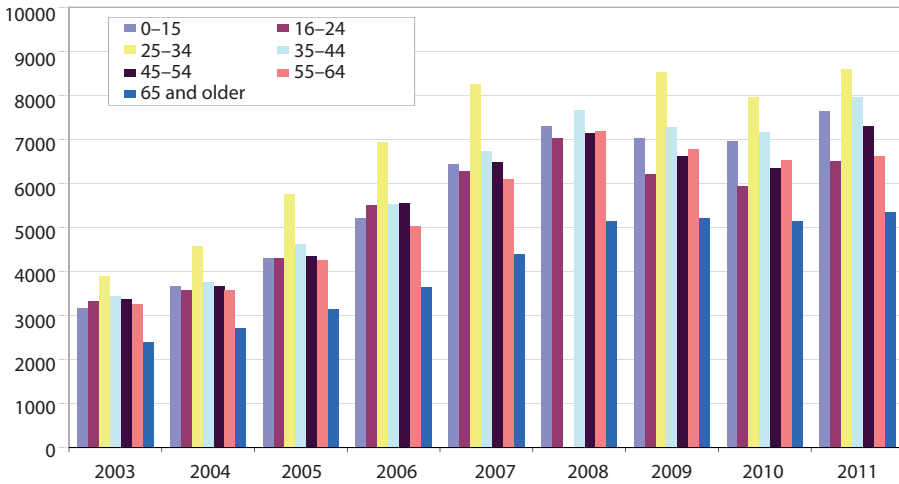
This indicates that the income of the age group who are parents of the children aged 0–15 have increased income during that period. However, most likely not all of the parents of the age group are from the cohort of 1970–1980, though perhaps some belong to this age group. Also, these numbers do not reflect the owned economic capital, just the salaries. It is most likely that most of the owners of accumulated wealth would be in older age groups.<sup>17</sup> Either way, it is noteworthy that in terms of economic status in society, the 1970s cohort is relatively well-off.

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<sup>16</sup> The age group 25–34 is not solely those born 1970–1980. In fact, those reflected in these numbers are born roughly inbetween 1969–1982.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, the label of a ‘winning’ generation has emerged in the Estonian sociological literature referring to those born around 1965 and it usually refers to the cohort that has done well in accumulating economic capital (Titma, 1999).

## The 1970s



**Figure 7:** The income per household statistics according to age group (source: Statistics Estonia).

However, real income is only one of the indicators of the social position. Another important indicator is the subjective well-being and position in the society. In a research project on these matters carried out in 2002–3 (Lauristin 2004, pp. 251–85) respondents were required to place themselves on a visually sketched staircase with ten steps indicating their self-perceived position in society. The answers were then sorted into five separate groups (see Table 2). The table shows that the self-esteem of the young and those who were young during the period of change is quite high. In fact, it seems that the younger the person, the higher the social position they think they occupy. This may seem paradoxical considering the facts we know about youth unemployment, but this apparently shows that the expectations of the young were especially high (*Ibid.*, p. 261). This by itself also indicates that the perceived position of the young people on the social ladder was high at the time. It was probably influenced by the fact that many young people were visible on the social scene and youth was perceived as the age for being successful (for discussion, see Nugin and Onken, 2010) and this boosted the expectations of even younger people who had not even entered the labour market.

Further research conducted in 2005 (Katus, Puur and Põldma 2008) asked the respondents about their satisfaction with their income. While among the cohorts born between 1959–63 37.3 %, and among those born between 1964–68, 43.3% claimed to be “very satisfied” with their income, among the

cohorts born between 1969–73 and 1974–78 the numbers were 47.2 and 49.6 %, respectively. Among the next cohort, born 1979–83, the number was 46.9%.

Age Groups	Lower Strata	Lower-middle Strata	Middle Strata	Higher-middle Strata	Higher Strata
15–19 (N = 148)	2	10	28	32	27
20–29 (N = 267)	6	18	33	25	18
30–44 (N = 397)	8	21	35	22	13
45–54 (N = 261)	13	23	31	22	12
55–64 (N = 213)	17	22	33	17	11
65–74 (N = 184)	23	22	33	17	4
Total sample (N = 1470)	11	20	33	22	14

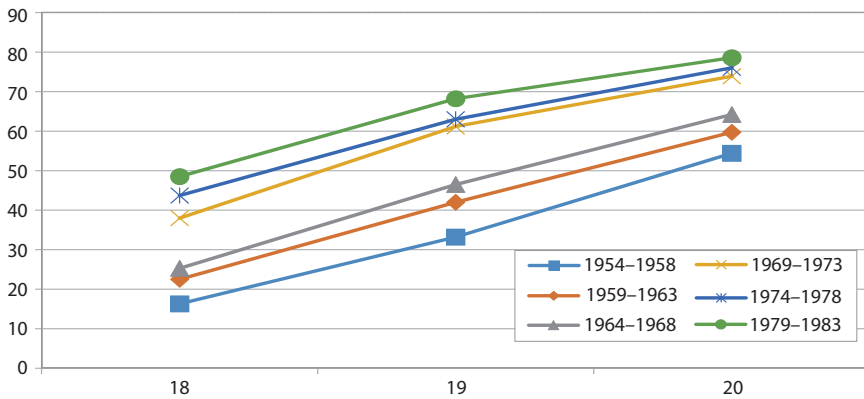
Source: Lauristin, 2004, p. 261.

**Table 4:** Subjective belonging to social strata in different age groups (in %).

All this reflects the well-noted pattern that if socialisation takes place during times of economic growth, the individual’s position in the job market tends to be better and stay better compared to those socialised under economic recession. In other words, social conditions which young people find themselves in usually accumulate – those young people whose transition to the labour market happens during a period of economic growth, tend to profit from that and preserve their position even after the economic conditions worsen. However, those entering the labour market during the time of decline seem to still struggle even at the time when the situation gets better. A French sociologist, Louis Chauvel, has called this a “scarring effect” (Chauvel, 2006, pp. 5, 7). Since the socializing years for the 1970s cohort have been pretty long (transitions from school to work tend to stretch to longer period, family formation tends to be postponed), they have witnessed both harsh decline as well as a sharp rise in economic development (during the beginning of this century). However, the decline coincided with the restructuring of the economy, when all opportunities to participate in this re-building were open. Some therefore see this cohort which occupied good positions at the beginning of the economic growth as part of a “strategic generation” (Turner, 2002, pp. 13–14). They were young enough to make use of the strategic opportunities which society had to offer.

## Demographic transitions

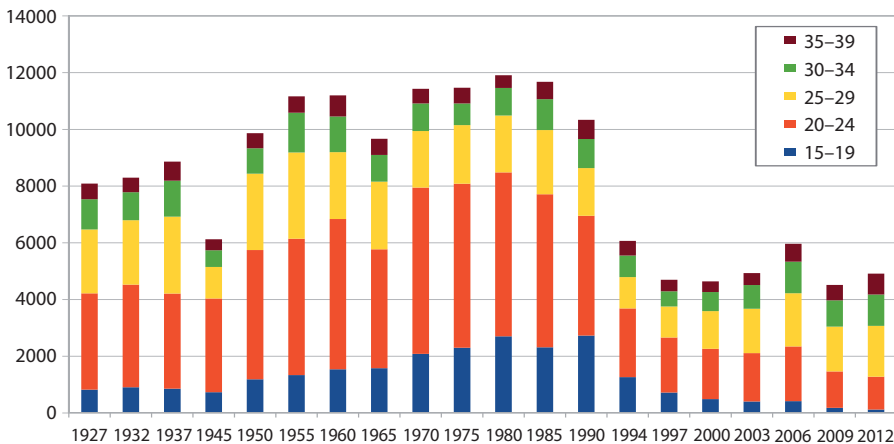
The 1970s cohort was also on the threshold of new demographic patterns, concerning sexual behaviour, marriage patterns and having offspring. As expected, the first to change among those was sexual behaviour. During the Soviet era, sexuality was a taboo. In terms of sexual morals, the Soviet Union's official stance on matters of sexuality followed a rather conservative model. References to someone's sexuality were often labelled as bad and as part of the Western capitalist society, therefore to be avoided. Pre-marital and extramarital sex was officially not approved, and contraceptives were not always available. Perhaps these circumstances were among the reasons why throughout the Soviet period, the age at which people got married and had children was young.<sup>18</sup> However, the atmosphere of moral constraints was also loosening during the second half of the 1980s, especially after the start of Gorbachev's reign. Therefore, the age at which young people had their first sexual encounters started to decline already among those born during the end of the 1960s. However, if we look at *Figure 8*, we can see that though sexual life has started earlier with every subsequent cohort, those age cohorts born during the early 1970s nevertheless stand out. We may thus claim that it was them who started the evolution in sexual behaviour in Estonia. This is all the more justified as subsequent cohorts started their sexual lives even earlier.



**Figure 8:** Cumulative percentage of those who have started sexual life by the age of 18–20 (source: Katus, Puur and Põldma, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> The reasons were perhaps more complex, involving also the housing policies of the Soviet Union: in order to get a better position in the que for apartments, marriage and children were important.

As for marriage and having children, this age group was the one initiating the pattern of favouring co-habitation to marriage and postponing giving birth. These processes are linked and follow the patterns emerging in Western countries during the 1970s. There are complex reasons for these developments and the processes also perhaps reflect the overall values in society: what is socially accepted behaviour and what is not. Therefore, though the age of having the first intercourse was getting younger, the marriage and cohabitation patterns did not change so suddenly. Though the behaviour of men and women slightly differ (as men tend to marry and have children a bit later), the overall trends among both genders are similar. However, I find the female patterns more important as they are more constrained by their biological rhythm regarding giving birth. Thus, *Figure 9* shows that the age of getting married did not rise significantly as yet during the 1990s. Rather the opposite: this was the time when the number of young newlyweds was especially big; compared to the previous period, the largest number of 15–19 age group were married at this time. This probably has to do with the loosening of morals on sexual behaviour, as it was acceptable to start relations earlier but not outside of marriage. By 2000, the change is obvious: not only is the number of marriages diminished, but the age of getting married has grown, continuing to grow further.

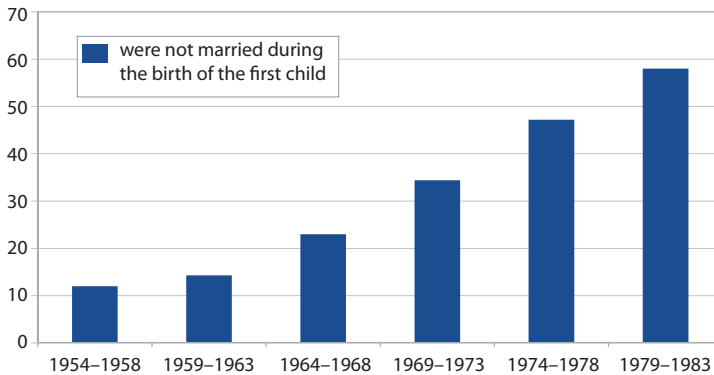


**Figure 9:** The proportion of marriages according to age groups, women and year (source: Statistics Estonia).

The decline in the number marriages reflects the spread of cohabitation. *Figure 10* illustrates the percentages of women who were not married during the birth of their first child. If we consider that the proportion of single mothers

## The 1970s

during the time of giving birth is rather stable (approximately 10–15%), we can conclude that those born during the beginning of the 1970s were more likely to get married before their children were born compared to those born during the second half of the 1970s. The proportion of births to married couples was rather high during the Soviet era, being 86% in 1970, and started to decline at the end of that era (73% in 1990), falling to 41.2% in 2013 (Statistics Estonia).



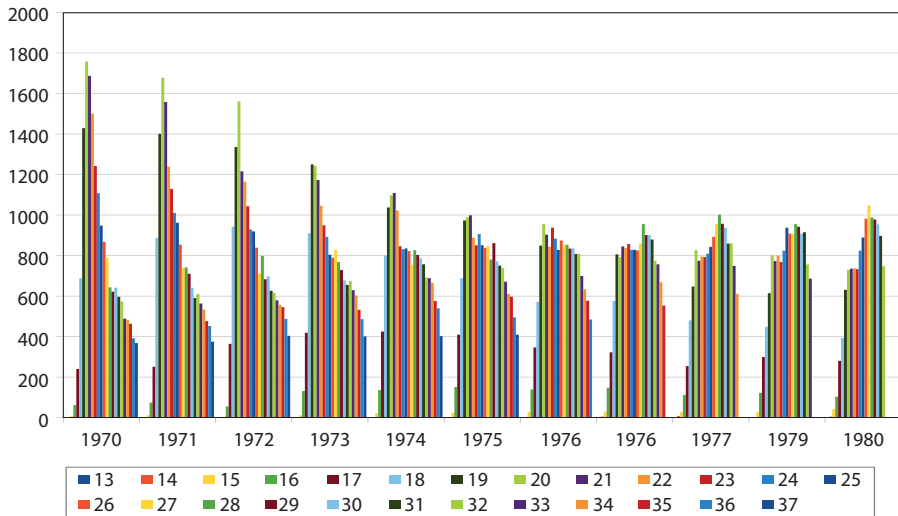
**Figure 10:** Percentage of women not married during the birth of their first child according to birth cohorts (source: Katus, Puur and Põldma, 2008).

So far the numbers have indicated that in terms of demographic behaviour, the 1970s cohort is not homogeneous. The demographic changes are rarely sudden and though the ones born in the first half of the decade may start some new patterns, in other respects they tend to follow patterns which are more similar to those born in the 1960s. This observation is especially relevant when talking about giving birth. During the Soviet era, the age of giving birth was getting younger and younger. The median age for giving birth after the WWII was around 25 years. However, 25% of the women born between 1969–1973 gave birth to their first child by the age of 20, being the cohort who entered parenthood the youngest since the 18th century, when the respective data was first collected in Estonia (Katus, Puur and Sakkeus 2005; Katus, Puur and Põldma 2008). Yet, this demographic behaviour has changed at a pace that can be characteristic only to periods of vast social changes. If we have a look at the age of giving birth among those born between 1970–80 (see *Figure 11*)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> These numbers are appropriate and reflect the numbers given on the homepage of Statistics Estonia, which indicate the age of those giving birth at certain years and not their birth datums. However, the numbers roughly show the trends. It is also noteworthy that here the age of giving birth to any child is marked, not the age of giving birth to the first child.



a visible change can be seen – giving birth is postponed and those born in the second half of the decade are more likely to give birth later.

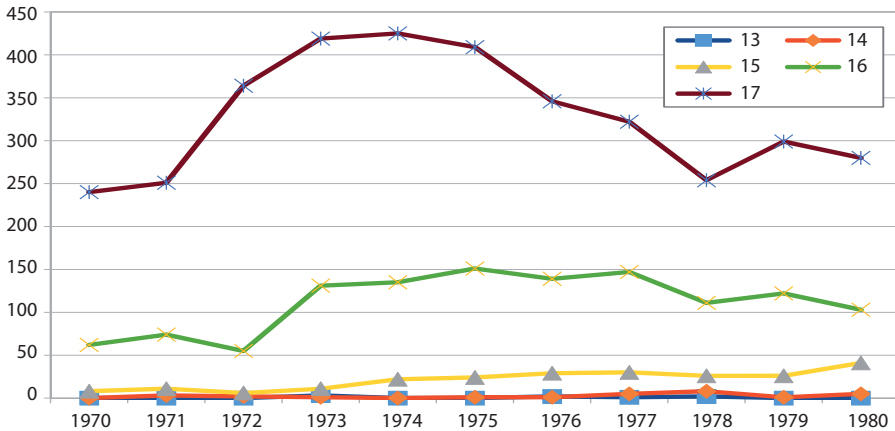


**Figure 11:** The age of women giving birth to a child by birth year of the mother (source: Statistics Estonia).

Thus, both the age at which sexual life began and the age at which women gave birth to their first child became younger over the course of the last 20 years. Some of the reasons for this may be found in the discursive patterns of the time: giving birth was, for example, propagated during the “singing revolution”: one of the most popular songs at the time called for filling Estonia with Estonian children. Another reason may have been the practice of giving birth earlier as a general trend as one of the practices of transition to adulthood: when more people started to give birth early, it became a norm. However, there may be several structural reasons for this, for instance, the fact that during the Soviet era, those having children were more likely to get a better position in the queue for apartments. Yet another reason may be that the overall loosening of sexual morals was not matched by the easy availability of contraceptives. The gradual availability of contraception, especially the birth control pill, which became more commonly available at the beginning of the 1990s, may have influenced the postponing of giving birth. The general shift in norms and values is also reflected in the number of teenage mothers illustrated in *Figure 12*. While the cohorts born during the early 1970s generally gave birth earlier, the number

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of teenage mothers was bigger among those born in the middle of the decade. Among those born later, teenage motherhood became less common, which may be seen as an indication of the better access to birth control and also better sexual education.



**Figure 12:** The number of teenage mothers according to birth years of mothers (source: Statistics Estonia).

In terms of leaving home, this age group followed the pattern of the cohort before and left home relatively early – while among those born in the 1970s, 70% had left home by the age of 22, only 50% of the next age group (1980–1986) had done the same (European Social Survey). Yet, one has to bear in mind that the reasons for leaving home may have differed among the 1970s cohort compared to the previous ones: while during the Soviet time young people mostly left home for marriage, the cohort of the 1970s started the pattern of leaving home yet not forming a family.

To sum up, many turning points in the demographic behaviour of contemporary Estonia can be traced back to the 1970s cohort. However, the demographic turning points are hardly ever very sudden. Also, not all trends are followed by subsequent cohorts (like the proportion of rising teenage motherhood), and perhaps reflect the ways of searching for new patterns. For example, many of those born at the beginning of the 1970s, who had their first child in their 20s have had a second (or third) child in their 30s, thus following the trends set by the previous cohort as well as the next. In addition, the trend of prevalent cohabitation widely practiced by those born in the 1970s may not be similarly welcomed by all those born in the 1980s, yet on the basis of

the currently available statistics, it is perhaps a bit premature to tell if this is the case, as the age at which young people get married has risen and they are still in their 30s. As for marriage, perhaps many among the 1970s cohort who have cohabited for a long time, might reconsider their arrangements and get married at some point. However, these numbers show visible trends that have been changing during the coming of age of this cohort.

## Summary

What do these changes indicate on a wider basis in Estonian context? One thing is quite clear – compared to the previous cohorts, the transitions considered crucial in becoming an adult were prolonged. Yet, this involves a number of processes which have more implications than just a line or column on the chart would indicate. In fact, some of the charts exhibited above are even contradictory: the growing number of enrolled students in the universities were not reflected in the charts of highly educated among the cohort. Still, even this tendency is meaningful in a broader sense. Personal transitions in life which had acquired certain patterns over time, were rapidly changing, yet the direction of these changes was not straight-forward. Those enrolled in universities also started a pattern of non-linear transitions: they worked simultaneously to their studies, and many among them were too busy to complete their studies. However, many of them bumped back and forth between education and employment. The increasingly spread pattern of cohabitation in people's personal lives was another trend that characterise the so called yo-yo transitions (Pais, 2000): cohabitating means less commitment and is more easily reversible.

Looking at these trends, we can clearly see the interplay of the structural conditions and the start of change in dispositions, described in the theoretical part of this chapter. The higher enrolment in universities and working during the studies were, no doubt, part of the social structural conditions prevalent in society at the time. The growth in universities and student numbers created new possibilities for studies; however the poor social systems for supporting students forced them to look for jobs. What is more, overall reconstruction of the society and the favourable conditions for upward mobility enabled them to grab positions which were perhaps unthinkable among the previous or subsequent cohorts during their studies. The influential positions may have worked in two ways: first, being already involved in the labour market in an influential

position, one finds less time for studies as these may seem unimportant (also one might lose one's job if not dedicated enough). Secondly, seeing that one could get a good job without a diploma may have served as a de-motivation to continue studying. Therefore, the numbers of those graduating did not correspond to the numbers of those enrolled the way it perhaps does among previous and subsequent cohorts. The structural change of the society in a way pushed them to establish some of the transition routes. One could also speculate that the uncertain future and prolonged studies prevented them from settling down with a family and influenced them to postpone parenthood and marriage.

Yet, there seems to be more than the structural reasons, as they are probably interconnected with some social values and discourses. Along with these trends, the society was undergoing the double transformation processes mentioned before and the individualisation that had gained prevalence in other Western societies started to be reflected also in Estonian society. Those born during the 1970s were increasingly facing a lack of institutional support for their transitions, thus, to use Brückner and Mayer's (2005) perceptions, were witnessing de-institutionalisation, de-standardisation, differentiation and pluralisation (Brückner and Mayer, 2005). While during their transitions the weight of individual choice significantly grew perhaps without the need to necessarily strive for it, the subsequent cohorts come to take those same individual choices as a perfectly normal part of their lives. Along with structural reasons which played a role in postponing the transitions usually considered crucial for becoming an adult, the perception of youth as a life stage also changed with those structural changes. Youth as being perceived as a period of time of open-ended becoming rather than a movement towards a fixed destination probably had its start in Estonian discursive fields at approximately this time. The society as a whole was also in a "state of becoming" as were the young people in it. The structural conditions developed hand in hand with the discursive shift of choice-biographies and individual responsibility.

What about the ministers born in the 1970s which were mentioned at the beginning of this chapter? What kind of transition routes did they follow? Judging from their bios, some of them postponed graduation from university and many of them worked in influential positions before graduation: they were among those who started the practice of simultaneous study and work (perhaps with periods of less study and more work and vice versa, the yo-yo transitions). Their first mentioned jobs indicate that they were among those who had the chance not only to witness the reconstruction process of the society, but to

take part in it institutionally. Their practices of cohabiting before marriage is not really something which is usually reflected upon in these kinds of CVs (nor is the age of the children mentioned there). However, the prime minister himself, for example, was not officially married to his partner when he stepped into the office. Probably the private lives of the ministers (and demographic patterns they followed) are not of much importance here. What is important, is that their transition patterns are clearly influenced by the changing social structures of the 1990s. They managed to see the change and participate in it without being forced to negotiate their transitions in the closed system of the Soviet Union, yet having a good understanding of it. On the other hand, they negotiated their transitions in a society which assumed individual responsibility and initiative, as the social support systems had just collapsed and the new one had not yet been built. In other words, they pulled through due to favourable social conditions and their own initiative. This is something to be remembered, as being in charge of several important issues; they might evaluate the contemporary young from the same perspective. Moreover, they are among the ones who are in a way in charge of the support systems for the young people today.

## 4. Narrated life courses

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Every story is narrated following a particular pattern. Take a fairy tale like Cinderella<sup>20</sup> or Puss in Boots<sup>21</sup>. Both have their main characters (Cinderella and the youngest of the sons) who find themselves in unfortunate social conditions: being without (much) parental care while (relatively) poor. In both cases, these situations are outcomes of unhappy circumstances rather than the state of affairs the heroes of the tales have called upon themselves. They had little or nothing to do with those events, yet, they are the ones who have to suffer the consequences. How do they act, then? Do they “take arms against the sea of troubles”<sup>22</sup>? On the contrary, both are saved by someone from outside their circles, saved by rather happy coincidences. Their role in these stories, then, is to accept the conditions their fate had brought them and then (provided they are patient and humble enough), someone (a fairy, a puss) will come and show

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<sup>20</sup> Cinderella is an old fairy tale, which has many versions. In the most common one, Cinderella is a daughter of a man who remarried after her mother's death. The stepmother has two daughters of her own who are privileged in the family. Cinderella has to work in the kitchen while the other daughters enjoy an idle life of parties and leisure. One evening, when everyone had gone to the ball, a fairy appears who changes Cinderella's filthy clothes into festive ones, a pumpkin to a carriage and mice to horses for Cinderella to join the event. She does and is immediately noticed by a prince who falls in love with her. As the carriage is determined to change back into a pumpkin at a midnight, Cinderella has to leave abruptly. While escaping, she loses one of her shoes. The prince traces her using the lost shoe and after finding her asks her to marry him. They live happily ever after.

<sup>21</sup> Puss in Boots is another old fairy tale in which the old miller dies, leaving his mill to his oldest son, the middle son the mules, and the youngest, only a cat. The cat requires to have boots and starts to think of several tricks to grant his master a royal life. Through several deceits and harmless lies he persuades the king that his master is Marquis de Carabas, owning a large castle, and in result, the youngest son gets to marry the king's daughter. They live happily ever after.

<sup>22</sup> A quote from William Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet', a soliloquy of Hamlet where he ponders whether to act against the fate or accept it, or commit suicide.

them a way to a happy future. In terms of the classical structure and agency debate, they have little agency and depend on the structure.

How are the stories of those born in the 1970s narrated? Do their stories follow certain patterns just like fairytales do? How do they construct their own role in those stories? In a certain way, people of this cohort found themselves operating within conditions during a crucial period in their lives which nobody had ever predicted or prepared them for. Looking at the numbers in the previous chapter, one could speculate that they found themselves in rather favourable social conditions. Yet, did they work hard to make use of those conditions? Or to rephrase the question: how do they reflect upon their own agency? Do they see themselves as active agents who shape their own lives? Or do they describe themselves as acting like Cinderella, humbly working in the kitchen until the fairy comes and tells her to go to the ball? Or like the son of the miller, who lets the Puss in Boots direct him through the events to become a king?

According to James Wertsch (2002), every narrative has a hidden structure according to which the story is structured. Like in fairy tales, which often follow similar patterns, nations tend to depict their past using specific narrative structures (e.g. evil invaders vs. victimised nation). In a similar vein, people tend to follow specific patterns when telling their own biographies, utilising certain shared cultural tools. Yet, before analysing those narrative templates expressed in the interview data, a brief introduction to the sample is at place.

The interview data this book is based on was collected throughout a period of ten years involving six stages and altogether 47 respondents.<sup>23</sup> Each of these rounds of interviews involved slightly different questions and interpretive angles, yet all interviews concentrated on the respondents' career plans and choices after leaving school and on retrospective reflections regarding their coming of age during the turbulent times of the 1990s. With the exception of the first ten interviews, all respondents were directly asked about their perceived generational belonging (in the first ten, this topic was touched upon more indirectly).

Needless to say, the primary criteria for selecting the sample was age: respondents had to be born between 1970 and 1979 so that their transition to

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<sup>23</sup> The first eleven interviews were taken in Dec 2003-March 2004; the second set of nine interviews took place from March-May 2005. In April 2008 I carried out one biographical interview, followed by four focus group interviews with 13 people in November-December 2009 (one focus group was conducted by Kirsti Jõesalu) and another six interviews in July-August 2010 (again, together with Kirsti Jõesalu). Finally in December 2012-August 2013 I interviewed the last set of eight respondents for this book.

adulthood coincided with the drastic changes in society. Putting the sample on a purely numeric basis (birth date) may, however, be questioned in light of the previously discussed processes of non-linear transition routes to adulthood and hence, its subjective evaluation and blurred definition. However, there are three reasons why such an age-based selection makes perfect sense in the Estonian and broader post-communist context. First, until 1989, transition processes to adulthood were rather standardised and linear, as we discussed before. In other words, the non-linear and prolonged transition routes to adulthood had its start gradually from the end of the 1980s. Second, regardless of the time at which the transition to adulthood is completed, it has its starting point during the teenage years: young people start the search for personality and establish a foundation for identity during certain years, hand in hand with biological maturation. Finally, the social transformation process lasted many years and thus, even if some respondents started their identity search later, the society was still in transformation. It seems that, at least for this specific sample group, as the period of their personal “identification” coincided with the course of “identification” processes in society, the overall atmosphere of the society in its search for identity also had an impact on their identities.

The core of my sample, however, consists of those born during 1973–1975 (34 respondents). This means that they graduated from high school during the regaining of independence in 1991 or a couple of years after that. Five respondents were born between 1970 and 1972 and eight between 1976 and 1978. The sample is thus to a certain extent inclined to reflect the living experiences of a rather more narrow age cohort. However, even though it is not balanced quantitatively in terms of birth year cohorts, it still provides a diversified insight into perspectives and career paths across the entire age group, as all year cohorts are represented. Moreover, determining something like generational experience always involves a degree of arbitrariness. In the Estonian sociological literature, for example, the term “winners’ generation” was originally coined for just one particular cohort, born in 1965 (Titma, 1999), yet later it was often used to describe people born in the 1960s more broadly. As the borders of generations are in flux and the experiences of cohorts tend to be similar regardless of the couple of years here or there, such a sample appeared not to be a particular problem. The life stories and generational constructions offered by those born later or earlier seem to confirm this hypothesis. However, there appear to be a few differences, which will be discussed in later chapters.

The sample was compiled using the “snowball” method, starting with recruiting acquaintances of the author, then contacting their friends, and the



friends of friends. Respondents were also chosen according to their advanced status. By this I mean that they had to have acquired a certain level of economic, cultural, social or symbolic capital, or a “voice” in society. As in many other qualitative studies, the sample is not representative of all the social layers in society born in this particular time period. Most of the respondents can be described as middle-class, while bearing in mind that “class” is not defined in the classic Marxist sense of socio-economic status only. As pointed out in the theoretical section, class as an analytical category has become more complicated in the contemporary world, beyond economic capital other forms of capital have gained importance as well. This is particularly relevant for the sample of this study, as the respondents came of age during a time when economic conditions were exceptionally difficult and the economic background of the parents had no significant impact on the transition routes of the respondents. It is also important to bear in mind that social and symbolic hierarchies in the Soviet society often did not match the economic ones. Teachers and doctors held high symbolic and cultural capital, but were often economically much less secured than, say, people taking up manual labour. This situation continued to exist also after the regime change and is only gradually shifting. Therefore, by classifying the respondents to this study as “middle class,” their own current position was taken into account rather than the economic (or class) background of their families. Moreover, many of the respondents were still rather weak in economic capital terms, yet they were strong in terms of other forms of capital (symbolic, cultural).

While stating that the majority of the respondent group falls under the heuristic label “middle class”, this term has to still be treated with caution. The notion of middle class is far too wide to make it possible to arrive at generalised conclusions that apply to all members of this group. Thus, even though the label “middle class” is important in describing the sample, it is not sufficient to define the essence of the respondent group. The group consists of those who have been and still are involved in constructing and reconstructing the discursive cultural fields. Studying their identity made it possible to explore the cultural dimensions of their class (Devine and Savage, 2005, p. 4).

The sample selection still aimed for as much diversity as possible given its rather homogenous character otherwise. Thus, respondents were selected also based on geographic terms, i.e. according to where in Estonia they graduated from secondary school. Geographic diversity made it possible to determine in what ways locality mattered during the transformation period. Thus, respondents came from both larger and smaller towns and villages across all

parts of the country. By the time of the interview, many of them had moved to Tallinn or Tartu. Another diversification came through selecting respondents based on their fields of occupation and specialisation. Thus, respondents were active in the creative fields as artists, designers, actresses, film directors, writers, or musicians; they worked in politics or the economic sphere as state officials, businessmen, marketing specialists, CEOs, or bank officials; some were working in higher education or in medicine, or they were public employees, working in ministries, municipal governments or in state museums. Finally, the sample included also specialists in law enforcement and a journalist. The purpose for diversifying in professional and geographical terms was to ensure that the social and discursive *fields* the respondents operated in varied, thus the proportion and mobilisation of their cultural, social, symbolic and economic capital would be different (for details, see appendix I).

Studying this group (or any other specific group based on qualitative data) has its advantages as well as shortcomings as other social groups are left out. Though it is not the aim of this chapter to discuss those left out by the sample, it might still be worth briefly looking at some of those that belong to the same age cohort yet are not represented in the sample. There are first of all those who cannot be classified as middle class and who did not manage to acquire influential positions or succeed in upward social mobility during the transition period. Though the statistical data presented previously suggested that the age cohort was overall more advantaged than the previous or following ones, the advantages were not necessarily distributed evenly to all the members of the cohort. Another substantial group that has been left out of the sample are members of the Russian-speaking population for whom the entire process of regaining independence had an entirely different meaning. The conscious choice made here to include only the “privileged” or relatively more successful members of this age group in Estonia aims to identify the generational discourses about this age group that are hegemonic in society as well as the mechanisms by which these discourses are enabled through social change. As Winston Churchill has so eloquently put it, history is written by the victors. In other words, what prevails in hegemonic discursive fields, is often the story of those who “won” and the stories of the others are left aside. Even though studying the stories of those who have no voice is certainly important, this book aims to capture the narratives of those who dominate the discursive fields. While this approach may not reflect the dispositions of the groups that have been left out, it can still influence them, as they live in the social reality that has been shaped by those discourses.

The specific Estonian situation should also be mentioned here. Estonia is a small country with 1.34 million inhabitants, with approximately one third not being ethnic Estonians. In 2013, the age group born in 1970–1978 constituted a bit more than 12,4% of the entire population, approximately 167,000 people. The average number of a yearly cohort (from the period 1970–1978) was approximately 18,500. If we include only people in Tallinn and Tartu (the majority of my sample), and only ethnic Estonians, the numbers diminish significantly. One could continue specifying by education or other variables, but the main idea is clear: the group of advanced people among the cohort is not that large compared to bigger European countries. Estonia's size determines the character of its social networks. Being of a certain age, living in a certain town and having a certain profession may mean that you know the majority of the people who are in your age group, live in the same town (or who studied at the same university) and work in your profession. Furthermore, certain social circles overlap and, having talked to a person of your age with a similar background, you will probably find out within minutes that you have many acquaintances in common. From the point of view of this research, this makes one speculate that small networks also mean less diversity in opinions and this gives more credence to the conclusions drawn from this qualitative data. The smallness on the other hand, can also mean that anonymity of the sample is hard to maintain as some respondents could be easily recognised by just their age, place of origin and profession. For this reason, all respondents were asked to give their consent in publishing the main data about them (age, profession and place of origin) and their opinions. Usually, they did not mind revealing their opinions to a broader readership, however, when some respondents requested that certain information should be left out, I have not included this in the book. The names used in the book are changed.

## Narrated Lives: Certainties and Uncertainties

As pointed out in the introduction, perception of time is crucial in constructing one's biography, as it moulds the way the past and the future is constructed. How we perceive time shapes the way we tell the stories and how we depict our role in those stories. The following section will therefore focus on how members of the sample narrated their own stories; how they reconstructed the major life course decisions they made and what these decisions were based on. In addition to these insights, the section will also demonstrate how the social

processes which took place around them were continuously brought into this narrative as reference points and influenced their decisions.

When planning one's life, young people usually look around to see what attracts them, search for role models that represent their desires. For the young people born in the 1970s in Estonia, these models were in a process of change and caused more confusion than orientation. Sometimes, like in the case of Mart (1972), the aspirations which had taken shape during the Soviet time needed reconsideration. After finishing primary school in 1987, Mart chose to go to vocational school to become a chef. When asked about his decision, he pondered on the social scene of the Soviet era, when restaurants were available only for the privileged few:

Mart: ... [Vocational school] seemed like a very great idea after finishing the eighth grade, like wow, what a secret world, those restaurants and bars, where you just couldn't get in... not only *you* couldn't get in, what's more, like, *nobody* could get in. Such a fancy porter was there who, like, kept the hall half-empty. You think like you belong to some kind of secret world, right. Like... later when you thought about it, it wasn't the brightest decision, this vocational school did not give me anything but a secondary education.

Though perhaps Mart's decision would have been reconsidered even if the state had not fallen apart (often young people's visions at the age of 15 do not match with the real world), in his case, the entire restaurant system he got his inspiration from collapsed. As Mart indicates, at the time of his decision making, restaurant visits during the evenings were often not available for anyone. The porters held high social status (social and symbolic capital) during the Soviet times, as they were in charge of who to let in this privileged area. During these times, social relations often were more important than financial means, as certain services were exchanged. In order to get to a restaurant, often one had to know the porter or someone working there, offering them something in return (semi-illegal corruptive favours that one acquired from their jobs).

Riina (1973) described that after she graduated from high school (in 1992) she had absolutely no idea who she would become. Eventually she went to study mathematics to become a teacher, yet she also thought she had to have some practical skills in order to survive during those times and to earn some living during her university years:

Riina: I was really worried. But I knew I had to do some job in order to get money while in the university, so I went and took up a sewing job. But I knew

it was a temporary thing. As for role models, my mother was an accountant, so I knew book keeping was very complicated. But I learned also how to do book-keeping. This I learned while in university. Just in case, because you are worried that you have to earn money with something real. Well, you study to become a teacher. You see, this is because you have no real role models. What I had seen was mother's job and teachers. So, actually I was invited... I had actually a plan, that if I become a maths teacher, then I will go to [name of the school where she had studied] school, because I had not seen other things. It seemed to me that the profession of a school teacher is alright, you have a free summer and long holidays and you get to go home during daytime and in principle, the teacher... my form teacher thought, that I would become a great teacher.

Neither Mart nor Riina eventually became what they had originally planned. Mart went to study design and ended up doing marketing jobs. Riina never graduated as a mathematics teacher, studied law later, had her own advertising company and was involved in politics. Years after establishing a successful business she decided to fulfil another old dream and graduated from the history department. Such non-linear life courses are nothing exceptional and can probably be found in any birth cohorts (not least among contemporary youth), but what may be seen as characteristic for this age cohort is not just the fact that role models were scarce and in a condition of flux, but also that the professions and occupations both respondents ended up with did not actually exist in society when they started their paths to adulthood: neither the advertising business nor marketing was present during the Soviet era (at least in contemporary form and position).

In a way, confusion can be used as a term to describe the entire society at the time. All the interviewed went to high school during the time when the society was under reconstruction. As the changes happened especially fast, school experiences could differ remarkably in this age group depending on the exact birth year. Those born in the beginning of the 1970s could experience a rather different atmosphere at their high school years compared to those born in the middle or the end of the decade. Kati (1970), for example, describes her experience in secondary school when her literature teacher was imprisoned by the KGB (the Soviet security police) and sent to a mental institution because of the way she taught her subject to the students. The teacher had chosen to concentrate on classical authors like Shakespeare and Goethe instead of the Soviet ones, introducing also the myths of the Bible. At the same time, as Kati reflected: "something was in the air" and the changes the literature teacher made were conducted in the "intuitive anticipation (*taju*) of the liberation."

In other words, the atmosphere was already changing, though the first brave ones were often still punished. Even though few of this age cohort experienced repression themselves or were directly affected by such acts, Kati's narrative stands out in this respect, as she recalls:

Kati (focus group (FG)): In the year of '87 the headmaster of the school phoned my mother and threatened that if I communicate with the literature teacher, I will be put away to mental institution as well, and if I attend [the meeting of the] heritage movement,<sup>24</sup> I would be sent to Siberia.

Even if in 1987 nobody was deported to Siberia any more on account of their political views (let alone for what they studied in literature class) and probably the cases of those sent to mental institutions by the KGB were rare at the time, these memories are nonetheless real for Kati. Whether or not these threats were realistic is irrelevant at this point: she has a memory of experienced fear of repressions even though she sensed the atmosphere of liberation at the same time.

Another form of fear experience was expressed by Janek (1971) and Hannes (1973) who described their experiences of escaping the compulsory Soviet military service. While Janek had to use his mother's social networks and fake appendicitis inflammation going through an actual operation, Hannes had to flee from home for three days to avoid the recruitment officers who were supposed to come and get him. Narrating these experiences, the respondents stressed their position in-between, the sense that they were the last ones to feel the tough hand of the regime, seeing it collapse at the next moment. What these reminiscences also demonstrate is that the regime change was rather sudden as the probability of similar stories happening diminished rapidly and became indeed unthinkable soon thereafter. While Janek had no doubts that he would have to serve in the army if he had not gone through the operation, Hannes admitted that he fled just in case, and his chasers showed no persistency in tracking him down. Yet he also noted that if this had happened a few years earlier, they would have probably gone after him.

Things collapsed at an unexpected pace as respondents only a few years younger had no comparable stories. Rather than relating their experiences with the tough regime, they described the time of no rules at all. Marko (1974, FG) described his high school time comparing it to the times Erich Maria Remarque has been depicting in his books: "everything collapses and fades away". Quite

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<sup>24</sup> The heritage movement (muinsuskaitse) was one of the social movements which had its role in regaining Estonia's independence.

a few respondents went a step further and used the word “anarchy” to characterise the overall atmosphere:

Henri (1975, FG): But think about it, during high school time [we did things that] wouldn't be possible now. We, for example, during our secondary school years went to [the name of a bar] and drank alcohol in the consent of a bar tender. Right now it's not possible, right. You get fines and everything on your neck.

Meelis (1973): Yes, that's true.

Henri: The thing has become a lot more organised, right? And it was naturally not possible during the Soviet time. That this was a specific era, when...

Meelis: ... freedom exceeded all the possible borders.

Henri: Exactly.

Hence, while Kati described her high school time by speaking about repressions, Marko spoke about everything collapsing and Meelis and Henri talked about the freedom that had exceeded “all the possible borders”. Yet, their high school time differed only by few years. During these years, changes could happen overnight, and those changes could also be enormous. However, in all cases cited above the respondents expressed the feeling that they were witnessing times of drastic changes.

In a situation where everything is collapsing and fading away, the level of uncertainty is rather high. One would expect that combined with sharp economic decline, these processes could cause disorientation or hopelessness in young people. However, though the actual economic conditions during the first stage of transition were rather tough, the memories of that period are treated under the rather positive terms of an opening society. Kristi's (1974) and Mart's (1972) interpretations are not unique in this respect:

Kristi (1974) This was... this was the end of the rouble-era. Very fun times. [...] very anarchic in the entire society and very strange things were possible.

Mart (1972) These were rather cool times... nothing was available, but you could do anything...

Although the economic hardships are mentioned as crucial in some phases of the life course, the overall attitude towards these times is depicted as positive (see also Vogt, 2005). In their narrated stories, the respondents depict

themselves as the ones who happened to be thrown into the middle of an interesting time. In other words, these things were seen as happening around them and like Cinderella or the youngest son of the miller, they had little influence over what happened. As Peeter (1974) put it: “one has to admit, [the high school time] happened to occur during a very interesting time”. This narrative strategy of depicting the time of the change as something that happened independently of them, is probably caused by their age. For one, they were not experienced enough to be worried about the future, but also, as most of them lived with their parents, they did not have to worry too much about the present either. They were in the life stage where they had to start building their life course, but not reconstruct it. Many adults at the time had to rebuild or rearrange their lives. In this context, Peeter reflects on his parents’ attitudes towards the change:

Peeter: Well... naturally, to me it seemed they were not keeping up with time. That they did not understand. Right now I think that I was of course unjust to them. In reality, their life was turned upside down. This is not easy. [...] I considered them to be cowardly and everything, but apparently, you see, this thing changed so fast, but they were thinking about where to get macaroni and stuff on the table, like, well, as always. To me, it was incomprehensible, I was far more optimistic towards the future compared to them.

Thus, the social position that they had during the change is probably one key by which to interpret their attitudes towards that time. However, even though Riina had to live alone and support herself already during the high school time, she also expressed her inability to understand the excitement of the elderly:

Riina (1973): For me it was a natural process, the way it was supposed to be. It would have been strange, if it had not been the way it was. /.../ We want to be independent, and this is normal and... how much one can talk about it, and why the older people are so excited about it. Was there any other way? I was glad and happy about it, waved the flag and all, and it was exuberant and nice. But the exaltation of the older people — what will happen now... So what could happen?

Here, perhaps a combination of different things comes into play. First, young people are often less worried about the future by nature compared to adults. Second, those young people had witnessed the change during their development years – as soon as they started to look around and get interested in



society, the society started to change. In other words, being socialised during the time of the change, the change became a normal state of things for them. Though they were not among those leading the grand changes, this atmosphere inspired many to start small-scale changes in their immediate surroundings. Riina, for example told me a story how she and her classmates initiated the dismissal of a geography teacher, who was mean to students, Kaido (1970) described how his class initiated closing down the Komsomol in his school, Hannes (1973) spoke how he refused to attend the class of sexual education (because he felt that what was taught was outdated) and how this led to a change in the subject after some battles with the school leadership. The overall atmosphere of change and questioning of the Soviet regime affected these young people and encouraged them to question their own surroundings and take steps to change them. In other words, they took initiative and had strong agency in the fields they operated in, even though (paradoxically enough) their narrative style sometimes would indicate they were bystanders.

Another interesting aspect which might have influenced their optimistic vision of the future with no worries is the notion of the certainty during the Soviet era (Vogt, 2005). The regulated social sphere created the feeling of security among its inhabitants. Though the rules were sometimes shaky and depended on social relations, social security was guaranteed: for example, unemployment was non-existent. Having been raised in such a society, those young people may have developed a disposition that one way or the other, things will work out. Combined with the positive attitude towards the changes, the respondents shared the feeling that there is not much to worry about:

Taavi (1972): At that time there were no fears, well, at least, regarding the future. Rather, at the present time, I have started to think about it more. Right now these fears have started to emerge. But... but... yes, at that time, there wasn't, really [...] Life proceeded by itself, so... so there were no such fears. Maybe those kinds of fears that you have to go somewhere again, do something, have to fill in some forms again or such things, well, the compulsory things, right. Maybe fear towards the things I did not want to do, but there were no other fears, no.

Merike (1974): I knew for certain that I will get accepted into the university, I will graduate from the university and after I will see what to do next, but I had no fears at all [towards the future]. I was relatively certain that my life will turn out well. So unbelievable as it may sound, but I never thought that something could go wrong.

Both respondents reflected that they did not have much of a vision about what they would become in the future – they were sure that in due course, life would show this to them. The narrative scheme depicting oneself in the framework of getting carried through life is pretty common. It is always a matter of speculation, how much this depiction owes to the social surroundings around these people at the time of coming of age. With any age group there are perhaps those who have fears towards the future and those who do not, as well as there always being people who let the flow lead them through life and those who take the lead. What is perhaps special about this age group is that they had no clue where society was leading them, so their aspirations were not based on solid ground. Their plans changed often, but frequently into something that they had not even known had existed. Thus, though they can use the narrative strategy similar to Cinderella's in the fairy tale, in many cases they actually had to take the lead and actively shape their life course. This form of agency can still be depicted in their narratives in the form of a fairy appearing in the kitchen offering to turn a pumpkin into a carriage. One such example is Hannes (1973), who describes how he got his first job during his university studies as a marketing director of what later became one of the most popular journals in Estonia:

Interviewer: So how did this idea develop [to establish a new journal]?

Hannes: The idea came like this. I met a person on a street and he asked, what I was doing. So I answered, like, you see, I go to school, I am involved in AIESEC, and he asked if I had some spare time. I said, I don't know, it depends for what. He told me: See, I'd like to do such a thing [establish a journal], so I said, sure, let's do it.

All this is not to suggest that none of my respondents had any plans for the future. Many among them knew what they would become and actually achieved it. Marek (1973), for instance, decided to become a veterinarian and wondered with contempt how contemporary young people do not know what they want to become. In a similar vein, Kristel (1973) knew that she would go to study law and become one of the actors in the court of law; Merje (1977) fulfilled her dream to become an actress. All of them achieved their goals and are working in their chosen fields as of the time of writing. All these professions, however, existed also during the Soviet time and the social position of these professions has not significantly changed. However, some of the respondents had dreams to become something that had a different position in Western societies compared

to the Soviet, or something that did not exist yet in the newly (re)independent Estonia. Meelis (1973) for instance knew that he wanted to study anthropology (and become an anthropologist), but there was no such study field available in Estonian universities at the time he started his studies in university. Tanel (1973) and Kristi (1974) wanted to have professions which they claimed they would not have taken up if the previous regime had not collapsed:

Tanel (1973): It seemed to me that I wanted to become a diplomat. And well, how realistic it was at that time, or, well... I did not know how to estimate this. This was almost as utopian as the will to become an astronaut. Well, maybe a bit more realistic. [...] I was absolutely sure that one way or another I would achieve it [become a diplomat] and there's no need to worry about it. Really, the fact that some time, say, in five years, I would have to work, it didn't make me... Well, unemployment as such didn't seem to be possible at all. So, the problem the young are facing today, that there is no work, well, it was incomprehensible.

Kristi (1974): I was to go to Paris, become famous and rich, but I am not sure how serious I was about this even myself at that point... Maybe it was just meant to brag... [...]

Interviewer: So what did you want to study, then?

Kristi: Oh, fashion design. I was to become a Pierre Cardin. (laughs)

At the time of the interviews, Meelis was a real estate businessman (after studying theology and working briefly in a museum), Tanel a high state official (after studying history and working also as a journalist) and Kristi was a free-lance journalist (after studying fashion design). None of them regretted their choices or the fact that their dreams did not become true. Katrin (1975) reflected on her experience rather typically in this respect. She chose to apply to the art science department: a new specialty about which she found out quite by chance. As it happened, the new specialty turned out to be extremely popular:

Katrin (FG): ... and at that time it had the highest competition, approximately 10 applying for one position, which was one of the biggest in the entire Estonia. Mother listened to the radio and was very proud [that I was accepted]. I was somehow not excited at all, I thought if I don't get accepted, then I won't. At that time, university education was not so important as it is today, that you absolutely have to get there. Then, you could have easily gone to some vocational school or to work, that would not have seemed to be so odd.

Hence, Katrin refers to the overall social atmosphere at the time when higher education it was not so important, indicating that in contemporary world the university education has become more vital. At the same time, she admitted that she had no idea what she would become after graduation. In her interview, she even repeatedly referred to the job allocation system that was rooted during the Soviet era (the system when every university graduate was allocated to his/her future job), while talking about her confusion after graduating her studies. Thus, in a sense, she is a good illustration to the previously stated circumstance that these people had grown up during the Soviet certainty and did not worry much about the future. Only when she graduated she acknowledged that she actually had to think what to become, since the old system was long gone.

In the biographies of the respondent group, the characters remind us a bit of the miller's son of the fairytale Puss in Boots: someone (or something) who comes into their lives and shows them a way to become someone they had not dreamt of. Yet, while in the fairy tale the Puss in Boots leads the way, in their stories he just shows the path and the journey is taken and the battles fought by the heroes themselves. Many among the respondents studied fields that had been newly established (art science, political science, recreation studies), many among them studied in fields, the content of which was much under change. Quite a few respondents described a situation where they thought they knew much more than their professors in the university (in fields such as economy, marketing, computer technology, recreation studies). The sense that everything is new and the world is open seemed to be prevailing. Like Kristi, who intended to become as rich and famous as Pierre Cardin (even if somewhat jokingly), there were others, who had rather naïve ambitions for their lives. As Janek (1971) describes, some dreams were so high that they were doomed to fall apart. He ponders on the ambitions of the newly established music bands:

Janek: This was a time when you could go abroad, but it still meant that you can play [music] in some village pub. This is still, like, on the border. I remember an interview given by [a band]. Like how their goal is to reach top 20 in England. This was a kind of romantic confidence, that we will work our way through. [...] But all this somehow died away and failed.

While Janek brought also other examples in these lines (how the euphoric atmosphere of opening was greeted and how this influenced the dreams to skyrocket but how they fell afterwards), this was not a prevailing line of narrative among this particular sample. Moving towards the dreams like becoming

a Pierre Cardin could open other doors which were not intended to be opened before (or known to exist, for that matter). This was the time when experience in any new field was scarce, and young people with not much expertise were recruited often: their only advantage being that they were capable of quick learning and working long hours. Some respondents described going to job interviews but failing to accomplish the test they were assigned. Ave (1973) reflected that she applied for a position where computer skills were required. She had no such experience but had asked her boyfriend the night before how the machine is handled. Based on those verbal instructions (the boyfriend did not have a computer at hand to show how his instructions work), she tried to impress her employers but said that she did not manage very well. She was hired anyhow, because, as her colleagues later confessed, they wanted “to give her a chance”. In a similar vein, Hannes (1973) told that during his job interview he was asked to solve an accountant task, in which he failed miserably but was hired because of his confident attitude. Thus, failing as such may not have always meant failure in general. The structures were in the making and the ones who had been in labour market for years may have had equal chances to those who had none but were enthusiastic and keen to learn (note: Peeter’s quote on how his parent’s world was turned upside down).

One of such colourful examples is the story by Toomas (1975) who was one of the few respondents who started his own business during his high school years.

Toomas: Well, something had to be done, we understood well that this is the right time. Everyone was doing something. Then we established the company and then we had all those great plans, thought that maybe we should start importing computers from America, there was some fuss around the computers, there were none. So then, in a high school office, we typed with an old typing machine on faded Russian-style paper [indicating its Soviet origin] some kind of a text in English based on our own best knowledge of the language at that time. It was full of mistakes, but we didn’t want to show it to our English teacher and then we sent it off by fax to Bill Gates, I think, and then, in the style that: we have here excellent possibilities to represent you. But then it didn’t go very well, there were no answers to our letters...

Toomas was not frustrated by his defeat in attracting Bill Gates’ attention with his flawed English. He searched for other options for his newly established company. Being friendly with his school headmaster, the latter confessed to him and his friends that the school needed renovating, but the budget would only

allow for the repairs of the main hall. Toomas and his best friend promised to renovate the entire school within the budget limits and they established a company for that purpose only. That the headmaster favoured a newly-established company run by his seventeen-year-old students over professional contractors demonstrates a huge level of trust in Toomas and his friend (especially considering that Toomas had no experience at all in renovation projects and the company had been founded recently). On the other hand, it also shows how little faith the headmaster put in professional companies and their pricing policies. However, it also characterises the overall atmosphere of the mixed up relationships during the transition time. Toomas managed to finish the renovation on time, though not without setbacks – he and his friend had finally to take the paint brushes in their own hands. Also, this project was not really profitable. However, his next projects were and he is a very wealthy man today.

Many of the respondents to this study achieved a lot due to their attitude that did not allow them to get distracted by fears of failing or doors closing. As shown in previous chapter, the social mobility among this age group was pretty high. Judging from the interviews, much of this high mobility is owed to the favourable social conditions, as many describe their careers as something that happened to them rather than something they initiated. Karin (1976) told that she started her career in a European-funded foundation as a secretary. She applied for the post because she had heard from her friend that it was available. Within few years she ended up as a project coordinator. While in Estonia, such quick careers were perceived as common at the time, it was not so common in Europe.

Karin: I dealt with issues concerning European Union while I was 22 years old, you see, though I did not have even an MA degree. I remember when I went to European Commission (I had to attend the meetings on monthly basis) to represent Estonia, and then I slipped in there, being 22 years old, while the majority of the others were some geronts aged around 70, some kind of professors, you see. They looked at me with their mouths open, like, who was I. I remember very well, because we were late to the first or the second meeting, and then I entered the door and there, at the corner, sat the Belgian or Dutch representative. And when I began to sneak in, he said to me “Oh, what bliss, coffee is served finally” (laughs). I blushed, like. Took my bag and stumbled to my place, searching where the sign “Estonia” is while all the people followed me with astonishment in their eyes.

Karin ended her story by saying that the quick career is a common feature for her entire age group, but she stressed also that her own age group was not among those who built these systems within which they could make a quick career. Though being too young to establish the systems, they were still part of the processes of reconstructing society.

However, while not being old enough to establish the base of the new society, they were the ones to establish new transition patterns to adulthood. Some of these patterns have been described in more detail in previous chapter. One such pattern was for instance, studying abroad. Previous age cohorts studying during the Soviet era had no such possibility. Establishing patterns, however, is not always easy as previous generations may not understand new ways.

Merje (1977): and then I went... I went to MA studies and got a [name of a] stipend to [name of a city in Europe and name of the school]. And then I was in [the name of the city] for a year, which was very, very good. At that time it was so rare, so unusual, not to go to work [after studies] when you have a job offer, right now it is so usual, most of the people don't take up jobs if the offers [are not attractive and] become free-lancers. Like, one of my professors asked if I was not afraid to miss the train: the others go to work, start working, and you will miss the train. Later, I have been thinking: how could she possibly ask this kind of question? I went to [name of the city], [...] which was an absolute centre of European culture. I started working a year later, so what? How could she ask something like that, how? And she herself had studied in Moscow.

Yet, she decided to go and was happy about it. However, as she reflected, this happened before Estonia joined the European Union, her chances to work after graduating her MA studies were not as good back then as they would be now. Otherwise, she might have stayed in Europe and started working there. While pondering on her unused life chances she also stressed that she is actually glad things turned out the way they did as right now she would guess she would have been unhappy living in a foreign country.

To conclude, the respondents compile a contradictory sample not only looking at the numbers, but also listening to their narratives. In many ways, they depict themselves as bystanders to the change, yet also talking about the things they initiated at an early age. They tended to lack a clear vision of their future, but were mainly not worried about it. They lived in a confusing time but were fascinated by it. Often, they describe their life course as if they had been thrown into this social situation without being able to affect its course, but they also describe this situation as opening a lot of doors for them.

## Discussion and Summary

Returning to the initial question, how are the tales of the heroes of my book then narrated? At a first glance, it all looks like a fairytale such as Cinderella or Puss in Boots: this generation's story often begins when they find themselves in the midst of a (somewhat) unfortunate situation: a state collapsing, transition routes changing, rules unclear and future uncertain. Their stories appear usually not without a fairy or a Puss: someone or something that opens a door, shows a new path or offers a pumpkin turned into a carriage. Therefore, at first glance, their stories may seem to be narrated as if one of those fairy tale characters: with little agency from their side. However, as the carriage may turn back to a pumpkin (the social scene is always changing), they have been forced to become active themselves to achieve something before this happens. Thus, taking a closer look, one can see that as the opportunities emerged, they often grabbed them and did not return from a ball to go back to their kitchen and hope for the prince to come and find them. Furthermore, in the overall atmosphere of change they often initiated changes themselves, even if only in their own small field which perhaps did not have a crucial impact for society at large (in their schools, for example). They also established a number of patterns of transition to adulthood. They were socialised in change and that normalised a state of uncertainty for them. In other words, their agency was strong even though the style of narration would often presume that it was not.

In order to place these narrative styles within a broader theoretical context, Jens O. Zinn's (2005) types of coping with uncertainties seem to offer the most insight. As was noted in the previous chapter, it is crucial to understand the perception of time when trying to analyse this specific group of people. Biographical time and the time of social developments interact and intertwine and oftentimes the basis for these relationships is formed during childhood or the formative years. The perception of time depends on how the future is seen and how uncertainties about the future are depicted. Therefore, it becomes important how these uncertainties are addressed – in other words, how a person copes with them.

Zinn has argued that human nature deals with uncertainty depending on how social reality is constructed, and that individual biographical actions depend on how uncertainties are perceived or whether they are acknowledged at all. He has proposed five different modes of uncertainties based on whether the uncertainties are perceived as negative or positive, or the way in which people cope with them. The modes are: *traditionalisation*, *approximation*,



*optimisation, autonomisation and contextualisation*. In the first two modes, the future is perceived as secure since an individual is not prepared for negative consequences and does not see them as dangers (Zinn, 2005, pp. 85–87). In both cases, uncertainties are tied to norm systems; in the *traditionalisation* mode, the future is depicted as relying on social norms, while in the *approximation* mode, it depends on personal norms. For example, in the first mode people do not prepare for divorce when married because this is socially not accepted. In the second case, divorce is considered impossible because of personal norms. Either way, people do not prepare for negative consequences. In the third, *optimisation* mode, an uncertain future may have its risks. The risks are clearly sensed as a part of competitive struggle (*Ibid.*, pp. 88). In other words, the world is seen in terms of market economic principles and people calculate uncertainties as risks which one should be prepared for, but should avoid at all costs. For instance, one has to be an attractive spouse in order to compete potential threats to one's marriage. In the fourth, *autonomisation* mode, people construct their value systems in conflict with established norms and fighting against these norms is seen as a form of personal development. In the fifth, *contextualisation* mode, the uncertainties are a mixture of the danger (as seen in mode 1 and 2) and risk types of logic. The uncertainties are not prepared for (similarly to the first two modes) but, when they appear, they are treated as opportunities for new actions and experiences. This understanding leads to a specific reinterpretation of the situation at hand, and certainty and uncertainty intermingle (*Ibid.*, p. 93).

These types of uncertainties probably exist in any age group and have existed in every era. However, in terms of modelling social reality, it is also possible to apply the types (though certainly simplifying the matter) to certain eras or age groups/social groups. The specific social conditions during one's socialisation process (into social structures) affect the way (social) uncertainties are perceived. For every given cohort, the socialising conditions differ. They also may differ along class or social stratification lines. Thus, such typologisation is always somewhat arbitrary, and surely individual qualities contribute and influence perceptions as much as social surroundings do. Yet, the shift in time perception described above and the change in society must have moulded the perception of uncertainties, too, as this is closely connected with the conception of time. It is therefore fascinating to take a closer look at how this particular time may have shaped this specific group and their strategies for coping with uncertainties.

This group spent their childhood during the Soviet era, at a time when certain behavioural and institutional patterns had long been established and functioned without changing much. The future (in the society in general) was perceived as certain, though there was not much hope for a better future (even though the state communicated a hopeful message). Henri Vogt (2005) has called this “closed certainty”. During the teenage years, when the respondent group started to take an interest in society, the society was transforming. The Estonian community was excited about those changes, sharing mutual visions of a positive (though vague) future. The future vision changed from (closed) certainty to (open) uncertainty (Vogt 2005), and the young (i.e. the respondent group) felt they had a certain part to play in this future – it gave them a feeling of (passive) participation. However, as they had focused on social processes just recently, they may have valued the change differently. For the young, change was something which had to happen and was normal. In other words, change as a state of being was something they saw as natural.

They did not perceive the uncertainties negatively, accepting them as part of their lives. Young people, being on the threshold of their adult lives, face an uncertain future anyway. The only perception of time they had had up to then was that of a safe and certain future, and thus they had a sense that nothing could go wrong. In a way, certainty and uncertainty coexisted and were intertwined in their perception of the future – a combination that Jens Zinn (2005) has called the *contextualisation mode* of perceiving uncertainties.

How did this *contextualisation mode* operate in the lives of this specific respondent group? Obviously, there was no clear pattern of behaviour. Yet, there were some traits that most of these respondents shared in their biographies. The easiest way to explain this is in the framework of structure/agency. The structural network of a “certain” transition to adulthood was transforming, yet the conception of individual choice biography (the model of transition to adulthood under late modernity; Beck, 1992) was not common. Thus, respondents did not plan much ahead. In their case, their retrospective self-reflection of their individual agency was low; they still had the *habitus* of relying on structures, depicting their life events as just having happened to them, rather than making things happen themselves (see also Grishakova and Kazjulja, 2008; Saar and Unt, 2010).

The stories told by the respondents indicate that career options were not always very clear. They either did not have a clear idea about what they wanted to do, or stuck to professions familiar from the Soviet regime (e.g. an accountant, seamstress or maths teacher). Many of this study’s respondents

eventually did not end up in the fields they had imagined they would, but they were not unhappy with their decisions. They depicted this as something that was normal, as life always offered other choices. The structures that were changing provided new opportunities, and were favourable for their upward social mobility. At the same time, due to this experience of changing structures which opened up opportunities, they did not see the uncertainties that were to emerge in the future as risks, but rather as opportunities. One of the important factors in the development of this *contextualisation mode* was the experience of scarcity in the respondents' teen years. The economic situation at the beginning of the 1990s was so desperate that the progress of the later years (and improvement in the economic status of the respondents) was remarkable.

This model of perceiving uncertainties is probably not universal and may not reflect the way this respondent group perceived the uncertainties in their personal relationships. Jens O. Zinn developed his modes from interviews which relayed how individuals constructed personal relationships, and how they perceived uncertainty, for example in marriage or partnerships. In the current study the *contextualisation model* is applied to a collective, an age group, rather than to individuals. The interest of this study was not primarily focused on how this group perceives personal relationships, but how they reflect and conceptualise society (the social aspects of their lives, their working lives etc).

## 5. Constructing a generation

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Travelling recently by a budget airline, I was surprised to find a text in the aircraft that addressed the topic of generation. It read as follows:

*The I can't wait to go generation.*

*The early riser for the morning cab, last minute packing, full of excitement generation.*

*The head first into water, wine or work generation.*

*The nip over, seal the deal, back for story time generation.*

*The walk until you're lost, find a quaint spot, strangers become friends generation.*

*The we've been coming here for years, but still fall in love generation.*

*The I don't want to go home, let's stay longer generation.*

*The back at the office, staring out the window, let's do it all again generation.*

*The everyone doing it their way generation.*

*The more places, more choices, more often generation.*

*This is generation easyJet.<sup>25</sup>*

I have no means to find out what exactly the producers of this advertisement had in mind or what the particular message of this ad was. Reading it through many times, I thought it could address particular age groups – contemporary young people, for instance – who are in a constant hurry (but efficient: seal the deal quickly) and thirsty for new experiences. On the other hand, they dedicate themselves head over heels to their vacations and know how to take time slowly: by walking until getting lost and drinking as much wine as they can. With a second thought, I gathered that perhaps for an airline company, it would be wise to address as many target groups as they can, so obviously the young could

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<sup>25</sup> See <http://www.easyjet.com/generationeasyJet> [accessed 30 March 2015].

possible not be the only target group (if at all, considering their scarce economic capital in contemporary Europe). So, eventually I decided that it addresses every age group that loves travelling and each should find a specific sentence which would work for them particularly well. Or, while reading they would like to become like the ones that the ad describes. In this case, “Generation EasyJet”, would be defined in a totally different way compared to what we usually associate with the term. It ignores the chronological age aspect, which has been the basis for the definition of a generation for a long time. It suggests that a generation has no particular age borders, but is rather defined by a lifestyle and *habitus*. Furthermore, rather than leaving an old and inappropriate concept aside, it takes the notion of “generation” and aims to creatively rework its meanings suggesting that being part of a generation is identifying with the contemporary lifestyle. To be sure, the authors of the ad are probably not the first ones to associate life style with the term “generation” and probably not the last. The labelling of rather large cohorts as one generation (sometimes stretching over a hundred years) can also be found in history books the further back in time one goes. However, my impression has been that, in recent times, generational lines have become narrower rather than broader as every year-cohort claims to be a whole lot different from the previous one. This attempt at framing a vast array of age groups for contemporaries in generational terms seemed rather odd to me.

By bringing up this example I intended to show that generation as a concept is one that can be met on a daily basis, in everyday encounters and situations which we have not anticipated. Generation as a notion is important and popular, and people love to use it even in situations when chronological age as its base is ignored. They simply redefine the term. Therefore, generation as a concept is constantly in flux. It is a concept which is often constructed *for* us as well as *by* us: we identify with the constructions if we feel it appealing. Also, and perhaps more importantly, use of this example aimed to show that generation as a concept is contextual. In different life situations, people identify with different generations, based on the specific context: in this case, the habit to travel and enjoy life. No doubt, the generation born during the 1970s can be described by many keywords expressed in this ad. Yet, there is also much more to that age group.

The following chapter is going to reveal some more aspects of this age group, and to sketch out the lines according to which the members of this group depict their own age group and draw generational boundaries in chronological terms. However, this attempt to sketch the essence of this “generation” should

be taken in the same context as the ad above: while many members of the age group would agree with the description, not every sentence applies to everyone. The description, then, should be taken as a list of characterising sentences which in its entirety describes the respondent group, but not necessarily all the points apply to every single one of them. It is also important to stress that generational characteristics are highly contextual: in different situations, different qualities of a generation become important. Thus, the following cannot be a conclusive portrait of an age group or the entire 1970s generation, but should rather be seen as similar to a portrait drawing of a street artist: the most characteristic features are there to make the face recognisable, yet it still differs a great deal from a photograph. Moreover, as different people may see different features of a face to be crucial, it is pretty common with such drawings that some find the portrait extremely similar while the others barely recognise the person depicted.

In chapter two a generational portrait was drawn from the perspective of “location”, thus searching for patterns in the macro trends which would distinguish this cohort from the previous or the next. The statistical data did not, however, provide a definitive answer to the question of whether the 1970s age cohort represents its own generation with a significantly different “location” (in Mannheim’s sense) from previous or subsequent age cohorts. However, what the numbers revealed was that people born during this decade started particular transitional (life course) patterns which were different from those of the previous cohort (and more similar to those of later cohorts). At the same time, other life course patterns paralleled more those of previous cohorts. In short, they seemed to be a cohort in-between: similar to others, yet different. Hence, a question arises as to whether this age cohort forms a distinct generation or it is just a twilight zone. Looking at this question relying on the qualitative approach seems to be the way to provide a more complex background to this question, thus focusing on the generational consciousness and self-perception of this age group.

## Analysis – reflexive generation construction

There is no clear definition of the length of a generation (Kelly, 2007, p. 172; Lovell, 2007, p. 5, 7). Mannheim states that a generation can embrace 15–30 years (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p. 24), but these parameters are never strict – in any age cohort there may be forerunners of the next generation who are marginalised during their own time (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p. 50). Some

theorists tend to count generations in coherence with reproduction cycles (Katus, Puur and Sakkeus, 2005), or reduce the interval between generations to only 10 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics; cited in Wyn and Woodman, 2006).

Subjective generational lines are problematic as they depend not only on time, but also on the age of respondents and their current life stage.<sup>26</sup> In the interviews, respondents were asked to define the borders of their own generation and to distinguish themselves from older and younger cohorts by pointing at specific differences between them. In many cases, they drew the borders somewhere five years older and five years younger, without giving it much thought. However, when explaining their answers, some shifted the borders further away and others drew them closer. In many cases, especially during the focus group interviews, the parameters kept shifting, depending on the context of reasoning. This confirms the previously stated phenomenon that in different life situations, different characteristics of a generation become important.

The respondents of individual interviews provided clearer answers compared to the respondents of the focus groups. The difference in clarity was due to the format of the focus groups, which as Bergnéhr (2007) suggests is the most suitable form of the interview to generate a discussion amongst group members. This format meant the parameters defining a generation varied according to the contexts of the interviewees' responses. Nevertheless, the responses indicate that the Soviet era becomes crucial in defining both younger and older generations. For once, the presence or absence of any memories about the Soviet period and the time of the restoration of independence seem to be one marker which distinguishes this group from younger cohorts (usually defined as born approximately from 1980, sometimes from 1985). On the other hand, the experience of having been an adult already during the Soviet period delineated this group from older cohorts (depending on the respondent, these were defined as born approximately before 1970). In other words, turbulent changes in society were used as the basic reference point according to which these people construct their reflexive generation. There were also exceptions to this pattern, especially with regard to the boundaries defining the older

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<sup>26</sup> For instance, as some respondents pointed out, someone aged 26 who does not yet have children may see those who have children as being in the previous generation, and those still studying, as being in the next generation. Younger people, wanting to be treated as adults, may need to identify themselves with the older generation (with "adults") who occupy strategic positions in society, while sometimes elder generations may prefer to be identified with younger, more active, generations.

generation.<sup>27</sup> Similar to Grünberg's (2009, p. 3) findings, the distinctions vis-à-vis the younger generation were altogether clearer than with regard to the previous, "older" generation.

It is important to mention, though, that not all respondents had clear opinions on generational consciousness or borders. While some respondents seemed to have waited for this question and claimed that the borders of the generations were very clear for them, the others found the question difficult to answer or even irrelevant. As Katrin (1975, FG) put it: "I don't believe in generations!" However, though she insisted that political views, similar educational backgrounds and interests are more important than generations, discussing the topic further, she admitted that there actually were some features that distinguish her generation (from earlier cohorts). In other words, though seeing some differences between their reflexive generation and the others, the need of the concept of generation was sometimes questioned:

Ketlin (1973): I don't know. I don't know how to answer that. In a sense that, as I said, for me the type of person becomes important, if you have this contact, if you have a mutual understanding of principles, dispositions, main truths, values. Something like that. Rather than identifying with some generation...

Often, the interviewees' first reaction was to deny the existence of generations in their lives because of the lack of generational conflict:

Sven (1978): Well, I don't know. Do you mean, if I sense [being part of a generation]... I cannot say exactly... no... no... I don't think I perceive it really. I have never... I have never... in a sense... felt any cleavage or... or... communication conflict either with older or younger. Perhaps also because I have a sister ten years senior.

After such answers, I usually asked if generation as a concept meant conflict for them and in most cases, after thinking further on the subject, the respondents said that actually this was not the case. In a similar vein, Sven admitted that there are several generational characteristics he would attribute to his age cohort. Along

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<sup>27</sup> Two individual interview respondents defined the older generation by demographic life cycles, placing the earlier year in their parents' generation. By contrast, two of the FGs shifted constantly to the borderline between the older generation, depending on the context of reasoning sometimes around 1965–1970, but other times around 1950–1969. One FG respondent, born in 1970, not only claimed to be part of the 1960s generation, but also felt that those born from 1973 onwards were the next generation.



with others, he admitted that thinking about one's generation is also a question of your own age. Being 35 and having become a father recently made him think about his age group and the fact that contemporary youth may be different.

These extracts show, that generational lines are not only highly subjective, but also subjectively contextual. Conceptualisation of a generation depends on one's life stage, but also on specific everyday situations, the angle of a particular line of thinking, or asking questions. Many had not thought about the lines of generational conceptualisation prior to the interviews, however, when asked to think about different life situations, they came up with clear lines of distinguishing a generation. The following analysis will show how the respondents construct their generations and on what basis they draw generational boundaries. In this context, a number of categories can be distinguished to make more sense of their reasoning. Thus, boundaries are drawn based on (a) structural and social network features; (b) discursive features; and (c) features based on value orientations. This categorisation is by no means conclusive, as all the features are interdependent and it is always hard to decide which feature is the most critical. However, it nevertheless offers some way of organising the borders of generational construction.

## Structural and social network features

As pointed out before, when social change coincides with a group's coming of age, it can become also crucial in forming a generational consciousness. In our case, the changes that took place around the year 1990 and thereafter should be critical in forming generational identity. Indeed, many of the respondents confirmed this assumption. They also confirmed the notion of being in-between: of not being yet the new generation, but also not the old, either. This feeling of in-betweenness can become for some also a defining feature of their generation:

Interviewer: Have you ever thought about... do you feel you are part of some generation?

Tarmo (1976): Yes, but I... Rather I... quite naturally, I don't know, sort of the background of Hemingway, who thought of himself as, what was it... a dead...

Interviewer: ... lost...

Tarmo: Yes, lost souls, right. In a sense I am not... that this generation emerged because it was a time of a war, even two wars, that somehow this generation that gets in-between, they don't know how to be... that something... And empty and senseless...

Tarmo went on talking about how his generation knows some ideals and traditions that have existed for a long time among Estonians while at the same time they have lived through the “cowboy capitalism” of the 1990s, when the rules were in the making and thus many followed the principle that the winner takes it all. Thus, he concludes:

Tarmo: I belong to a kind of stupid generation, who, on the one hand /.../ like, go to bloody joint singings [refers to national choir song festivals, traditional values] and then they remember some things with delight, on the other hand they are like, stranglers, kill each other.

In line with Tarmo, one might recall Marko’s (1974) comparison (referred to in the previous chapter) of these times with those described in Remarque’s books, where everything fades away and collapses. While Tarmo sees his position of witnessing the “interregnum” between the old and the new times as a source of emptiness or lack of meaning, the others do not share his view very eagerly. Rather, while sensing their position as being in-between, many tend to treat this as a resource. Sven, who initially did not think he feels as part of a generation, stresses that because of having the experience of being in-between, he has something that others do not:

Sven (1978): ... this... our generation maybe... well, there has been a lot of talk about it also in the media, that just we are so to say the ones who in a way have seen both times, right, that maybe those who are older from us, they are in a way in this... how do I put this... they are... when you were an adult already during the Soviet time, then perhaps you were already somehow... somehow you saw this thing from a different perspective from us, since we were in a relative childhood or in our youth and got away so to say. Or... well, we actually *did* get away. So I think that those who live today and have not seen that at all, those perhaps are not able to value these things, the way our generation can. You know, having an independent state and being a patriot.

Thus, Sven, along with other interviewees mentioned the political turn as a defining force of their generation (see also Eisenstadt, 1988, p. 91) and the source of distinction in one way or other with the other age cohorts (note that he also admits that what has been told in the media has its influence on this opinion as well). Many were aware that this “inventory experience” (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p. 42–44; Misztal, 2003, p. 85) was crucial in forming their social and generational identity, thus mirroring Lovell’s observation that

“[f]or not only do generations make history, it is also the case that history makes generations. The very concept of generation implies chronological consciousness, a sense of one’s own unique position in history” (2007, p. 8). An individual’s personality becomes crystallised during their youth and the social circumstances of being incorporated into social structures are essential to this process (Eisenstadt, 1988, p. 94).

Several respondents stated that (what many defined as) the chaotic 1990s, defined the “1970s generation” as creative, adaptable to changes and adjustable to new social contexts. In contrast, the younger generations were said to be prone to taking things for granted, leading a rather organised life, tending to be more passive and having less initiative to plan ahead.

Toomas (1975): I remember when in Estonia, you could establish your own company with three hundred crowns [approximately 30 USD] and in principle, you could do just about anything. It was very.... all you needed was initiative or to be entrepreneurial to... to achieve something. Today, the model of the old and the kind of established world is like... different. Today even if you are active... but then you go to university, maybe even until your PhD, or at least until your MA. And then, maybe in some very good foreign university, then you come and settle at some highly paid job. But during our time it was, like, be yourself proactive, then you can achieve, like, just about anything.

Toomas, as we remember from the previous chapter, was the one who started his own business already during high school and though being enrolled in university several times, never managed to graduate. The structural conditions of having many possibilities were a common feature on which to base the generational construction. The society was opening, possibilities and opportunities that never existed before, were emerging and thus, the age group that was born in the 1970s was able to make use of the opportunities which were unavailable to previous age cohorts. Yet, while the younger ones may have even more opportunities, many claim that they do not know how to appreciate it. One respondent who was the third child in the family of seven children (with two siblings her senior by six and eight years and four siblings her younger) defined herself as different from the others:

Anneli (1976): You know, I actually *am* different. Take for instance, the possibilities. I already had possibilities, the two older ones did not, and the younger ones do not understand that well, they have *always* had them.

## The 1970s

This line of thought was also expressed by Riina, who had sisters almost a decade younger. The conceptualisation of possibilities is pretty broad among the respondents. Many have in mind structural options such as studying abroad, travelling and having freedom to consume, and the material possibilities that they could not afford as children. Moreover, the structural conditions provided by technology were referred to (see also Siibak 2009) – young people have more information via the internet and are less likely to visit libraries or buy books and their social networks are based more on virtual networks compared to older age cohorts. While some indicated that since the younger ones do not know how to appreciate these possibilities, they are more passive, the others suggested that the younger ones are often more open. For instance, Ave (1973) admitted that she clearly envied the younger ones for this openness. Thus, interestingly enough, many respondents gave ambiguous constructions about the younger generation (take the welfare society for granted and are passive or are very open and active because of the possibilities the welfare society offers). However, several interviewees admitted that the younger generation has fewer opportunities to achieve the upward social mobility of their own generation, because the situation with the job market is tougher, unemployment is higher and there are fewer positions available. This, as many respondents believed, this has also influenced the younger generation to be less inspired by work and more interested in leisure.

Kristjan (1973, FG): I might be romanticising things, but I dare say that we do some things out of some inner calling or mission [...] there is one contrasting point [with the young], which is in a way justified. It is that everything is seen as some kind of a project, which has some technical start and end and which can be accomplished technically within the frame of some kind of rules. [...] But that the things have contexts, that some kinds of synergies exist in human relations, which also play and have to be considered when taking decisions and how things have been and... [they do not understand]

This extract is also a good illustration of the construction of a generation on the principle of age. The young always seem to the older people to be shallower and less experienced in detecting the contexts. However, there seems to be more to it. Many of the respondents started their work life during a time when both institutions and markets were restructured. As we saw in chapter two, most of them “happened” to achieve senior level positions right after the graduation or during their university years, which gave them the feeling of actually taking

part in the restructuring of society. This line of thought is also expressed by Karin, who stated:

Karin (1976): Perhaps this enormous belief in one's abilities, because we lived during a period where you can put yourself on trial tremendously a lot. And for the contemporary young, it is only possible to a limit, they can't put themselves on trial everywhere and always. We were often given such tasks that were obviously beyond our abilities, since there was nobody else to give them to. That this self-confidence and I think, a kind of preparedness for a risk actually, this characterises the ones born in the 1960s and the 1970s.

In this extract, Karin refers to the similarities with the older cohort in terms of structural opportunities in the labour market. However, she also makes a clear distinction between herself and the ones born during the 1960s based on structural lines. The older generation was, according to her and other respondents, those who had rearranged society, fought for independence and participated (more) in the re-structuring of the economy:

Riina (1973): Those whose birth year starts with six [1960s], they are the other generation. These are older. These are the ones who could privatise something and were, say, like... I met the [new re-established] republic so that I didn't understand a thing, what comes now, what has happened, what private businesses and... But I feel that those whose year of birth starts with 6, they were in the business and they were arranging everything. Like [an example name] and those guys. Yes.

While Riina refers to those arranging businesses, Merje points out the same phenomenon in the political field:

Merje (1977): I think that the border goes where... approximately where [a name of a politician born in 1960] is and who are around 50 right now, the generation, who, when the transition began, hopped on the train (*haarasid härjal sarvist*), who were at the time... well... we were 10–11, those who were twenty. Who started to do things. Who erected all those parties, who brought out the blue-black-white [national flag] and the students who started all these... well, this is the point, I think, they were the first to come to the steering wheel, we were so-to-say the next, who rode on the waves of the real estate boom of the beginning of the 2000s... so I would say, a decade, though they say that a generation is a cycle of 20 years, right?

In a sense, these respondents refer to the older age cohort as the “strategic” generation by having structural chances to privatise Soviet enterprises and start businesses that did not exist before. A *leitmotif* mentioned often about the older group is that they had the chance to attend university student working camps during summer and to build social capital there, which in turn helped them during the restructuring of the economy during the 1990s.

The lack of experience of anarchy was also mentioned when talking about the older ones – their formative years fell within the strict framework of Soviet rule. “We haven’t functioned as adults during Soviet time,” as Kristi (1974) pointed out. The experience of “functioning” as adults in the system enables the older generation to know the “true face” of the Soviet regime. The experience of the Soviet era for those born in the 1970s is the one of a happy and playful childhood. They had never felt real fear, had not experienced repressions, nor had to worry about managing everyday food supplies or build up social networks in order to supply the family with household essentials or get opportunity to have a vacation abroad. In contrast, the older generation had to deal with all the downsides of the occupational regime.

A dominant theme about structural conditions influencing generation-formation was the Soviet army.

Peeter (1974) ... the generational line is very clear. The generation before us... me... this I can say about boys... men... they were the ones who, for instance, struggled with [invitations to] Russian army. I didn’t any more. I was called to army, but these invitations went straight to dustbin, you see.<sup>28</sup>

Here, the respondent hints at the repressive system that he no longer had to fear. Conscription into the Soviet military was greatly feared and in order to avoid being “called up”, young men were prepared to fake illnesses or even insanity (note the stories of Janek and Hannes in the previous chapter). During the 1980s, conscripts could be sent to life threatening environments like the war zones of Afghanistan and Nagorno Karabakh or Chernobyl to demolish the nuclear power station after the catastrophe. Hence, as some respondents concluded, the older generation regarded the new regime with different values and was, as a result of their Soviet experiences, even more patriotic.

Structural social conditions are critical in defining the respondents’ subjective generational construction as well as the “generalised others” (Corsten, 1999,

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<sup>28</sup> The last conscripts of the Red Army were born in 1971–1972.

p. 260; Grünberg, 2009, p. 3). The respondents acknowledged the importance of generation as a “locality” as well as an “actuality” (how they and the other generations have negotiated the new emerging structural conditions). However, several indicators measured and considered important by social scientists and youth researchers when constructing generation were left unnoticed by this respondent group. They mentioned the situation in the job market and the upward social mobility, yet completely left out the demographic markers of marrying or having children. Only one respondent (Martin, 1976) mentioned the increased access to tertiary education, stating that his generation was actually the last to have received a “non-mass” university education, which enabled a more individual approach to students. By this statement, Martin linked his generation to older cohorts rather than the younger ones. Martin also mentioned the change in family relations, saying that gender roles have been changing and the men in his generation are more flexible to do domestic work traditionally ascribed to women. By this statement, Martin distinguished his generation from the older age cohorts and linked it to younger ones. Yet, no one else from the respondent group picked up the theme of education or gender roles.

## Features based on discursive practices

One of the crucial features determining the line separating generations is the understanding of time. To create a generation, the common experience in formative years alone may not be enough, the age group must also share a perspective of time: the future and the past. Generations share certain interpretive principles or “discursive practices” (Corsten, 1999, p. 258–259), which validate the mutual experience in discourses (Corsten 1999, p. 261; Misztal, 2003, p. 62; Weisbrod, 2007, p. 22). In other words, different generations hold different aspects of the past as important, they tend to treat the past and the future according to similar narrative principles (i.e. treat some periods ironically while others seriously; use similar keys and cultural symbols when interpreting the past). Generational *habitus*, which is the foundation of generational memory, and therefore identity, can be seen as a system of practice-generating schemes rooted in the uniqueness of the socio-historical location of a particular generation (Misztal, 2003, p. 90). Remembering is more than just a personal act (Misztal, 2003, p. 5–6) as it takes place in a social context. Memory can guide our actions by creating organised cultural practices

and enables us to understand the world by serving as a “meaning-making apparatus” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 17). *Mnemonic communities* inform us as to what is sufficiently important to be remembered and how it should be remembered (Misztal, 2003, p. 12–13).

The memory about the Soviet time and about the political and social turnover is a powerful “meaning-making apparatus” for the respondents. In most cases, remembering the Soviet time or the “singing revolution” were the first themes representing the defining of their generation. The clearest line between generations is with the younger generation.

Kristi (1974): Mmmm... They have never worn a pioneer scarf [*laughs*]... and so on.... Look at you very naively...

Kati (1970, FG) – In a way... in our Estonian-language environment it is important to understand the jokes about... that when after the death of Brezhnev all those Andropovs and Chernenkos started to rule and then you laughed that who are they going to put as a general secretary before they bury him...<sup>29</sup>

One general trend is to distinguish the younger generation as the one which does not remember, cannot (and would not) talk about or understand the Soviet period. The key to the generation is an understanding of the period and its structural order, which shaped the childhood and adolescence experience of the respondents and moreover, retroactive remembering and valuing this period (Kelly, 2007). In these cases, the Soviet era is seen in a fairly nostalgic way and as a cultural resource to create discursive practices (Corsten, 1999; Grünberg, 2009; Kõresaar, 2008, p. 761). The 1970s cohort is sometimes included within the so-called “Russian cartoon generation”<sup>30</sup> and they use their collectively understood childhood cultural codes to generate the “generalised others” (Kelly, 2007, Grünberg, 2009). Indeed the *leitmotifs* the respondents used to refer to their childhood were Russian cartoons, the 1980 Moscow Olympics

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<sup>29</sup> Leonid Brezhnev was General Secretary of the Communist Party for 18 years (1964–1982) whereas his successor Yuri Andropov was in office for 17 months (November 1982–February 1984), and his successor, Konstantin Chernenko for 13 months (February 1984–March 1985). These short term party leaders became sources of jokes, the bottom line of which was that the party leaders would die soon after they stepped into office.

<sup>30</sup> The “Russian-cartoon-generation” is a widely-spread cultural concept used by many theorists. It indicates the ones who were raised during a period, which showed similar cartoons throughout the Soviet Union for long periods of time. Thus, the borders of this generation are rather broad. For instance, Catriona Kelly (2007) draws the border at 1955.



and the successive deaths of the General Secretaries of the Communist Party. However, several referred to other cultural codes or shared memories:

Meelis (1973, FG) [*Talking about Romanian sport shoes that the others in the focus group remember, too*] Here you go, you see... this is a good example, that I mention a random thing, and everybody remembers the same thing. The choice was so small, that everybody had the same things. [...] It is much easier, there are certain keywords – and everybody understands.

The attitude of nostalgia, as reflected by Meelis, does not necessarily mean that the respondents consider the Soviet period positively. As Kõresaar (2008, p. 769) explains, in any group several nostalgias can be active simultaneously. The interviewees emphasised that those who have lived through the Soviet time can tell the difference between the things to condemn and those to be nostalgic about. In other words, they felt to be entitled to be nostalgic, because they claimed to know the lines of the “right” and “wrong” types of nostalgia. In their view, lacking the Soviet context and experience, the younger generation tends to have a simplified version of the Soviet period, while the respondents in this study perceived themselves as owning the necessary intellectual and cultural capital to give appropriate evaluation to certain contexts (positive to cartoons, and negative to political opportunism).

Several respondents pointed out that living during the Soviet era provided a certain understanding of historical context and the need to accomplish and value things in the present, like joining NATO or understanding citizenship policy. Liisa (1974) pointed out that a different attitude to history can influence the behaviour of the younger generation:

Liisa: Oh, I just remember one specific case this summer [2004] at an [archaeological] dig... that... you know, the one in August. This Estonian... What the hell was it called? Re-Independence Day... Or whatever? Anyway, the day Estonian Independence was re-established [in 1991]. Well, the celebration of this day. There were quite a few older people, who had lived through this singing revolution. It hadn't even occurred to us, that we had to celebrate it somehow. This is something that is inside us. It doesn't have to be... We absolutely don't feel any need to exhibit this. But young people, they were sincere, listened to the National Anthem in the morning... A national flag stood at the excavation site and in the evening a cake was bought and a celebration took place. This is terribly lovely and all, but I feel like... this is... this is like atheists celebrate Christmas. That there is a certain shift. They wouldn't understand why we, having lived during that time, don't celebrate it? And we didn't understand, what the hell are they celebrating?

The official celebration of the re-independence day has grown gradually. It was announced as a national holiday in 1998, but it took several years before there were established certain mnemonic practices. Thus, during the time of the interview (2005) those practices were not yet rooted in society that much, and these circumstances might have also played a role in Liisa's narrative.

Besides the political context, the overall social context of their childhood is also often used to distinguish the differences between the younger cohorts and the respondent group. One such phenomena often brought up is the somewhat romantic attitude towards nature and surroundings. The respondents often started talking about their childhood using key terms like freedom in mobility in the wild nature or in the (urban or rural) environment around their homes. The interviewees often stressed that during their childhood, they spent a lot of time outside, in the wild nature or in the backyards of the neighbourhood, running, cycling, building shelters, hiking along the riverbanks etc. This is frequently juxtaposed with the image of contemporary youth, who allegedly spend too much time behind different screens. Taavi's extract is illustrative in this respect:

Interviewer: How did you spend your time?

Taavi (1972): With something that contemporary young are dealing with very little. With technics, what else. Motorbikes, running away from militia, drove around with motorcycles, went to the woods, lived like a child of nature. All days round fishing at the riverbank or building a hut or something alike. Well, this kind of stuff.

It is noteworthy that in this particular interview the topic of generation was not in the interview schedule and Taavi positioned his experiences within the backdrop of contemporary youth by picking up the topic himself.

Another habit regularly thematised is the reading practice (i.e. "we read a lot"). Though the developments that are causing this comparison, no doubt, are structural (technological progress), I chose to elaborate on them as a discursive feature. The main reason is that the distinction is often made on a discursive scale, romanticising the experience of reading and spending time outside that is actually accessible to contemporary young people as well. In these accounts, young people are evaluated as lacking experience that many of them actually have. Also, young people are seen in these discourses as being less experienced, while the experience itself (e.g. walking on the riverbank instead of skating in a skating park; reading a paper book instead of watching a film on the internet)

is evaluated as being “richer” in discursive terms while its actual evaluation is often much more complicated. In this context, the border of the younger generation is pushed further (in the 1990s even) as those born during the 1980s obviously did not have that many technological opportunities.

The differentiation with the older generation in terms of discourse is more ambiguous. On the one hand, the 1970s cohort has similar childhood experiences with older generations. The context of Russian cartoons can be traced back to the 1950s cohort (see Kelly 2007). On the other hand, the distinction on the basis of discourse was still often made. Many respondents mentioned that the older generation had stories that the 1970s age group did not have or even did not understand. Among the themes mentioned were topics about student working camps, *kolkhozes* (collective farms), and about the experiences of coping with and cheating the Soviet regime. Again, some of the *leitmotifs* which emerged in the interviews were the stories about serving in the Soviet military.

A critical issue is how generations value and interpret the stories of other generations. The childhood innocence of the 1970s cohort enables the interviewees to legitimately value some things positively, since these are simply part of their childhood memories, and they did not make moral choices as adults. In a similar vein, as the repressions were not part of their lives, they sometimes note that they do not *know* how different life can be when you live it in fear of repression:

Anneli (1976): [we don't know] that well... that life can be a bit different. But I don't know anything about the fear or anything in these lines. So if we take these generations even more back in time, those who have feared and... this I know nothing about.

However, as this quote indicates, the respondent refers not to the generation that in her mind is the previous one, even further back in time (not the ones born during the 1960s). In other words, she has in mind those who lived during the Stalinist repressions and one can sense a silent admiration in her talk: those living through these times had to suffer, but they also needed to be brave. As for the generations not directly opposed to fears threatening their physical existence, this type of attitude can change. Those individuals who did participate in the system as adults are occasionally condemned for being nostalgic about the Soviet time, as the younger generations view them as collaborators with the ideological regime which suppressed Estonian national identity (see also Grünberg, 2009, p. 6–7; Marada, 2004, p. 165). In other words, the

respondents tend to differentiate between those who collaborated in the face of being a physically threatened existence, and those who collaborated out of opportunism. These dispositions are not always clear, though. The lines of such accusations are blurred and contextual. The same goes for how the resistance to the Soviet system is evaluated. Marko (1974) mentions that he does not always understand why the stories of cheating and dishonesty are presented within the framework of heroic narratives. Taavi (1972) and Mart (1972) both recalled adults in their surroundings who had changed their attitudes towards the Soviet regime overnight. Taavi told about those recruiting others to party or pioneer organisations, Mart referred to his history teacher whose version of the history was very “red”. Both remembered that seeing these people turn patriotic overnight raised many suspicions in their sincerity. This suggests the 1970s cohort sees the older generation sometimes as morally corrupt. By contrast, the respondents’ generation was described as sincere, trustworthy and incorruptible. All this can be attributed to the privilege of their birth date: they were not old enough to be able to take sides in ideological battles.

Another difference in the discursive level with the older generation is their memories of being a political dissident in the Soviet system or participating in the “Singing Revolution”. A common theme in the interviews is the aspect of being a bystander as events unfolded. Anna (1977, FG): “We watched the putsch on TV. The older ones were actually there.”

Many of the respondents concluded that it was harder to draw a line between themselves and the older generation than with the younger ones, as on the communicative level there seem to be fewer misunderstandings. This somewhat parallels the findings of a survey conducted among Russians born during the 1970s which found 58% of that cohort claiming there were no significant differences between them and their parents (Lovell, 2007, p. 12).

## Value-based features

Constructing generational boundaries based on value-orientations are closely connected with both structural and discursive features described before. Value-based distinctions with regard to the older or younger generations are influenced by structural conditions of the formative years. Likewise, discursive and mnemonic practices are often determined by values.

Having experienced to some degree the hypocrisies of the Soviet-era society, the 1970s cohort claims to have learned how to be critical of public discourses and ready-made truths and to be capable of expressing irony towards whatever

comes their way. Respectively, they perceive the younger generations as less capable of critical thinking:

Kaido (1970, FG): Society asked a lot of questions at that time [during the time of political change in the 1990s]. We may not have participated, but questions were asked. The difference between generations is that they [the younger ones] do not pose questions any more. [...] I sense that this generation [born in the second half of the 1980s] do not have any doubts whether the independent state will stay, and do not fear that anyone might come to deport you [to Siberia]. They will sympathise with you that you have been born during the Soviet time.

According to the respondents, “their” lack of critical thinking may also lead to a lack of patriotic feelings and of valuing the independent statehood of the regained republic. This is accompanied by having little interest in politics and society, which leads to the observation that their value base is more fluid and tolerant.

Kristo (1973, FG): There is a less critical attitude, I think. And maybe also less need for confrontation. They are so tolerant because they lack some value basis.

Meelis (1973): [...] Super tolerant, but this does not stem from the fact that they lack values, but that the values come and go very easily. [...] They clearly lack, what you could say is characteristic to us, generational values. [...] Maybe it’s because today all those values change so quickly.

Kristo: Maybe these are out there somewhere, we just don’t see them. We have all sorted out.

This in a way complies with the values that sociologists have attributed to young people in the late modern societies of Western Europe. The youth of today are characterised as having flexible multiple identities and hedonistic values. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009, p. 33) contended there are emerging global generations which are united in “increasing insecurity.” This new generation, suggested Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, cannot be constituted *politically*, but can instead be defined by “cosmopolitan experiences and events” (*ibid.*). Compared to the older cohorts, the young are more individualistic: “Then there was collective action, today there is individualistic reaction” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009, p. 34). Indeed, several respondents mentioned some of these traits among the younger generation. The fluidity of their value base, argue these respondents, makes them a passive generation, which is not prone

to actively question or change things. Following these lines of logics, then, their naivety makes them absorb whatever values come their way. The respondent group attaches values that are typical of young people globally to the younger generation and links these values to the specific social changes in Estonia.

Another value that is attributed to a younger generation is consumerism. Contemporary society with its massive consumption habits is sometimes seen in a negative light. As indicated before, the respondents often referred to the possibilities young people have and do not know how to value. One of these aspects is the absence of commodities during the Soviet time. Paradoxically enough, this aspect is seen as a resource in the contemporary world:

Hannes (1973): To stay completely honest, but maybe I will not, I cannot say, but at least it seems to me that ... mmm... this experience of the Soviet Union is a bit similar to the experience described in history text books, in the sense that you see, like, what kind of life can be, in an economic sense and... and... when you see that you can very successfully live without all this bling-bling, then, well, I did not have this kind of magpie complex, that when things opened up, that lets buy now and fool around... I have this same... reluctancy...

In other words, many respondents reflect that the absence of things as such has made them value things differently from subsequent cohorts, who have been socialised in the world of things. At the same time, they admit that longing for things and material goods was something that shaped their lives a lot. Merje (1977) recalls that back in the Soviet time, every single candy wrapping paper was sniffed, saved and collected if it originated from a Western country, so the relation to the material world is different. According to many respondents, the absence of consumer goods was more meaningful than the things themselves and it influenced them to value things accordingly (thus, consume more “conservatively”, as Merike (1974) put it). Yet, strangely enough, the same attitude among the older generation is often looked down upon and judged. Urmo (1977), for instance, described how elderly people have still stocking practices due to their attitude that acquiring things is difficult. So, according to him, they eventually get more things than they actually need.

The value differences with the older generation, as previously mentioned, are not seen as being so crucial and borders were hard to draw. The borders towards previous generations were shifted during some interviews by up to almost twenty years (from 1970 to 1950). The values attributed to the older generation thus also depended on where the border lay.

One of the most often stated values mentioned in connection with the 1960s cohort was that of pragmatism. The respondents reasoned while referring to the older generation's formative years during the 1980s, when the Soviet system was most cynical and ideology was a learned façade of a regime, which nobody took seriously. People had learned certain behavioural patterns to survive, and had to distinguish their private sphere from the public. Hence, they developed a playful attitude towards life, were more apt to value pragmatic goals and were more easily adjustable to rules or values in order to achieve these goals. Kristjan (1973) said that the attitudes of this older generation towards different kinds of rules could be summarised: we made these laws and rules and built this state, we have the right to be sometimes creative in remodelling them in our own interest.

Another thing that was often brought up, was the conservatism of the older generation. Though this is something that probably characterises generational boundaries also elsewhere, this conservatism was often reasoned along specific Estonian socio-historical lines. For instance, Ketlin (1973) pondered on the lack of tolerance towards the different ethnic groups among the older generations:

Ketlin (1973): I think that in a certain sense this society has influenced us, the fact that we are Estonians, that the Estonian as a person is closed... I think, society has had its impact on this and the era. And the kind of... racist would probably not be correct word, but nevertheless... as a child I remember a kind of... in a way disdainful attitude (or maybe it is not a correct word either), but in a way like those Ukrainians, Georgians or Russians, who lived in Estonia back then. Quite naturally, it has a lot to do with the fact that we [Estonians] were so-to-say violently deported out and they [foreigners] were violently imported in [hint to Stalinist repressions and immigration policies by the Soviet Union] and so on. But I think the attitude towards the black or Pakistani, this attitude, negative attitude in particular towards people with other skin colour, it dominates more in the older generation. A lot more. And I think, in a certain way, it is connected to the society.

While talking about these trends, Ketlin has in mind her parent's generation and not those who were born during the 1960s. The interviews in which the border of the older generation shifted to include the 1950s or earlier cohorts did not mention either the political change or the Soviet regime as reasons for the value differences. Rather, they felt that the differences seemed to indicate the normal differences which emerge due to age, but also reflect the change in gender roles.

## The 1970s

Merike (1974) The generation prior to us is too conservative. [...] well, there are those rules how you can behave in certain social circles or how you can talk to certain people. For instance, it is beyond my understanding... well... [...] If we have a wine glass on the table, and one's glass is empty, then naturally a man has to pour a new glass for the woman, a woman couldn't possibly do it herself. For me it is normal that I do it myself, I do not expect such support from men.

Overall, most of the value distinctions were connected to either structural differences or mnemonic practices, yet those which were not, can be perhaps boiled down to differences that emerge due to age.

## Summary

Though the emergence of generations and generational consciousness depends mainly on structural changes in society, it seems that the reflexive generational construction in discursive fields is less concerned about the same structural processes that many sociologists seem to be keen about. Therefore, though the change in social structures and socialisation practices may have created a base for a new generational consciousness to emerge, the lines that are drawn when constructing one's own generation are often based on more intangible grounds. As for subjective generational markers for the respondent group, the defining basis for the generation seems to be the remembering of the political change and relationships to the Soviet period. In Western societies, where there have not been such remarkable political transformations, politics has ceased to be a source of generational identity and has been replaced by social solidarity (Lovell, 2007, p. 11). The 1970s age group, however, seems (and may well be the last) to relate their generational identity to political memory, which was also defined by Mannheim as the basis for "generational consciousness" (Mannheim 1993[1952], p. 33). Even though the statistics presented in chapter three allow us to see many traits in which the 1970s cohort could be considered closer to the cohort born during the 1980s, in their subjective interpretation they feel closer to those born earlier, during the 1960s. Thus, their subjective time perspective seems to be more important than the structural conditions of socializing. The reason for this might also be that people may be inclined to identify with the older generation at this particular life stage (in their 30s), especially because in Estonia, many of those born during the 1960s are the ones holding strategic positions in society. Yet, they also see distinct generational differences with the 1960s cohort.



There are several ways to interpret the data presented here. One could claim that the respondent group forms a distinctive generation within the approximate parameters of 1970–1980 (+/- 5 years). The group is distinguished from the younger group on a mnemonic basis and from the older by social inclusion patterns. There seem to be most of the features of a generation that generational theorists have implied: the “feeling of sameness”; “generational consciousness” (at least according to the respondent group, who may be interpreted to form one of Mannheim’s conceptualised “generational units”); mutual discursive and mnemonic practices; similar socialisation experiences during the formative years which limits them to certain experiences; and participation in a common destiny (generation as a “location” and an “actuality”). The individuals of the 1970s birth cohort feel they have somehow participated in helping to reconstruct the social or institutional structures of the new state (though they tend to have the feeling they have not been active agents in the political turnover or economic reconstruction that preceded the more stable period of reconstruction). The 1970s cohort also has features of a “strategic generation”, having high social mobility and better income compared to previous and subsequent cohorts.

The other possible interpretation of this data, however, would be that this is an age group between two different generations, an intermediate zone. Interestingly they themselves sense their position as being in-between, having two faces like “Janus, one face in the new social system, the other in the old” as Alina (1971) so elegantly put. They seem to be the ones between the “Soviet generation” and the generation of the new social order. The feeling of being caught in between may characterise many age cohorts. Yet, it does seem that rapid changes in socialisation patterns and shared memory with the older cohorts makes the 1970s age cohort special. This hypothetical model is also supported by the fact that the results of the statistical data and qualitative interview data do not match. One reason for this could be that even though the structural patterns change fast, the subjective time and values react to social practices after an interval and thus, the 1970s cohort share the values with the previous cohort while already structurally choosing different paths.

Either way, the cohort born during the 1970s vividly brings forth the issues of generational borders, of how to define the parameters of a generation; which aspects of statistically measured data are significant in detecting generational lines, and how we should interpret subjective generational parameters. Thus, interesting research questions arise as to who defines the generational borders, based on what circumstances, and how the cohorts who seem to lying in-between can be located.

## 6. We are what we remember: memories as a resource for identity

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“What was I ever going to make of my childhood? Like an old summer dress, it had gone out of fashion. It wasn’t even good enough for a bit of party chit-chat. I took a sip of wine and decided to go. Time for a trip. A trip back to where I came from.” (Hensel 2004, p. 18)

This extract is taken from a book by Jana Hensel (born in 1976), who spent her childhood in Eastern Germany under a communist regime, which collapsed by the time she became an adult. In this quote, she positions her childhood memories in a dialogue with what she sees as the perception of her Western friends and other peers, and is annoyed that she was a child during a period, which is considered a taboo. In the introduction of her book she writes: “Nothing remains of our childhood country – which is of course exactly what everyone wanted – and now that we’re grown up and its almost too late, I suddenly miss all the lost memories.” (Hensel, 2004, p. 4). In other words, the world she had lived in while she was a kid was no longer there and nobody wanted it to be. Quite the opposite, everyone wanted the GDR to be gone for good, yet she felt her memories were suppressed in the course of the wiping out of this country. Hensel was upset that whenever she was about to tell her memories to her Western coevals, she had to translate a lot regarding the circumstances. Thus, she felt that she needed to publish her memories: to let the world know that she is entitled to her childhood as much as anyone else, she just had lived a “right life” in a “wrong” one (Shortt, 2012, p. 119).

The book by Hensel offers a good example of how the context in which memories are told becomes important. Hensel points to the differences between her own memories and those of her Western coevals, who had childhoods

that needed no “translating.” However, there is more to it. She also feels that the memory culture regarding life in the GDR has become stereotyped. In her view, not only have the stories about the communist past become formula-like, the questions asked about that past have also become ritualised (Shortt, 2012, p. 122). Thus, Hensel feels her memories are alien not only to the ones from a different cultural context, but in her own cultural space, too.

While sharing a birth year and childhood experiences with many of the respondents to this study, the context in which Hensel finds herself when sharing her memories, is rather different from the context in which the Estonian respondents shared theirs. Apart from obvious historical and structural differences between re-independent Estonia and re-unified East Germany, the respondents to this study did not have to translate anything for me as the interviewer. Not only was I part of the same cultural space, but also from the same age cohort. They did not complain about their narratives of the past (or memories) being left out, which leads me to the second, rather more speculative, point. Being an age group which was socialised into the new society and was part of the reconstruction process, they have a greater sense of entitlement than we see in Hensel’s writing. In fact, many of the respondents of this study are visible on the social scene and have a voice also in constructing mnemonic discourses. Therefore, how they see the past, becomes important, as this could be one of the legitimate versions of the past circulating in cultural discourses.

The following chapter thus aims to open the character of the mnemonic patterns that this age group uses not only because this opens up some aspects of the memory culture in Estonia, but also because it can show how similar experiences can acquire different positions in different cultures at different points of time. Memory culture is dynamic and thus, what is remembered can depend on the life stage of the person, but also on the cultural context the act of remembering takes place. Therefore, I find the presentation of the memories by Jana Hensel meaningful, as they point to the fact that Eastern European experiences can translate into different contexts. Her book shows that what she remembers parallels in some way the memories of the respondents to this study, but mnemonic background is different. In the German case, the transition was very abrupt and this may also have influenced the way mnemonic culture about the socialist past has developed. The unification of the two Germanies brought forth the hegemonic mnemonic templates of the Western side, which tended to equate both the national socialist and the communist regimes on German territory and condemned them unconditionally (Todorova 2014, p. 16). As the construction of the past is not a static process, the situation where Hensel’s

memories are presented, may have also changed by now or the Estonian context may change soon. However, as the Bulgarian researcher Milla Mineva (2014) so eloquently puts it, the “recollections of the children of socialism are, perhaps too nuanced for black-and-white ideological constructions” (p. 156).

## Memories

As some of the previous quotes already illustrated, the respondent group reasoned many aspects of their generational identity using narratives of the past. Kaido indicated that living through Soviet time and the transformation processes means that his age group remembers that state independence is not for granted. Liisa pointed to the transformation experience as a source of entitlement: she did not understand how the younger ones could celebrate something that had a deeper meaning for her. These examples demonstrate that remembering (among other things) is a question of moral categories, such as patriotism. The past makes its presence in our moral and emotional lives and collective memory sets the moral agenda for the present (Poole, 2008, p. 155, 159, Sturken, 2008, p. 73). Remembering the Soviet era and the social change thus is a powerful symbolic resource for this group: it makes them feel entitled to a specific kind of patriotism and evaluate sometimes the younger age cohorts from this perspective.

However, there seems to be a broader level to it. Most of what we remember we do not remember personally. Society tells us what to remember and what to forget and also, what and how it is appropriate to remember (Zerubavel, 2011, p. 224; Olick, 2011, p. 227). The past is evaluated on a moral scale often collectively. In these accounts, communism as an ideological regime is often treated as being evil or immoral (Tileaga, 2012, p. 265) and thus, the entire period tends to be treated accordingly. When Hensel wrote that her childhood country is lost and that is (“of course exactly”) what everyone wanted, she referred to the hegemonic disposition of collective memory in her homeland: that is, the communist legacy is bad and has to be deleted. The lines of thought which label the Soviet (communist) legacy on the moral scale of good and bad are not alien to other post-communist states either. In Estonia, on the official memory policy level, the discourses of “criminal communism” have been common since the regaining of the republic. The memory cultures in the Baltic states have been characterised even as the “unconditional denial of the socialist past,” and such dispositions dominated especially during the

1990s (Jõesalu and Kõresaar, 2013, p. 177). In these accounts, the past is presented via the discourse of rupture (*ibid.*: 183): the pre-war independence era (1918–1940) is perceived as a period of harmonious development, which was cut through by harsh Stalinist times in the aftermath of the WWII. Often, the entire Soviet era is treated in the key of harsh repressions (*ibid.*: 183). However, since the turn of the century, a more heterogeneous treatment of the Soviet era has been emerging (Jõesalu, 2012). The reasons for this are probably (as always) complex, but along with the change of the political environment the change of generations which shape the discursive field, plays a role (Jõesalu and Kõresaar, 2013, p. 178). Together with a shift towards a heterogeneous treatment of the Soviet time, late socialism (as defined in Yurchak, 2003) has surfaced on the discursive fields stressing more the everyday level of the system (Jõesalu, 2005). This does not mean, however, that the overall hegemonic treatment of the communist past has been changed towards a positive evaluation of the regime. Rather, dealing with the time has become multi-layered. This development has not happened overnight: the heterogenisation of the Soviet narratives which started at the beginning of the 2000s has lasted until today (Jõesalu, 2012). Furthermore, this trend has not happened without battles in discursive fields.

One of the phenomena which has raised public debates since the 2000s is emerging nostalgia. There is often a tendency to label nostalgia as longing for the communist regime and therefore, its spread has been regularly contested as a threat to democracy. There is a certain period which needs to pass in order for nostalgia to emerge – this is also probably the reason why the emergence of waves of nostalgia in Estonia have mainly not occurred before the 2000s (Jõesalu and Kõresaar, 2013) when the euphoria of the new republic had passed. In Eastern Germany, it emerged already during the 1990s as the new republic changed the environment of the country very fast (though not necessarily along the lines the Eastern Germans themselves would have preferred, see Shortt, 2012, p. 116; Berdahl, 2010). However, nostalgia can be heterogeneous (Kõresaar, 2008; Berdahl, 2010; Pasiëka, 2012). Often, memories that evoke positive feelings are not backward-looking or long for restoring the regime in any way. They can be used as counter-memory to the past, but also as a way of giving meaning to the present (Berdahl, 2010; Boym, 2011).

Svetlana Boym (2001) has defined two types of nostalgia: *restorative* and *reflective*. While the first can be applied to the nostalgia of the first pre-war republic during the 1990s, the latter is often used when reminiscing about late socialism (Jõesalu and Nugin, 2012; Jõesalu and Kõresaar, 2013). Restorative nostalgia aims for rebuilding the lost homeland, while reflective nostalgia

“fears return with the same passion” (Boym, 2011, p. 455). In Boym’s treatment, reflective nostalgia is always in a dialogue between past and present. By looking at the past, it enables a new understanding of space and time (*ibid.*, p. 452). Rather than being determined to restore the past, reflective nostalgia “dwells on ambivalences of human longing and belonging” (*ibid.*, p. 453). By questioning the absolute truth, this type of nostalgia is not directed towards the past, nor the present, but sideways, loving details rather than symbols (*ibid.*, p. 454).

One of the tools of reflective nostalgia is irony (Boym, 2001) and, indeed, cynical irony made its appearance also on the scene of nostalgia in Eastern Germany during the turn of the millennium (Berdahl, 2010). The use of irony or even dark humour while depicting the past has been noted also elsewhere (Mineva, 2014), when the dominant narratives are found to be “unproductive or divisive” (Sheftel, 2011, p. 145). While the hegemonic narratives are often prone to create victims or heroes, humour and irony can help to avoid that trap, offering a sort of relief or a self-critique (*ibid.*: 151, 153). This strategy enables the crossing of borders which the discourses of the official memory policies are often unable to (*ibid.*: 159).

Therefore, while the political goals of restoring the Estonian pre-war republic during the 1990s needed the de-legitimisation of the Soviet era, the political stabilisation during the 2000s did not need a clear-cut and black-and-white version of the Soviet era any more. Yet the already established dominant narrative was too strong to be questioned, as that would have meant questioning the political base structures of the entire society. Thus, rather than contesting the official narrative which dwelled on big symbols of victims and martyrdom (Tamm, 2013), there emerged a need for a version of the Soviet time which offered an alternative without questioning the hegemonic treatment of the past. Reflective nostalgia offers a good strategy for that. In the following, I will try to show that the respondents use the Soviet time creatively and contextually for constructing the support for dominant narratives (such as patriotism), but they often also look “sideways” – indulging into details, avoiding symbols and using irony. Also, their memories of the time of the transition are not always as deep as they might appear from some of the previous quotes about patriotism.

## Memories of the Soviet period

When speaking about the Soviet time, this group mostly remembers it as part of their childhood. This notion is important, since childhood experiences are usually universally good, as also noted by Karin (1976):

Childhood is always bright if you are not from some... If you have not been mistreated, then let's say honestly, whatever era you are living in, I think, childhood until the age of puberty, every childhood memory is bright, whatever era there was at that time. I think the children I watched in [a name of a poor country] and who ran barefooted while there were minus degrees outside, because they were simply so poor... I think that these children won't complain about their childhood too much, because children play and discover the world.

Similar thoughts were very common among the respondents. There was a clear tendency, however, to position these positive memories in the overall discursive environment about the Soviet time and its general (negative) perception in society and distinguish one's own experience in this respect. As Tanel (1975) noted, "we are not dramatic about the period" (indicating thus that many are) and though he admits that probably the freedom of the individuals was suppressed, he as a child did not pay much attention to it. Anna (1977) pointed out that she does not always see the point to "dig out the sufferings" when talking about the period, referring to the discourse of rupture and deportations. Without my prompting, many still picked up the topic of the deportations and their relationship (or rather, lack of it) from this historical discourse. Yet, they also felt the need to somehow apologise for not seeing the Soviet era as dramatic and in terms of victimisation, stressing that their attitudes do not translate into restorative nostalgia:

Sven (1978): In this sense... I don't have anything negative to recollect [about the Soviet period] that... quite naturally, I won't also start slamming about how I would like to have the Russian time or the Soviet time back or that it was damn good at that time, but at the same time I would say... Of course, I had the [the wish of] Estonian freedom inside me for a long time, maybe already around the age of ten or even earlier but... but at the same time I don't have anything negative, like, but then again I think... this is because my family was not directly touched by the deportations in any way and... and... well... overall anything like horrible or ugly didn't happen to my kin.

The respondent group seems to use the symbolic resource of their age to justify their positive attitude towards the time, yet without questioning the hegemonic discourse. As Janek (1971) stated: “The depression of the Soviet time did not reach me.” This is meaningful, since he was the same person whose appendix had been removed to avoid Soviet military service (see Chapter four) and who even had a brief encounter with the KGB. Kati (1970), whose mother had been threatened that her daughter might be sent to Siberia (see Chapter four) was also keen to recall funny and absurd sides of the regime. In other words, even if some forms of the repressions did touch their lives, the respondents still generally chose either a positive, ironic or humorous tone to speak about the Soviet era. Thus, the nostalgia they seem to indulge in, can be characterised as mainly reflective (Boym, 2001), looking sideways rather than involving the moral debates about the ideological side of the regime. Urmo (1977) noted that he was sure that the era is richer than the official impression would leave us to believe, as for him it was “colourful time, when a lot was possible.” Thus, choosing the humorous narrative enables them to avoid the trap of labelling the era relying on the moral categories of good or evil (Sheftel, 2011).

Regarding the broader social discourses in Estonia, the question of collaboration with the Soviet (occupational) regime is often brought up. While the question of collaborating with the KGB or other organs of intelligence is considered reprehensible on a legal level (it is forbidden for former KGB agents to work in certain state positions), having been a member of the various Communist Party organisations is not sanctioned in any way. Such issues are nevertheless still debated. During the 2005 municipal election campaign, one of the candidates, Juku-Kalle Raid (1974) leashed a campaign against former Communist Party members by printing a T-shirt with a sign “How much longer? Incinerate the Commies!” with the names of the parliament members who had been CP members on the shirt’s back. This campaign evoked a lot of debate framed in ideological terms. The opinions varied from considering CP membership a crime to accepting it as a normal coping strategy during the Soviet regime.

Thanks to their time of birth neither Juku-Kalle Raid nor any of the study’s respondents could have possibly been members of the party even if they had wanted to. As Kristjan (1973) noted, his age group can brag about not being part of Komsomol (Party organisation for older youths) as when they were old



enough to apply, the organisation had been dissolved already.<sup>31</sup> However, many had been members of the October League and pioneer organisations (Party organisations for younger youths). Having been part of these organisations, however, is often seen as not a serious business, not least because they were children at the time. Marko (1974) described the pioneer organisation of his time as being a “joke organisation” and their attendance as funny. He also mentioned that even the funerals of the General Secretaries with the dramatic pathos were comic to him at the time. Alina (1971), who actually was one of the last to join Komsomol, also described the rituals for it as amusing and not serious, recalling mainly how they went and had ice cream after the procedure. The concentration on details (ice cream after ideological recruitment, disdain for pioneer scarf) is very common when reminiscing these (seemingly) ideological issues.

This tendency has been noted by other researchers as well. As Julianne Fürst (2010) points out, the more the Soviet state aged, the more the structural rituals became rigid, but the more rigid they became, the more young people concentrated on its form rather than its content.<sup>32</sup> Depending on when the regime was established (in Russia and Estonia the practices of adopting the regime’s formal side appeared at different periods), people learned the art of sidestepping. Especially for the young, consumption practices became the source of identity instead of ideology. As the focus was aimed away from the ideology, young people were also not in particular opposition to the system (Fürst, 2010, p. 3). In fact, many of the respondents admitted that they were (childishly) serious about their dedication to communist socialisation practices. Toomas (1975) recalled that he was an active flag-carrier and he enjoyed it because he could get away from classes to fulfil his duties. Anneli (1976) recalled with ironic tone that her dream as a child was to become a *part-org*<sup>33</sup> because her neighbour was one and it seemed appealing at the time. In other words, they illustrate what Fürst described as “master[ing] doubt and belief

<sup>31</sup> As Kristjan was born in November, he went to school in 1981 and not in 1980 as most of those born in 1973 did (the school year starts in September and those who are seven years old by that time go to school). Thus, many of my respondents who were born in 1973 were actually the last ones to be admitted to Komsomol right before its collapse.

<sup>32</sup> Juliane Fürst talks in her book about what she calls the post-war generation, having in mind those who were young after WWII in Russia. In Russia, the regime had been in power already for decades, so the social conditions were a bit different compared to Estonia. However, similar dispositions developed in Estonia during 1970s and lasted until the collapse of the regime.

<sup>33</sup> Part-org is an abbreviation for party-organiser; a person who was responsible for leading the party organisation’s activities in institutions.

simultaneously – and ma[king] this task not a burden but a simple fact of life” (2010, p.4). Some of the respondents were especially enthusiastic about their participation in these organisations:

Ave (1973): I was a very active member of the October League, very active pioneer and I managed to be recruited into Komsomol, which was dissolved right after my joining it, and I think I had a plan to become a communist [member of the Communist Party] as well (*laughs*). I really was active, those members of the October League or Pioneers, you know, I don't remember how many whistle ropes [signifiers of achieving some kind of skill levels] you could achieve there, but in any case, I had at least three of them. This green, blue, and yellow were for different skills, I think. I had this as a specific goal on its own, I wanted to get these and I wanted to be a good-performing pioneer. So, I guarded those [communist] monuments [indicating to the role of the privileged pioneer] a lot (*laughs*) at different occasions [...], I liked it. On every possible occasion I performed in the October Palace [a house for cultural activities]. [...] I even don't feel ashamed for this. For me, it was part of a childhood. [...] I don't even know what contemporary children do but sometimes I think that my childhood was even more fun. More interesting, in this respect. Maybe I am wrong, I am not really familiar with the possibilities out there.

Ave's recollections are interesting, since Communist-party orientation was not anything her socialisation would prompt. At home her father was openly anti-Soviet, declaring his intention to install bombs in Red Square in Moscow. According to Ave, she was always scared that he would express his disdain towards the regime somewhere in public.

While Ave's father's dispositions did not break through to his daughter, many respondents mentioned the atmosphere of distrust towards the regime at home as influencing their own opinions towards the system. Many interviewees pointed out that their parents did not openly talk about the disdain for the regime, but it was felt in the air. For instance, Kristjan recalled that his family joked about the husband of his aunt, that he had been so stupid that he even couldn't get to work as a militiaman (indicating that these were the utmost fools who represented the Soviet regime). The contempt for the communist system which was transferred to the children usually took rather naïve nationalistic forms, as children tend to see things in black-and-white. For instance, Juhan (1973) described himself getting really emotional when Russians (i.e. Soviets) won at team sports (he was always keeping his fingers crossed for any other team). Martin (1976) described how in war games on the street everybody wanted to play Germans, and not Russians.

The respondents often present themselves in somewhat oppositional terms. Several felt proud for not joining the pioneer organisation or Komsomol. Many mentioned that they celebrated Christmas<sup>34</sup> at home or even went to the church and were told to keep quiet about that. Ketlin (1973), however, recalled how she attended church at Christmas at high school and when it became public, there was an even bigger problem at home than in school. She admitted that she had attended the church out of protest rather than out of some religious calling, making it exciting for her. Her parents, though, were not cross at her for going to a Christmas ceremony, but for recklessly disobeying the rules the state had established and feared she might ruin her future prospects.

Quite a few remembered that their parents tried to spare them from getting into trouble by not talking about anything which could cause ideologically driven problems at school (knowledge about the independent pre-war republic, annexation of Estonia, deportations, or Christian holidays). Therefore, the understanding of the true essence of the regime was blurred for almost all of them. Some things were left unsaid, others were said not openly, and all this was stitched together and contextualised by the kids who were also exposed to ideological discourses in the educational systems. Merje (1977) perhaps is a good example of this confusion. While being raised in a family who could be considered silently oppositional (she remembers regular visits to the church at Christmas, but also how her parents' friends had discussed Russification and the lack of freedom in the 1980s), she recalls how she wanted to impress her parents' friends with her piano skills. For this, she chose to play one of the most powerful melodies she knew at the time, which was the Soviet anthem:

Merje (1977): Because I liked the melody so much, and it truly is a very powerful melody. Mother and father did not say a word [when I learned it]. But when my mother had her birthday, and mother's friends came over, then I wanted to show how I know this anthem (*laughs*), mother said, don't play it now (*laughs*). When I think back, oh my god, well, they all understood, the grown-ups, but... but they understood that I don't understand, what I was dealing with. But yes, and I couldn't understand, like, mummy, why cannot I? This is such a beautiful, powerful melody, right.

To sum up, both the exaltation about the communist brainwash as well as opposition is seen and contextualised in the key of childhood. Using their

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<sup>34</sup> As the Soviet state was a secular one, celebrating Christian holidays or going to church was considered inappropriate for a Soviet person and could cause problems.

childhood experience as a shield, this age group feels entitled to evaluate the adults of the time on moral grounds, since their own attendance can be treated ironically in playful categories.

This is not to say that the suppressing or dark side of the Soviet regime is missing from the memories of my interviewees. The metaphors of the hegemonic discourse of rupture also have an important position in their memories. As expected, this is also interpreted through the child's prism. Often the motive of evil adults pops up, Merje (1977) told how she was scared of every stranger, since it was a common thing to get berated by a bus driver or a saleswoman. Tarmo (1976) recalled physical violence by the teachers towards the pupils. Anneli (1976) related how they were scared of a local furnaceman (in fear that he would put children into oven and bake sausages of them). The symbols of cold winters, long bus rides, uncomfortable and backward infrastructure contribute to the picture of an inhumane state. In fact, some aspects of the society which owe to the fact that technology was less developed (as in any other state of the time), is attributed to the inhumanity of the regime.

The lack of freedom was a powerful *leitmotif* which was mentioned by many. However, even when speaking of the repressive side, the memories tend to remain reserved and not reach the dramatic depiction of the official narrative. Their childhood during the Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko time was a time of stagnation and economic decay. Though they lived through one of the peaks of the Cold War, the arms race, the threat of war was not really felt at an everyday level. Rather, the time was marked with shortages in the economic sphere, in living space and other commodities. Thus, even the notion of the lack of freedom was sometimes expressed via the lack of opportunities to consume or to go abroad. Though these two opportunities may seem like different categories, in the heads of the respondents as children they may have felt the same, since going abroad was often associated with material opportunities. The conversation between Henri (1975) and Meelis (1973) illustrates this very well.

Henri (FG): For me... this absence of freedom. This started already when we had to join the pioneer organisation in 1983, right. Was it? 83 or 84? In any case, deep Soviet time. [...] I didn't join. [...] But I went to such a school where there was an opportunity to go abroad during the high school. Both to German Federal Republic as to DDR, you see. It was a kind of German-language biased school. And I remember how... since I refused to join [pioneer organisation], then I was approached with the rhetorics that then you won't be able to get opportunity to go [abroad] in high school. Well and I was back then in what class... third, I guess.

Meelis: People were influenced...

Henri: With such types of things, yes. But how people dressed and...

Meelis: But one thing which comes to mind, is the way people dressed, [...] from one side, people were one-sided and similar, but one cannot claim that people were not aware of things. One thing was not to tell the difference between Nike, Dila or so on. But there was a clear distinction if a thing was *foreign* or not. The same thing that has remained up to nowadays in Russia... ours or...

Henri: *Innomarki*... [foreign labels, in Russian]

Meelis: *Innomarki*, yes. This thing was very clear: ours, or foreign.

It is very meaningful, how the line of thought by Henri starts off from the absence of freedom to the restrictions to go abroad and then it leads to the desire of foreign goods. Things and the material environment reach a very prominent position in many interviews (see also Jõesalu and Nugin, 2012). As illustrated in the previous chapter, goods and their absence can also be used as a resource for identity (the ability to value things you have now) or a resource in general. Many respondents pointed out that due to the absence of goods, people became very skilful in making things themselves (sewing, cooking, building) or using things creatively.

There were other sides of the Soviet era (not particularly tied with the regime) that were seen positively with a nostalgic touch. The positive attitude towards the Soviet cartoons was often expressed, since they were seen as spreading positive values such as friendship, community, honesty (see also previous chapter, and Grünberg, 2009; Kelly, 2007). The technological backwardness (of the Soviet state in particular but also the period in the development of technics in general) is also often treated as having a positive effect, as it promoted human relations (more human contacts rather than communication via technology), taught self-reliance and independence (no mobile phones which enable parents to check on their kids), and encouraged physical fitness (no computer games and scarce TV programs which meant more playing outside).

To sum up, the experience of having lived during the Soviet era is often seen as a resource rather than a burden. The hegemonic discourse of the dark night is not questioned, yet, when the group's own memories collide with the discourse (attendance in communist youth organisations), it is almost always treated ironically. The positive sides of the period are de-ideologised and seen as part of the everyday life (see also Mineva, 2014). The negative stereotypes of the hegemonic discourse about the Soviet time (lack of freedom, suppressing of free will, inhumane system) was contextualised with the group's childhood

memories: the opposition is translated to disdain for the pioneer scarf or reluctance to play the role of a Russian soldier in a play. Repression is depicted by bringing the examples of cruel adults. The narratives are often filled with details. These details serve as cultural tools to express the attitudes that may otherwise clash with the dominant historical narrative. One of the reasons the detailed descriptions emerge is the type of nostalgia these respondents are keen to indulge in. Reflective nostalgia often concentrates on the details (Boym, 2001), offering to look sideways and avoiding the trap of evaluating the past on an ideological scale. Another reason is probably universal, childhood memories are usually full of (seemingly) meaningless details: things that may seem irrelevant for an adult, but are tremendously important for a child for whom the level of abstraction is less developed (Piaget, 1952).

## Memories of Transition

While positive recollections towards the Soviet time may still be a sensitive topic depending on the context they are told in, the political transition is a topic which is less often a source for discursive battles. The overall direction of regaining independence and dissolution of the Soviet Union is generally treated as a positive development (among ethnic Estonians, at least). In this respect, the respondents do not stand out. However, their reminiscences offer interesting insights into how coming of age during the age of transition is retrospectively conceptualised.

Many respondents acknowledge that their own opening and the opening of the society were parallel processes and that the protesting spirit of a teenager was sometimes difficult to be distinguished from the protest against the Soviet Union. However, they also admit that the personal was perhaps more important. One such example was Mart (1972) who, when asked what he remembers of the time of his high school, answered without doubt the “Popular Front” and started to laugh. In his further narrative he admitted that his goals probably were far more down to earth than being closely connected to Estonia becoming a free country. In fact, he claimed he was not interested in politics at all – yet his first association was the name of a political movement. Liisa (1974), who stated her high interest in politics, participation in several national movements and her deep patriotism due to that movement up to today, also reflected on her own development stage as teenager:

Interviewer: What was important to you at that time?

Liisa: This period was actually very busy. I cannot distinguish these moments for example, well, there are, like, many things together. That the most intensive period was 88–89, where this political and personal opening collided [...] I think I changed absolutely like every year. That my... I really do not know how to answer, what, like... Well, I think that personally, in terms of personhood, the things connected to myself were most important and vital. Because if I said that some kind of political events were absolutely primary, I would lie. Because in fact, I saw absolutely everything through the prism of my own personhood.

The positive emotions about the political developments, though, were expressed by nearly everyone, even if the extent of involvement varied. Tiina (1973) who claimed not to be interested in politics was in a student work camp at the time when the Estonian republic was declared (August 1991). She and those who were in camp with her actually missed the news that day (having no radio on the spot). Yet, she remembers the specific feeling of happiness or euphoria when she heard of the independence. Many mentioned that they were not interested in politics at all though remembering their enthusiasm about the freedom-movement. A number of those claiming disinterest in politics had actually participated in the “Baltic Way” – a human chain that was organised in 1989 from Tallinn to Vilnius. This indicates that for many, politics and the political change of the 1990s are different categories as the latter is perceived as a general social movement and politics is associated with contemporary party politics. Marek’s answer is pretty typical in this respect:

Interviewer: How much were you interested in politics?

Marek (1973): Not much. I mean, maybe it was hard just to cope with one’s own business.

Interviewer: Freedom movement?

Marek: Oh, that! No-no, in this respect, of course I was interested at the time. Everyone was. I think everybody, like... And the tanks and...

Many lost interest after the political situation stabilised or the movement did not offer options to participate any more. The level of participation and the meaning for this movement, however, varied from dead serious to carnivalesque. Hannes (1973), who even had some conflicting issues with his school because of his oppositional use of the symbols of the Estonian republic during the late Soviet time, reflected on the time as follows:

Hannes: You see, we did not let ourselves to be bothered with circumstances around us, we... we felt good and lived with the knowledge that there are so many things in life that needed to be tried and done and... we somehow did not think at all whether something was bad or good. Well, of course, we were enthusiastic and all this wave of awakening and of course we had blue-black-white [Estonian tricolour] ties, leather ties, and stuff and we did a lot of things and, but these were all like... I don't know, in a way, just one of those things. Well, it was not the meaning of life for us to concentrate on. Young people, after all...

Yet, during the interview, Hannes stressed his patriotism several times, pointing out that up to today he is a patriot who in the case of military crisis would definitely take up weapons without a second thought to fight for the defence of his country. Thus, the fact that at the time of his youth the freedom movement was just “one of those things” he felt excited about due to his age, does not necessarily mean that this attitude has stayed. In fact, many reflected on their own dedication back at that time with a tone of self-criticism, indicating that the (“true”) meaning of the process of independence has occurred to them later in life. As Janek (1970) pointed out, he was rather naïve at the time and for him the process was altogether like a carnival, when the hope to hold some girl's hand on the way back home from some political event was more important than the event itself. As the events took place during a rather short time frame, the age of the respondent may have played a role, too. While Janek went to those events on his own will, some of my respondents were taken to these places by their parents or parents' generation and were inspired by their enthusiasm (see also Mineva 2014, p. 155). Sven (1978), for instance, recalls travelling around Estonia with his father's choir and the high feelings of patriotism these travels had created in him. He accompanied his father when he sang at the hoisting of the Estonian national flag on the anniversary of the republic on February the 24<sup>th</sup>, 1988. Though it means getting up very early and standing for hours in the freezing cold (February in Estonia can get rather cold), he has continued this tradition until this day and promised that he would take his kids with him one day. Thus, though the experience was mediated by the parents, the socialisation rituals it involved often left deep emotions.

However, not only the age, but also the location may have had an influence on the perception of these events. As illustrated by the next extract, for some both:

Karin (1976): Yes, for me it seemed like rather senseless, why my aunt dragged me to such a place [Baltic Way]. And I remembered that I stood there but it was



well, like, I did not understand at all why I was here. But other things there... Oh, I remember the Phosphorite War [a movement to prevent the mining of phosphorite in North-Eastern part of Estonia], it was about Virumaa. And I remember boys from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade going around with those phosphorite signs and there was some scandal about it. The headmaster of the school was a very cautious red man [indication to communist ideology], you see. But any kind of euphoria or the battle over freedom, I don't recall anything alike in Ida-Virumaa.

The region Karin comes from (Ida-Virumaa) is situated in North-Eastern part of Estonia, where during the Soviet time several large scale industries were established, where output was oriented towards the entire Soviet Union. Most of the manpower for the factories was also brought in from other parts of the country, mainly from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In this part of Estonia, the proportion of ethnic Estonians was thus in the minority at the end of the 1980s. Therefore, Karin's narrative about that time differs as she recalls the ethnic tensions more severely than perhaps others.<sup>35</sup> When the Soviet Union collapsed, the industries were gradually dissolved, which gave way to a vast amount of social problems. Thus, her narrated picture about the times of transition was rather dark – along with ethnic conflicts the hazy times meant dark business affairs, the emergence of mafia, shootings in the local pub and deaths due to the spread of illegal alcohol. Karin recalled that by the time she was old enough to go to parties at night, nobody dared to move on the streets after 9pm. So when she went to Tartu to continue her studies in the university, she was stunned by the different experiences of her coevals, by the different extent of their patriotism and devotion to political questions.

Though the sample included respondents who had grown up in different parts of Estonia and in different types of settlements, Karin's interview quotes were the only ones which revealed a distinguished experience due to geographical location. Though one of the other respondents was from nearby town, Kohtla-Järve, she did not single out her experience from her coevals. This suggests that transition experiences may or may not have been influenced by different geographic locations. However, one has to bear in mind that the regional differences are voiced by respondents only even if the cleavages with others are sensed. Therefore, the acknowledgement of such regional differences may be fostered by the change of environment and depend on how much the

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<sup>35</sup> This is not a universal pattern. Ave (1973), who was also from that part of the country, did not recall the tensions that severely.

new surroundings differ from the original context. All in all, my sample is far too small to be able to claim anything substantial about the regional impact on transition experience, yet Karin's example indicates that this may be a question worth looking into in further studies.

Several respondents did take part in the independence movement, playing usually a secondary role, yet this participation gave them a feeling of being part of something important. Here, also, the notion of the confusing time occurs, where strange things were possible (according to contemporary standards). Tarmo (1976) recalls the days of being part of the Defence League and his readiness to be involved in armed conflicts. With ironic tone he told me how he, being only 15 years old, slept with a Kalashnikov under his bed. When he went to the League's shooting training by public transport, he had his loaded weapon with him and got scared looks from co-travelling pensioners. His experience is similar with Toomas'(1975):

Toomas: I didn't take part directly in the defence of Toompea<sup>36</sup> but I was there, somewhere, ready to do it. Very, very tense times. I remember that... like... in these circles, in Defence League people were ready that any moment Russia will invade us... [...] But, you know, there was a time when I even thought that I'd like to abandon school, since this thing [*Estonia's struggle for independence*] seemed the right one, that the Estonian Republic stands on the edge of a knife and then.... that everyone has to do, like, something. Then in the name of that I gave up a lot of things, that...

In his further narrative, he told about how his enthusiasm somewhat faded. After being involved in the League for some time, he got to realise that everything was actually rotten, that the Estonian security forces during the early era of regained independence were corrupt and he decided he could be useful to Estonia in other ways. He became a businessman, but was also involved in one of the political movements at the time of the interview.

While Hannes and Janek admit that they have attached more serious meaning to the movement for independence in later stages of their lives, Tarmo and Toomas indicate the opposite: that their enthusiasm faded with time. Yet, both still admit that patriotism has remained strong in them. This is not the case however with Taavi (1972):

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<sup>36</sup> Toompea Castle is the seat of the Estonian Parliament in the centre of Tallinn; people gathered there in defence of the castle when Soviet tanks rolled into Estonia during the attempted putsch of 1991.

But well, then there was like the Baltic chain and everything was cool and... but yes, right now, looking back, it sucks, everything. What has become of it. Well, I think, when right now someone would like to organise the thing [Baltic Way] again, they would not be able to get it together any more. And... and... I wouldn't go to defend Toompea. At that time, yes. I served as a border guard and was really devoted, like, in the name of something. But right now... For me, the meaning of Estonia has faded or... I wouldn't go out [to fight] for Estonia or do anything.

Perhaps it is meaningful that Taavi was not among those in his age group who had enjoyed upward mobility, at the time of the interview he was unemployed (though definitely not an outcast, living in a private house which was in the process of renovation and two BMWs at the yard). Perhaps being involved and staying involved is crucial in this respect: after feeling that the state had not answered his dedication, Taavi did not feel the need to be such a patriot any further.

While most of the respondents recalled some personal high emotion about the period, some admitted that the political and social change had passed them unnoticed. Ketlin (1973) said that she does not remember herself sitting in front of the TV and following the news about the putsch. Rather, she reasoned, she remembers the scenes from the documentaries seen later. As she put it, "life went on." Similar thoughts were expressed by Merike (1974):

I was not such a protesting kind or Estonian-minded, that I... that I would have thought during the Soviet time that the Estonian republic has to be re-established, that it was impossible to live here [in the Soviet Union] or whatever. We lived in a society where we did, you were accustomed to that life, because it did not... well, it enabled to get by and feel good... so I did not... I even didn't think at the time when Estonian republic was established, that it will be better, so to say. I was rather sceptical. [...] I actually did not believe that the establishing of the Estonian republic, that it would change our lives, that we would reach the same [economical] level of other European countries. I was rather sceptical, actually.

For Merike, independence was foremost connected to economic development rather than the political notion of a democratic independent state. She is also among those who avoids labelling the Soviet time with any ideological markers, concentrating on its material well-being and the notion that people were used to living the way they did.

It is hard to summarise the experience of the transformation under some general keywords, as the experiences vary along the lines of geographical locations, age, family background or personality. As already pointed out on several occasions, one more time, their age positioned them into a unique status: they were (to certain extent) old enough to understand and to participate (again, to certain extent), but all in all they were still bystanders. As Urmo (1977) put it: “You, like, are part of something important, but you still stand aside”.

## Summary

Coming back to Jana Hensel’s metaphor of the “old summer dress” at the beginning of this chapter, it seems that fashion design can indeed be one of the useful allegories by which to describe the presentation of the memories by this particular respondent group. In fact, that old summer dress was gladly taken out from the drawer by these people, to wear it when retro style was appropriate, but occasionally also at other times, creatively reworking it into contemporary fashion, adding it into contexts which made it look original. In other words, the memories worked as a cultural resource on several levels. For instance, it could be used as a moral agenda set for the present to stress the depth of one’s feelings of patriotism, arguing that those who lived under the Soviet regime knew how to value the current democracy or an independent state. It could be, however, also used as a source of funny stories, which distinguished them from subsequent cohorts, and which provided them with a special kind of humour. In addition, it could be used to show that their value base was grounded on experience; that they know how to value material security or freedom in order to move around the world.

It is important to note though, that the playful and occasionally expressed positive attitude towards the Soviet era cannot be equalled with restorative nostalgia towards the ideological regime. None of them indicated that they would like to have the regime back in any way. Rather, it was used as meaning-making for their own identity. Moreover, even though the respondents tended not to indulge into ideological batters, it does not mean this trait can be generalised for the entire age group in Estonia. As illustrated by the example of Juku-Kalle Raid’s political campaign (incinerate the Commies!) and as will be shown in the next chapter, among this age group are also those who are taking more radical and ideologically driven positions towards the regime. Also, their childhood memories of the Soviet era may not be solely unique for this age group.

As Catriona Kelly (2007) and Kristi Grünberg (2009) have shown, the shared childhood memories of the time can be extended to previous as well as part of the next cohorts. Therefore, the memories presented in this chapter are just some discursive paths among several. These paths sometimes cross and sometimes run in parallel, but at times can get into discursive battles as well.

While the experiences of the Soviet era were almost always contextualised in a child's perspective with little or no agency (thus, not being responsible of any questionable ideological actions), the transition experiences are more heterogeneous in this respect. While some position themselves as indifferent bystanders, others depict themselves as passionate contributors. The change and its direction is mostly perceived as a positive development. This is not characteristic to Eastern Europe in general, as several authors have pointed out that for instance, in Eastern Germany, many felt that the changes were put on them from above rather than built by the nation themselves (Vogt, 2005, Nehring, 2007). When thinking about the general upward mobility of this age group in Estonia and the experience of working in influential positions when they were young and inexperienced, we can see that this respondent group often feels as being part of helping to reconstruct the new republic.

Jana Hensel's summer dress is thus an important symbolic item both for Hensel herself and for the respondents in this study. It is not only important as a symbolic or cultural tool for feeling entitled or evaluating other age groups. As it seems, the position of this summer dress can differ in Eastern European societies to a certain extent. However, as with fashion in general, it is dynamic. What is out of fashion today, can be cool tomorrow. Yet there is more to it, as Eviatar Zerubavel (2003, p. 44) observes:

Given the role of memorabilia as a mnemonic bridge, we often refuse to throw out old clothes and hold on to otherwise worthless presents we received from people who once occupied a special place in our lives. As we keep moving through life from one place to another, the various mementos we carry with us, make it, somehow, much easier to maintain the continuity between our past and present selves.

Thus, both for Hensel and these respondents these memories are part of an identity which is continuously contextualised in the environment of the current collective memory. The memories expressed by the Estonian interviewees showed that collective mnemonic patterns are offering a framework to structure their own narratives of the past. Their autobiographical stories were positioned in the cultural context of both the discourse of rupture as well as

## The 1970s

the normalisation discourse of the Soviet everyday, using the humorous details to de-ideologise their memories. Having said that, I am not indicating that their narratives are a weak echo of what they have read or heard from other people. Quite the opposite, as will be shown in the next chapter, their discursive practices have also made their way into public discourses. However, the cultural discourses about the past are cumulative – a new one is always created on the basis of the old structure with the cultural tools which are available when the narratives are told: cultural forms are in constant circulation (Sturken, 2008).

## 7. Public and media discourses

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The proliferation of the internet and social media has, among other things, probably multiplied the spread and the speed of the distribution of ironic and humorous stories and jokes from all fields of life. The form of irony and making fun enables one to approach critical social themes and topics in a way which allows laughter over tensions which could otherwise be a source of confrontation (see Sheftel, 2011). One such topic which gets attention every now and then is the generational conflict. Recently, an anonymous tale circulating on Facebook caught my eye confronting generational experiences in an ironic way:

When I was a kid, my parents always drove me on the verge of crying with their boring recollections about how hard their childhood had been, how they had to walk to school, every morning, 15 km uphill, but the winter lasted all year long and in addition, they had to carry their three underage sisters on their backs. The school they attended was actually one big cold room, the toilet was outside and in order to reach it, they had to run the entire kilometre uphill.

The story went on about the difficulties the parents had to experience in school, about the poverty and unhygienic conditions they had to cope with. While their living conditions were inhumane, they were still very diligent and hard-working:

On top of all this they managed to help their parents in cleaning their communal apartment and cleaned the toilets every day! In addition, they chopped wood, heated ovens, peeled 5 buckets of potatoes in a single day, because they had no other food but potatoes, because other ingredients were unavailable, because these were sent straight to the war front.

The storyteller goes on to say that when listening to those stories he promised to himself that he would never bother his kids with such tales. However, seeing how young people get everything so easy today, he has changed his mind. The story continues thus with recollections of his own childhood compared to the contemporary youth. His story is concentrated not on material resources or hygiene, but rather, on technological progress:

I'd rather not talk about MP3 or Kazaa! When I wanted to get music, I had to go on foot, in the middle of winter and a snowstorm to a music store 5 km uphill and steal black LPs, risking with my honour right in front of the sales-people! Or wait the entire day to be able to record music from radio stations such as "the Voice of America" or the BBC, whereas everything was disturbed by KGB! And the voice of a DJ could start chatting in the midst of a song and that was even worse than KGB!

This particular story illustrates a funny way of constructing universal patterns in generational terms. According to this common storyline, it is always the older generations that had it harder and it is always the younger who have everything coming too easily to them. These constructions are, no doubt, pretty widespread and not anything particularly Estonian or even post-communist. Rather, such stories are made up and distributed all around the world with variations. For instance, an American singer, parodist and actor Alfred Matthew (artist name Weird Al Yankovic, born 1959) produced a similar song called "When I was your age" in 1992. In this song, he talks in ironic key how he had to walk to school forty miles in snow and work twenty two hours for just half a cent.

However, though there seem to exist universal cultural constructs about generational perceptions across different cultures, every different culture (and generation) positions these models into the specific cultural context of their own childhood. The similarities between the American song and the anonymous tale may be striking, but the latter constantly refers to the Soviet context: note the hint to communal apartments in the parents' story and KGB in the narrator's. Judging from the background of the story, the piece is written by someone who has been a child during the 1980s (recording songs from radio), thus potentially someone born during the 1970s.<sup>37</sup> The sense of humour is

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<sup>37</sup> There are a number of signs suggesting that the author is indeed born during the 1970s. For instance, recording music from the radio became technically available for young people only during the 1980s; having a phone also indicates the 1980s when having a phone became more regular; in other parts of the texts there are computer games described, which did not emerge until the end of the 1980s.



especially appealing as it exemplifies the points made earlier, namely that the 1970s age group tends to be distancing themselves from the more dramatic narratives of the Soviet past and in their narrations of these times prefers to concentrate on everyday life (phones, letters, music). Nevertheless, they treat the experience of living at that time as a symbolic resource (we had it harder, we know how to value contemporary comforts) as universally those who have experienced difficulties in the past would do. Additionally, it also illustrates how the past is treated ironically, joking with rather sensitive dramatic symbols like KGB (the voice of the DJ being even worse than the KGB).

Such humorous stories form part of public discourse or the narrative templates, as James Wertsch (2002) calls them, which surround us on an everyday basis in the form of different media, the internet, newspapers, books, films, etc. As pointed out in previous chapters, memories tend to be both private and collective. What is remembered personally, is always put in the broader social context. Thus, the collective and the personal interact constantly; public images become private and the other way round (Sturken, 2008, p. 74). Our personal memories are always structured and contextualised within the framework of collective memory, yet those who hold hegemonic positions in different discursive fields can shape the way collective memory is structured. The following chapter aims to illustrate that the constructions which emerge from the interviews also appear as powerful discursive patterns in the public media. While this may just show how much private memories can be shaped by public media, it can also point at the degree to which this group has a “voice” in public. This all the more so, as many of the journalists and commentators who will be cited in the following analysis belong to the same age cohort.

The rather late turn to public discourses in this study has several reasons. First, and most obviously, the structure follows the sequence of the research process. The interviews with representatives of the 1970s cohort were conducted and analysed first and only in a second step did I analyse the media in search of similar narrative templates. The aim was thus not so much to get a general picture of the various discursive fields, but rather to determine the degree to which construction used in the narratives of the respondents was reflected also in public discourse. A second reason for this structuring is likewise research related. The interviews for this study were taken over the course of ten years, however, the media analysis was limited only to the years 2010–2012. In this sense, the study deals with discourses that have made their appearance during the last decade, but it does not aim to show their dynamics. While during the ten years the dispositions of the interviewed remained strikingly stable (the way

they reflected on the past; their attitudes towards the change; their generational constructions), the images of them in the media might not have stayed the same over the same period, not least since the respondents themselves gradually gained more of a voice. Therefore, rather than providing a thorough analysis of media discourses over time and using this as some sort of framework for examining the interviews, the following analysis is meant to merely illustrate and to complement the findings from the interview data. It certainly does not constitute an analytical framework which organises the data.

The focus of the following chapter is on systematically analysing two popular nation-wide daily newspapers in Estonia: *Postimees* (N of articles analysed=85) and *Eesti Päevaleht* (N=62) during 2010–2012, and here mainly on the opinion pages. However, while doing the analysis, other media outlets (including social media and literature) as well as individual articles and op-eds which appeared after 2012 were also considered and used for the analysis in a more unsystematic manner. To follow the discursive practices of generation (as outlined earlier; see also Corsten 1999), articles were coded first of all thematically, taking those that addressed issues either relating to generational construction or to the memory of the Soviet era and/or transition periods. These were then analysed as to the pictures they draw, first, about the 1970s as such and second, about those born during this decade. As said, the main aim was to see whether the findings from the qualitative interview analysis were reflected in these media depictions.

Returning once again to the issue of voice, it is most instructive to look at the age of both newspaper's opinion page editors. Indeed, by early 2014, all of the four editors of the opinion pages at *Postimees* and four out of five editors in *Eesti Päevaleht* were born during the 1970s.<sup>38</sup> In other words, we can assume that the 1970s cohort has a strong position when it comes to setting the agenda for public debates or having a say in public controversies. In a democratic society, this does not mean that they determine public opinion, let alone censor it. However, the age group as such is certainly not under-represented or in a marginalised position when it comes to voicing its perspectives in public media and discourses.

To be sure, to claim that the opinions depend on one's birth date would be an exaggeration. At the same time denying any impact of the personal age on our opinions would also be careless, as our experiences depend on the social

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<sup>38</sup> Most of these editors had been in the same position also during the years 2010–2012 that are covered by this systematic analysis.

context within which we were raised and came of age, and our experiences shape our opinions. Thus, similar social conditions might not determine attitudes, but they perhaps have a power to influence what topics are meaningful to people.

## Generational construction: evaluating the young

As shown in previous chapters, personal experiences provide people with a feeling of entitlement. Those who have lived during the Soviet time possess the resource of certain “knowledge,” something that those who have only heard or read about it would never be able to claim. As one might expect, experiences as a source of entitlement come up every now and then also in the newspapers (as well as in social media) and they are mainly evoked whenever the situation of the current youth is being evaluated. In fact, the universal patterns of inter-generational comparisons that appear in the anonymous story at the beginning of this chapter mostly in a joking tone (the young do not understand; have it easier etc.) reappear here in a more serious tone as well. Strangely enough, among those who talk about their hard childhood in these newspaper op-eds are also those born during the 1970s. This extract by Kätlin Kaldmaa (born 1970), for instance, is strikingly similar to the anonymous storyteller’s depiction of the harsh conditions of his parents’ generation:

I was raised in Central-East-Estonia’s utmost province, where there is nothing besides beautiful wilderness. /.../ I had to go to secondary school somewhere further away. The place was Palamuse, the distance to which was 13 km, so I know very well what it means to go to school far away. You could only dream about the school bus, and had to get up at half past five for school, the shuttle bus was scheduled ten minutes after seven, and every morning I had to pass time for over an hour in an empty school house, because the lessons did not start until nine.

After school, the daily Odysseus journey awaited. Luckily there were three or four of us [from our village] so we did not have to do it all alone, but in the midst of the coldest winters and diseases, there were times when I had to. The shuttle bus was not due until six and there was no place to wait for it. So we had to start going home after school by foot, whether it rained hail, water or knives, was it warm or cold. During winters, often below minus 20 degrees – it is one of the coldest regions in Estonia. Every single day. Thirteen kilometres. /.../ Often, some of us had to take off shoes in the middle of the journey, because the pain was intolerable. Yet the next day, you had to go to

school with the same shoes. /.../ and when you reached home you had to start cooking, because mother was away at work. (Kaldmaa 2012)

The aim of this article was to contribute to the debate about the closing of rural gymnasiums. While sometimes the message “we had it harder” is meant to communicate to youngsters that they should be capable to adapt to contemporary (i.e. easier) conditions without complaining, the idea of this piece of writing was quite the opposite, to convince the audience that closing a gymnasium can cause serious sufferings to young rural lives. Either way, using what can be conditionally called “generational capital” is common in arguing for or against certain policies.

In some accounts, having it hard is presented as a price to achieve positive outcomes, if only the subsequent generations would give up their comfort zone. Such examples embrace a variety of areas, from better study results to sports performance. Peep Pahv (born 1970) for example, draws a picture during a school of his time which was harsh, but in his opinion due to that the school was also disciplined, unlike contemporary schools which are in the abyss (Pahv, 2011). In another article, the same author observes that while in his youth it was unthinkable for pupils to avoid skiing lessons (though the lessons took place at the other end of the town and one had to manage with transporting skis in public transport, changing several buses to reach the destination), young people today do not know how to ski and do not even bother to learn (Pahv 2013). Yet, in his view skiing is a skill every Estonian should possess. The general line of such stories implies that people who have lived through tough times have a moral right (generational capital) to tell how things should be as they have actually lived through (what they perceive as) harder times. It is noteworthy, however, that the experiences of those who lived through the strict Soviet time and the confusing time of the 1990s are used very contextually. Sometimes the strictness of the Soviet time is seen as source of virtue (and lack of regulations a source of negative outcomes), at other times the puzzling times of loose rules in the 1990s is seen positively as a source of creativity (and thus, regulations as repressing, see also the interviews in chapter three).

While there are several articles that draw on the experience of harsh Soviet times, today’s young people were also evaluated against the backdrop of the transition experience and of the symbolic capital of restructuring the economy. Similar to the opinions expressed in the interviews, those born during the 1960s (i.e. the “winners’ generation”) were presented as the ones who actually called the shots throughout the restructuring process and the contemporary

youth is evaluated against the backdrop of their success. In an interview for an online news portal, *delfi.ee*, when asked about contemporary young people, Professor of Social Sciences at Tallinn University of Technology, Rainer Kattel (born 1974) observed:

I notice comfort and conservativeness, maybe even laziness in thinking. People want to get their degree, finish the university, get a job with salary over one thousand euros, establish a family, buy a country house... But the eyes are not shining, new ideas are hard to find.

*No spark?*

Yes, young people want to live a life of an Estonian 50-year old “winners’ generation” men, but they don’t understand that although the winners have everything now, they had to strain a lot during the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, to get the privatised company running. Those people who right now think about a calm pensioner time, worked a lot more compared to the contemporary youth, they strived and risked. Contemporary youth would rather have a secure paid-job.<sup>39</sup>

The patterns which emerged from the interviews are thus well observed also in the public sphere. According to these articles, compared to the previous generations, young people were either not tough enough (accustomed to easy lifestyle), enthusiastic enough or patriotic enough. In November 2013, for instance, a restaurant *Roheline Ait* in Rapla (a small town in northern Estonia) whose mission was to offer healthy food, was closed due to the shortage of staff. In the interview given to online portal *delfi.ee* the owner Pekka-Paavo Kesküla (born 1972) complained about contemporary youth, who according to him were too lazy to take up jobs and if they do, they demand too much money and still refuse to dedicate themselves to the job properly.<sup>40</sup> According to the owner, everything starts from home and school:

“In school, you cannot demand anything anymore. Everything has to be made interesting and appealing for them.” /.../ “I know young people who do not look for jobs for themselves, they just wait until someone offers them. And they think one gets paid just for showing up, working is for extra money. The more boring the job, the bigger the salary.”

<sup>39</sup> See: <http://arileht.delfi.ee/news/uudised/rainer-kattel-praegused-tudengid-tahavad-pingutamata-voitjate-polvkonda-jaljendada.d?id=66168402> [accessed, April 2015]

<sup>40</sup> <http://arileht.delfi.ee/news/uudised/populaarse-soogikoha-omanik-sulgeme-uksed-noorte-tootsijate-tase-on-kohutav.d?id=67215750> [accessed April 2015]

The article was widely shared on social media<sup>41</sup> and commented on. The same news was reflected in other news portals and dailies. As expected, many people had felt the same way about the contemporary young. The topic further developed and soon enough there were several articles published on the same subject. In one of them, a former employee of the restaurant complained about the harsh and humiliating style of management by Kesküla, thus explaining his incapability to recruit more staff. However, there emerged other pieces which broadened the topic and called for a more balanced picture of the issue. Besides the ones advocating for diligent youth, there were also articles which urged not to judge the contemporary youth according to the development paths which were common either during the Soviet or the transformation times. The Rapla restaurant's case was an occasion which produced a debate in a more concentrated form, though such discussions took place in other forms before. In 2010, Arved Breidaks (born 1975) pondered in a newspaper article on the strong stereotypes which exist about young people who sit on their hands. He pointed out that the economic developments along with the rigid state institutions dealing with unemployment are often responsible for the job behaviour of the youth. In his view, there is no point blaming the young for preferring to work on Australian farms, instead society should think how to change these attitudes:

I find that first we have to give to the youth back their faith in their homeland so that whenever problems emerge they would not get a ticket to a budget flight, but would try to find solutions in Estonia. It is not possible to achieve right away, but we could start by ending the public cursing of the youth about how they cannot manage anything. Causing defiance between the generations is neither in the interest of the young nor the old. (Breidaks, 2010)

In a similar vein, Anna-Maria Penu (born 1978) and Nils Niitra (born 1976) wrote about how the global economic crisis affects the socialisation patterns of contemporary youth (Penu, 2010; Niitra, 2010). Niitra brought as a comparison his own socialisation experience of having worked as a journalist already at the age of 17, since there was a “youth cult” governing the society at that time, when “every kind of experience was a burden” and the state welcomed young people without any experience. Right now, he argues, experience is valued again and those who managed to take strategic positions in the society are reluctant to give them up, making it hard for the young to access good jobs.

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<sup>41</sup> It was shared in Facebook 1800 times, which is a big number considering the size of population of Estonia.

Thus, he reasoned, the state has to take measures to improve the social conditions for the young.

The attitude, which labels youth as not being diligent (or something else) enough, is perhaps universal in the contemporary world, and probably has existed already for centuries. However, in every society it takes different forms as the social conditions where previous generations were socialised, are always unique. In Estonia, there was a period quite recently when being young meant also being successful in terms of upward social mobility. Often, thus, when the contemporary youth fails to follow in the footsteps of those “in charge” in discursive fields, they are evaluated as not “tough” enough. If necessary, the Soviet experience can also be brought up as a discursive weapon in these battlefields.

## Constructing the generational borders

The construction of the generational lines or units in general is pretty vague. There are several articles which refer to generations in blurred terms without particularly setting the borders for these generations. The authors of the articles refer to “my generation,” “the Soviet generation,” “the war generation,” or “new generation” etc. In these cases, it is the reader who has to deduct the borders from the topics discussed: often there is a certain experience referred to, which is available only to specific birth cohorts. Similar to my interviews, the generational borders in the articles were often set contextually depending on the issue: shared Soviet childhood or life under the Soviet regime (which could refer to a wide range of birth cohorts), or experience of a certain period (i.e. the Khrushchev thaw, narrowing of the cohorts). Talking about the “young” or the “new generation,” the line is usually not mentioned either. Generally, the authors tend to refer to those whose socialisation experience has been under the regained independence.

While the generational labels are often changing and hazy, the term “winners’ generation,” however, seems to be coined in discursive fields. Introduced first by sociologists in describing those born during the mid-1960s,<sup>42</sup> who occupied key positions in society during the transformation years, the label seems to have a wide usage also in public debates. Often, other generations are defined against this backdrop of the “winners.” Again, the borders are rather unclear, and sometimes the label of the winners’ generation can embrace age

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<sup>42</sup> In fact, the longitudinal research which was the base of this label, had those born in 1965 in focus (Titma, 1999).

cohorts born from mid-1950s until the 1980s, to signify those who have enjoyed upward social mobility or economic wealth. Occasionally, the 1970s generation is distinguished from the one born during the 1960s (“winners”) indicating that they were too young to participate during the crucial years, yet wanting their share later. This particular perception is often limited to the political context. One powerful pretext for this construction was a new political party, *Res Publica*, which was established in 2001 and the most prominent figures of which were persons born in the 1970s.<sup>43</sup> In the general atmosphere of distrust towards the “old” politicians they managed to get significant support during the elections in both 2002 and 2003, yet their popularity did not last long. In 2006, in the light of a dropping popularity percentage, the party decided to join with the conservative *Pro Patria* party (a party which had been on the political scene since regained independence). The original promise of *Res Publica* to establish a new way in politics lost its meaning and was considered as failed by many. In several articles, the story of the rise and fall of *Res Publica* was depicted in generational terms, indicating that the political force emerged, because those born in the 1970s wanted to have a say in political decision making. In an article about generational construction, Maimu Berg (born 1945), refers to this phenomenon:

When I listen to contemporary opinions about the need to change the generations in the hope that when it happens, life will look right upwards, then let me remind you that it was just a while ago when people enthusiastically voted for a new generation to reign, a generation who had been left aside by those who were senior, but wanted to get a piece of the state pie and promised people completely new politics and a better life. “Promised, promised, but did not give”.<sup>44</sup> (Berg, 2011)

The new party was indeed often attributed to the specific 1970s generation. Seeing this as a generational phenomenon, however, is rarely done in a positive tone as *Res Publica*’s political slogans to bring in a new style of governing are frequently described as not only failed, but in fact a façade behind which there is a cynical and pragmatic will for power. While *Res Publica* was probably the first political movement which had a high share of “1970-generation

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<sup>43</sup> The immediate party leadership was of older age however. The initial party chair was Rein Taagepera (born 1933), who was replaced already in August 2002 by Juhan Parts (born 1966)).

<sup>44</sup> This is a reference to an old Latvian folk song “Pūt vējiņi” in which a man has been promised a bride, but her mother refuses to give her away.



politicians” and thus brought the topic of the 1970s generation into discursive fields, the proportion of the 1970s cohort in leading posts in other parties has recently grown significantly as well. As was discussed in chapter two, the new government which stepped into office in March 2014 was formed under a prime minister, Taavi Rõivas, who was born in 1979 and the leader of his coalition party (the Social Democrats), Sven Mikser, was born in 1973. When Rõivas was first suggested as a candidate for the post of prime minister, his personality was also analysed in *Postimees* from a generational perspective:

If we think further, then, what kind of possibilities are possibly out there for the generation born in the seventies? The generation born in the sixties is still in charge, but the sparkling ideas that brought them success in the times of newly regained independence scare the contemporary electorate or even may take one to prison. [...] There are always exceptions, but for [the 1970s] generation, there is no other possibilities but to be studious like a school child, who has all the home work always done. And strenuous – ready to work patiently in the name of a goal. (Kõiv, 2014)

It is noteworthy that though a man born in 1979 was about to become one of the most important men in power in Estonia, the author of the piece, Sigrid Kõiv (born 1975) still considered the 1970s to have been left aside (“what kind of possibilities are possibly out there...”). The notion that the 1960s generation are still calling the shots and the 1970s are mere puppets in their hands is strong in this article. In her construction, the 1970s generation consists of those who lack creativity and achieve everything due to hard work. Interestingly enough, she constructs her very own generation. Perhaps one reason for this somewhat negatively flavoured construction of the 1970s generation in politics (both during the *Res Publica* episode as well as with regard to the Rõivas government) owes much to the habit of the overall critical attitude towards politicians in the media. However, publishing the article on this topic also illustrates that though the 1970s are making their way more powerfully to the political scene, their generational constructions are probably still in the making.

Though there are some articles in which the 1970s cohort is treated as being separate from the 1960s, there is generally confusion as to where to draw the upper line. In other words, the discourses tend to be too vague to allow the establishment of a border for a “new” generation. As we saw in earlier chapters, in the interviews the generational boundaries had been rather blurred (depending on the issue, borders were shifted back and forth), but they tended to be roughly drawn 5-7 years before and after the respondents’ birth

year. As society was changing really fast during the transformation years, it offered many key points or trends which could be creatively used to construct one's generation. Depending on the age of the respondent, people set borders defining some crucial aspects which the social developments offered from their own experience. These tendencies also appear in public debates. Holger Roonemaa (born 1983) feels the need to distinguish his experience from the ones of those born at the end of the 1980s:

Things that apply to the brats born in the beginning of the 1980s do not apply to those born only 1986 or later. If we leave aside everything that concerns childhood and how much impact *perestroika* had on someone, then empty shelves in shops, witnessing the queues that were kilometres long, participating in the Baltic Way or watching *Nu pogodi*<sup>45</sup> cartoons, then there is still a cleavage between those born in the beginning and the end of the 1980s. /.../ While those born in the first half of the 1980s were dragged with force straight from school or university to work and they have been able to guide the social developments with their values, morale and ethics, then for those born in the second half of the 1980s, the situation is exactly the opposite. Nobody waits for them with open arms. This is the bitter truth. (Roonemaa, 2011).

This extract illustrates that the generational constructions used by those born during the 1970s or even the 1960s, are also a source for generational identity for those born during the 1980s. Roonemaa uses the discursive (cartoons), structural (upward mobility) as well as value-based features to distinguish his cohort from the ones born later. Though he was only six during the Baltic Way, it is still a powerful cultural resource to use for his generational identity.

Thus, the borders and lines of generations are always contextual and constantly constructed and reconstructed in discursive fields. While generation as a social construct is strong in many discursive fields – people use it when fighting discursive battles in the fields of politics, sports, culture and even health issues; there are always voices which call for abandoning the construct as useless:

And so, all this talk about generations seems to be a pseudo problem for me. I don't consider one's generational belonging as a value in and of itself. The fact that I check the same box in terms of birth year with someone, does not

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<sup>45</sup> Nu pogodi is a title of a popular Soviet cartoon, which had a wolf and a hare as the main characters. The cartoon was similar to Tom and Jerry and was allegedly its Soviet analogue. However, the cartoon also continued to be produced after the Soviet time was over and its last episodes were made in 2006.

mean we have a lot in common and plenty of things to talk about. Alright, we were raised in the same social conditions, but you cannot endlessly talk about sugar coupons, triangular milk-packages and a collection of candy wrapping papers. (Prints, 2011)

Deconstructing the generational concept, Prints (born 1977) relies still on cultural symbols which often pop up in the shared Soviet childhood narratives: collecting candy wrapping papers or remembering triangular milk-packages. In other words, though disagreeing with those who consider those Soviet de-ideologised symbolic details to be a base for generational identity, her picking up those signs indicates that they are powerful cultural tools in discursive fields. Thus, one can conclude that the Soviet period is one of the strongest keys by which generations are defined. In fact, it is really hard to find any generational construct which leaves the Soviet era aside as its base. Mart Niineste (born 1983), for example, maintains in several of his articles that the contemporary elite consists of “Soviet people” (Niineste 2012) through and through. Moreover, he reasons, the new generation is not untouched by the Soviet legacy either, as they have been raised by these “Soviet people” (Niineste 2010).

But how exactly is the Soviet period depicted in the media by those born during the 1970s? As already pointed out, the past is used as a powerful source for setting moral agendas for the present (Poole, 2008). In addition to personified narratives, media discourses also offer propositions for the state in its mnemonic policies to create ways of fostering patriotism. In these accounts, the past addressed is more distant than the lived memories of the cohort born during the 1970s. The historian Vahur Made (born 1970), for example, repeatedly raised an issue of establishing memorials to commemorate different aspects of Estonian history. In one of his articles, he asked why in the capital of Tallinn the erection of a Russian Orthodox church is in full swing, yet there are no plans to establish memorials to the victims of the Stalinist repression or for the anti-Soviet partisans (forest brethren). “I would love to show these to my sons and talk to them about Estonian history” (Made 2010). In another article, he criticised a plan to open a memorial tablet to Boris Yeltsin:<sup>46</sup>

In Tallinn, there often come guests who will ask: who are you? Who have been your leaders? Whose thoughts have become the base of your culture? We only shrug and point to Yeltsin. (Made, 2012)

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<sup>46</sup> As first, the President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, later Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin officially recognised the Baltic states’ independence in 1991.

In his treatment, thus, the past is not only important in order to set a moral agenda for the subsequent generations, but also to introduce Estonian history and culture to others. Though Made criticises the decisions of those in power, his suggestions are well in line with the official hegemonic memory politics which treat the Soviet regime as an era of rupture and which tend to stigmatise not only the Soviet, but also everything Russian (Pääbo, 2010).

Made represents the discourse, which urges for representation of Soviet history through victimisation (a call for the memorial of deportations) and struggle (the forest brethren fighting the regime), labelling the state “criminal”. The voices which call for a more diversified treatment of the Soviet past, however, are also present in public discourses. These voices often urge the public to consider private lives and experiences while deconstructing the regime and the entire era:

Yet, Gagarin is also for many Estonians the hero of their childhood or youth, regardless of the regime back then. How many of those wanted to become an astronaut or astrologist after that. There is no need to feel ashamed for one’s childhood and youth. (Postimees, 2011)

Therefore, childhood is treated as a shield which enables disengagement from the regime’s ideological side, even though the symbol itself – astronaut Gagarin and his first flight to space – was part of the Soviet ideological propaganda machine. As Wimberg (a writer, whose real name is Jaak Urmet, born 1979) put it:

...as youth is always beautiful, its beauty is being transferred on to the whole era, when the time of youth happened to take place. (Wimberg, 2010)

Thus, not only the childhood itself, but the era with its ideological symbols (de-ideologised through the prism of childhood) get their share in the nostalgic memories of some of the representatives of the 1970s cohort. Nostalgia can be presented also in ironic ways such as concentrating on the absurdity of the regime (see Jõesalu and Nugin, 2012; Sheftel, 2011; Berdahl, 2010; Mineva, 2014). An example for this is the TV-show “ESSR”, a playful series presenting the surreal social relations and everyday practices of the Soviet era. The series was launched in 2010 and was broadcasted on national public TV channels. By 2013, seven seasons were produced. The series was written by three authors, among them the previously cited Wimberg as well as Gert Kiiler (born 1974) and Villu Kangur (born 1957). The series received lot of media reviews, some

of which raised the issue of inappropriate nostalgia, while others greeted the humorous treatment of the era.

This jolly depiction is often a reaction to the hegemonic treatment of history as a tragedy full of drama and suffering. The tendency to distance oneself from this construction of history that places mostly rather gloomy events at its centre was already noted in the analysis of the interview data. As stated, the cohorts' age can certainly be seen as one of the main reasons for this distance. Not only was the 1970s cohort too young to have experienced the worst repression, they also grew up during a time when the memory of these repressions slowly faded and lost their urgency at the level of family communications and memory. Moreover, particularly painful stories were often not told to children to avoid getting them in trouble at school. This could be one reason why the particularly heartbreaking family stories that appeared in the media during the time analysed here (2010–2012) were rarely written by those born in the 1970s, but rather older cohorts. For example, Anneli Ammas (born 1962), Peeter Tali (born 1964) and Eerik-Niiles Kross (born 1967) all wrote about their families' stories of suffering (Ammas, 2011; Tali, 2011; Kross, 2011). These stories have a subtext which aims at establishing a moral responsibility to remember and not to forget in order to avoid such things happening again.

While not questioning the need to remember or challenge the official memory of the rupture, several representatives of the 1970s cohort, however, raise issues which call for a more balanced treatment of history. Meelis Niinepuu (born 1979) advocates that perhaps the presentation of pain and sufferings can be exhausting and unfruitful tactics in fostering the remembering of difficult times. While he fundamentally agreed about the importance of remembering the repressions and deportations, he urged people to concentrate more on stories which had positive outcomes (people falling in love while in forced exile, courageous people surviving in spite of hardships in Siberia etc) (Niinepuu, 2012).

Another interesting debate occurred in connection with the popular novel "Purge" written by the Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen (born 1977),<sup>47</sup> which appeared in its Estonian translation in 2009. The book found rather mixed reactions in Estonia and was criticised not least by members of the 1970s age group. Oksanen's novel focuses in particular on the sufferings and

<sup>47</sup> Though being of Estonian origin from her mother's side, Sofi was born and raised in Finland. Thus, she has not lived during the Soviet time in Estonia, though during her childhood, she often visited Estonia. In her book "Stalin's cows" she describes her childhood experiences. Her treatment of that era is far from nostalgic (reflective or restorative).

## The 1970s

the brutal treatment of Estonian women during the Stalinist period as well as later years. In her version of history, the heritage of the Stalinist repressions influenced the lives of women all the way up to the 1990s, and the violence that was planted back in the Stalinist times, had consequences throughout the Soviet time. According to Piret Tali (born 1972) such depiction of history is too biased towards violence:

I think that the fearful years of Estonian history can be described more discretely than by rape and bloodshed. I don't think that talking about those things would take us closer to bringing those who raped women 60 years ago to the court of law or their activities would be evaluated as crimes against humanity. (Tali, 2010)

Tali is far from demanding the forgetting of those brutal years, but she objects to this way of viewing the entire Estonian history through the lens of violence and repression. To balance the representation of a repressive history, Tali wrote a book herself about her pioneer years (Tali, 2012). Most of the book is written in short ironic stories through the prism of her childhood. Unlike her brother Peeter Tali (born 1964), who wrote (in the article referred to above) about their family's history of deportation in rather dramatic colours, Piret in her articles and book presents this same history in less dramatic style. While Peeter Tali describes how his grandmother, after her husband had been deported, lived for years with packed suitcases (in the fear of deportation), Piret Tali depicts that story in the key of a confusing narrative of a child. In the chapter of her book where the story appears, she recalls how she wondered why her grandfather had been sent to Siberia if her mother claims he was not a criminal, and why he has a grave in Estonia even though his body is not there. The sufferings caused by the deportation are left out of the narrative as they were perhaps less vivid to a child. Instead, Piret Tali proclaims admiration for her grandmother for loving her husband until the end of her life (having her bridal bouquet buried with her). The structure of Tali's book allows for ironic excursions through the multilayered world of the Soviet time, showing the author's enthusiasm about being a pioneer, her confusion about parents' reluctance to accept the Soviet regime, and presenting nostalgic details of her childhood's material world (chewing gums, bicycles etc.).

Explaining these contrasts in the public presentations of family history among siblings by reference to their age or even generational belonging would probably be too simplistic. Childhood memories and confusion about right and

wrong as a child has been depicted in literature by other generations as well (see, for example, Tungal 2008; Ots, 2012). Moreover, depictions of the Soviet everyday can also be prevalent in the memories of older generations (Jõesalu, 2005; Raudsepp, 2012; Jõesalu and Kõresaar, 2013). However, as those born in the 1970s did not experience the restrictions during their adult lives, the childhood nostalgia is actually their only lived memory of that period. Nevertheless they feel entitled to having an opinion about this time. Wimberg (born 1979) takes the line of thought expressed by Piret Tali even further when he admits that he is sick and tired of hearing stories of deportations (Wimberg, 2011). The extent of the grievance seems to have taken – in his view – the measures of “mass hysteria”. As he observes: “In Estonian society, there seems to be like an urge for grievance”. However, he still feels the need to clarify why he has a right to discuss the topic:

My talk may seem cruel and inappropriate. I will tell then, for a change, something more personal. /.../ My grandmother’s uncle was deported along with his wife and children. My uncle and his wife died in the Kiev oblast, the children made their way back to Estonia. The son of another uncle spent due to his German uniform a year in a Narva camp, then in Kasakhstan, but made it back alive. Grandmother’s first husband lost his life while in German uniform. Some relatives emigrated. Typical Estonian family story. For some reason, however, I do not feel the urge to unite with all those choirs of grievance that have become louder and louder recently. This does not mean I don’t hold dear the memory of my grandparents or wouldn’t value my family or its history. I do, very much so!

Yet, the depiction of the Soviet past by the 1970s cohort is ambivalent and it is not easy to put a finger on its distinctive indisputable features. One of the representatives of the cohort, Andrus Kivirähk, a writer born in 1970, is a good example of such ambivalence. In his humorous newspaper columns, he treats the Soviet period just as ironically as political figures of the Estonian pre-war republic (e.g. Konstantin Päts, the first president of Estonia) and his sharp pen analyses critically the issues of contemporary politics, bringing funny parallels from both historical periods. Kivirähk is one of the most popular contemporary Estonian writers having published several novels, short stories and plays. One of his plays (*Blue Wagon*, staged in 2003 in theatre “Ugala”) addressed also the topic of generations in humorous key. The plot has a birthday party at its core, where people who have spent their childhood during the Soviet time

start reminiscing about those times and making jokes about them.<sup>48</sup> In one of the scenes, they find the uniform of a militiaman and one of the characters decides to wear it. When an elderly neighbour rings the bell of the apartment in order to ask the company to keep the noise down, he gets immediately terrified by seeing the militia uniform. The friends at the party decide to play a trick on the old man by convincing him that the old Soviet regime has been re-established. By this, Kivirähk seems to imply to the audience, that while for the elderly generation the fear of repressions is still vivid, the younger ones are capable of making jokes about it.

In the debate over Oksanen's "Purge", however, Kivirähk did not agree with Piret Tali (and others who disagreed with her general violent treatment of Estonian history). Instead, he mocked those blaming Oksanen for exaggerating with the overall atmosphere of the Soviet era in a rather sarcastic way. In his view, it is characteristic of Estonians to always worry about what the international audiences may think of them. Thus, he claims that he would not be surprised if a squad of Estonians would now go from door to door in foreign countries to clarify the historical details of the book (like, he ironically adds, the dog's names in her book: they did not sound Estonian enough). He continues:

So if Oksanen depicts life in the Soviet Estonia differently from the picture which someone who lived at that time remembers, this is her creative right. Actually it is bizarre how passionately some people rush into defending the Soviet time. Of course, life at that time was not black-and-white, but generally it was crap nevertheless. My generation was lucky, because childhood is commonly beautiful and right away when things got serious and the time came to go to the Russian army, the Soviet time ended. But elderly people should remember. It is natural that retrospectively several features of the time seem funny or exiting, but generally I think it is difficult to be unjust towards the Soviet power. And Oksanen writes mainly about the Stalin era, which was the nastiest of them all. (Kivirähk, 2010)

Thus, though being one among those who constructs a generation that is able to laugh about serious issues of the past, he is also the one who reminds the public of the fact that the Soviet time was so bad that it is hard to exaggerate its cruelty.

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<sup>48</sup> There is no particular age frame for the generation Kivirähk depicts in his play. However, it can be assumed that he depicts people of his own age or perhaps a bit older. Thus, it can be labelled the 1970s generation only conditionally, as it perhaps embraces the experience of those born in the 1960s as well.



Therefore, though those born in the 1970s (but not exclusively them) are apt to be ironic about the Soviet past, indulge often reflective nostalgia and concentrate on the details of the material world, they are not challenging the official mnemonic patterns relying on the discourse of rupture. Their treatment of the past fits generally within the overall framework of collective memory, the borders of which are constantly shifting and reconstructed and are not unified within the cohort itself. While Piret Tali and Andrus Kivirähk contribute to the development of the heterogeneous treatment of the Soviet past, there are others who tend to have a more rigid attitude towards the era. Kristjan Jõevere (born 1976), for instance, takes a more unforgiving stance condemning any kind of nostalgia towards the Soviet time, even on the everyday level:

Those living well, eating eel, drinking Moldavian “cognac” and wearing deficit clothes during the Soviet times were only the people who compromised either with their conscience or dignity, who stole something from somewhere, sneaked, smeared, bribed someone with presents and fawned. (Jõevere, 2010)

Jõevere also pointed out that on top of all, during the Soviet time the hot running water was turned off for the entire summer to humiliate people even further, on the level of personal hygiene.<sup>49</sup> In line with Jõevere, Heiki Suurkask (born 1972) maintains that since the entire state was based on hatred and fighting all kinds of enemies on all levels, this atmosphere could also be found in society and thus, it is hard to justify any kind of positive reminiscing about this period (Suurkask, 2010). Martin Pau (born 1975) describes in his column how he finds elderly people who get too close to him while waiting in a queue annoying, indicating that this is Soviet-era heritage (Pau, 2010). According to him, these people have lived most of their lives in a society where you had to fight in the shop to get food and thus, they are still using the same techniques though the system has changed. In other words, even though the Soviet past is gone for decades by now it still is a prevalent cultural symbol by which to distinguish, label, evaluate and generalise behaviours and processes in society and among age groups.

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<sup>49</sup> Strangely enough, the same circumstance – turning off the hot water – was brought out by Wimberg in one of his articles as an example of one of the sources of fostering endurance in people, i.e. positively. (Eesti Päevaleht, 2010b).

## Summary

Generational construction is a powerful tool in public media used for various purposes. As the social scene is constantly on the move, the purposes change and the constructions are moulded accordingly. Generational construction can be used to evaluate social processes, (other) age groups, the political scene, the education system, sports performances or employment markets.

The most common context in which the topic of generations are brought to the table is in relation to evaluations of contemporary youth. Following rather universal narrative patterns, “the youth” is always having it easier compared to a however defined “us”. In this case, sometimes even climatic conditions are depicted as tougher and harsher. Paradoxically enough, having it easier is not always perceived as something positive (as progress in technology and social well-being could be). The mechanisms of generational construction often aim at the opposite. Living through difficult times can entail the notion of having a certain capital, which enables knowledge or understanding or valuing certain phenomena more (and therefore, the younger know, understand and value less).

Along with others, those born in the 1970s do not hesitate to use these mechanisms in public discourses. Their reference point in the past is usually the Soviet regime. The overall negative aura of that regime is often used to depict difficulties that were not particularly connected with the political system, but other aspects, such as cold weather or backward technology. At times, these aspects add to the general (negative) treatment of the period, contributing at the same time to the positive aspects of the identity of the generation (living through tough times as a resource). Another reference point to evaluate the young is the transformation period, which can also be creatively used to evaluate either the upward mobility (or, the lack of it) of the youth, their devotion to their employment (or the lack of it) or their patriotism (or the lack of it). Such evaluations are not always similar. While some try to judge young people, the others use their own socialisation experience in trying to understand them.

The depiction of the 1970s as a separate generation in public discourses is, however, not as strong as one could conclude based on the data of qualitative interviews. This could owe to the fact that in the interviews the respondents’ attention was deliberately drawn to the question of generational boundaries and their discussion. In public debates by contrast, the focus is always somewhere else – the articles analyse some broader social process or burning question and the generational construction is just a tool to strengthen one’s arguments. Moreover, for a generational label to emerge there is a need for a rapid shift

either in powerful public figures or in symbols. For example, during the transformation years, the public and economic elite changed rather abruptly. The new public figures that are most commonly referred to as “the winners” were predominantly born during the mid-1960s and thus their winning aura was transferred to the entire birth cohort, though not all members of this cohort clearly share this experience (Saar and Unt, 2010; Saar 2012). The cohort of the 1970s has probably not emerged as suddenly on the social scene as the 1960’s “winners’ generation” did during the 1990s, but rather, made their appearance in public scenes more gradually.

One of the exceptions to this is the political scene. The emergence of *Res Publica* with its clear rootedness in the 1970s cohort constitutes a moment in which this age cohort was clearly depicted as a separate generation in the media. However, as the politicians born during the 1970s are making their prominent presence in other parties as well, this discourse can be transforming. In other words, it may be too early to claim anything about the features of the 1970s generation in public discourses.

It could be concluded that those born during the 1970s take an active part in public debates and discussions. This chapter demonstrated how they have contributed to and to some degree shape public mnemonic discourses about the Soviet period. Though we find parallels with the interview data, there are also slightly different nuances that emerge in public discourses. Unlike in public media, the dramatic treatment of the Soviet period was more marginal in the interviews. Rather, the respondents presented their memories from a more personal and everyday life perspective. Thus, the political discussions about broader historical evaluations did not surface. The reason for this difference has also probably a lot to do with the difference of the interview format and the public debate. However, it is important to note that even though the 1970s cohort shares specific childhood memories, these very memories have a different impact on how individual members of the cohort make sense of them. This is particularly visible in the varying degrees to which they engage in stigmatising the Soviet period. For instance, the absence of warm running water during the summer in the apartment houses can be treated as a resource (a healthy habit to take cold showers) or as a source of humiliation (abbreviation of elementary personal hygiene). While there seems to be a consensus (along the lines of the hegemonic collective memory) about condemning the political regime at the state level, the level of the everyday is experienced more diversely and thus, interpreted accordingly.

## Conclusions: Generation on the doorstep or a doorstep for a generation?

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The portrait is one of the most widely spread art themes throughout art history in all possible art forms, be it paintings, photography, sculpture, or collages. It offers interesting insights, not just about the person portrayed, but also about the historical time and the painter. Thus, besides creating an image of a specific person in a specific time period (though in modern, especially abstract painting, the resemblance is often optional), the portrait allows us to draw conclusions about the artist's personality as well as about the society both the artist and the person portrayed live(d) in. The extent to which we actually learn something about the person in the portrait, however, is limited regardless of the artistic style or technique. The portrait aims to catch a moment. It is a snapshot: as much representative of a person as it is not. The author may have caught the personality very well, so we might get a chance to draw conclusions about the person's character, profession, preferences and taste. Yet, regardless of how well the individual portrait carries the essence of those portrayed; it always leaves many aspects out. The same goes for the conclusions we can draw regarding the artist and the society.

This book has also aimed at drawing a portrait of a kind – that of a particular age group born in Soviet Estonia during the 1970s. At the same time, while revealing common characteristics and narrative constructions shared among the members of this cohort, the study remained cautious throughout regarding the limits of such a task. In many ways, this remains, indeed, only a snapshot of an age group that is currently in its most active years (in terms of social participation as well as also being demographically within the reproductive age), inevitably capturing only a limited or incomplete image of the entire cohort. This study catches a moment (though in my case, the “moment”

of research was stretched over ten years) in a story that may not have reached its climax yet. Moreover, if we dwell briefly with the notion of the portrait, those who come to the studio of an artist to be painted are usually wearing their best clothes and smiling their most beautiful smile. In other words, the heroes of this book spoke the version of their stories they wanted others to hear. Hence, rather than studying these people's lives in their entirety (including their sorrows, their weaknesses, their downsides), it offers a favourable picture, which most likely gives an idea of only some of the features of the cohort. But these features are nevertheless meaningful, as they bring out specific discursive patterns that prevail, similar in the way the clothes someone wears in a portrait gives us an idea of fashion trends at the time the painting was painted. This is also a study about the past as much as it is a book about the present. While it looks at the period with which the specific age cohort was coming of age retrospectively, it also tells a story about the society it was written in. Had it been written earlier or later it would, most likely, have turned out to be a very different book. Finally, it is as much a book about the respondents and their narratives, as it is a book about me as the author.

However, despite certain limitations caused by the mostly qualitative data, the book also offers a chance to look at a particular social group in Estonia's society which has until recently stood mostly in the background – both in terms of their social visibility as well as the attention they attracted from social researchers. By drawing this portrait and putting it out there, the book thus makes a forceful claim that this age cohort deserves greater attention and is, indeed, important enough to be painted. A painter (or writer) has in a way the divine power to give immortality to some people. Who would know Mona Lisa if Leonardo da Vinci had not painted her?

By placing the 1970s cohort at the centre of this study, this book poses the question of whether this constitutes a separate generation, distinct from those born in the 1960s as well as from those born in the 1980s. Throughout the writing, I have been rather hesitant to definitively answer this question. To be sure, one could claim with some authority that the study collected sufficient statistical and qualitative data to be able to construct a generation with the tools available for the sociologist. Hence, sociologists are in some ways as powerful as artists. By choosing the subject they write about or paint, they push the subject into a spotlight and to some degree shape the way in which it is interpreted. Far from comparing myself with da Vinci, I nevertheless admit that writing a book about the 1970s cohort probably quite considerably contributes to the discursive process of generational construction. However, as I have also tried

to show, the borders of generations are blurred, keep shifting and are subject to all kinds of structural and discursive forces. Relying on the words of Mark Twain, one could say: “Facts are stubborn things, but statistics are pliable.” To put it differently, it is always possible to mould statistics depending on how you ask questions. With the same data one could have probably written a book that claimed the existence of a generation stretching from 1960–1975 and another one comprising all birth cohorts between 1976–1990. Therefore, perhaps generational boundaries should be of secondary importance to our purpose here. Time is a powerful painter. As it passes, the boundary lines I have drawn in this book, may be overdrawn completely.

## Transition in transition

As pointed out in the introductory chapter, the post-socialist transformation is not a phenomenon unanimously understood or approached in different academic fields. Starting from the confusion in terminology (is it transition or transformation?), it encompasses a range of different approaches, all the way to the point where the very notion of post-socialist transition is being questioned (see Stenning, 2005, p. 114). While leaving aside the question of terminology (and using “transition” and “transformation” to describe the same phenomena), this study has first of all provided empirical data to support the theorists who argue for not determining strict and tangible characteristics to post-socialist transition, but to treat this as a time of becoming or as a generalised feeling of “moving forward” (Kennedy, 2003, p. 9; Sampson, 2008, p. 220–223).

The dataset used for this study is too limited to make any credible generalisations about post-socialist societies in general, or the Estonian society in particular. However, it does give a deeper insight into the subjective experiences of a specific birth cohort, whose coming of age coincided with the broader social and political transformations. Among this cohort, the changes in society were perceived mostly in positive terms, yet without having a clear sense of where these changes were leading or determining more specified development goals (apart from becoming an independent state). This is not to say that during the transformation years the surrounding society was in the abyss or lacked plans of development. The reason why the respondents did not formulate their own preferences for development was that the change happened on multiple levels and for this particular group the atmosphere of the change was more important than what the end goal would be. As Kaido (born 1970) pointed out:

“Society asked a lot of questions at that time.” Thus, the young people coming of age were sensing the change as a general period of “identification” (Sampson, 2008, p. 220); a period when many people asked where one should go or who one should go with. Judging from the interview data, the personal search for identity was probably far more important than the developments in society, yet, the combination of the two left its specific imprint on these people’s identities.

Henri Vogt (2005, p. 79, 83, 97) suggested that post-socialist societies can be characterised as having a “plurality of utopias.” Though he had in mind that the society had different utopian goals on multiple levels, his notion is also useful in describing some of my respondents as the utopian discourses at the social level boosted their own dreams and plans. While utopian dreams about one’s future are common among young people in general, the opening of the society contributed to these respondents’ personal ones. Not having a clear understanding of a new society and its limits enabled them to enter unknown lands and dream in categories that had been unthinkable a short while earlier, thereby sometimes clearly overestimating the possibilities that the new society would offer. Hence, the “plurality of utopias” in their case can be defined as utopias in both the personal as well as social domain.

Indeed, the notion of “utopia” seems rather useful when describing the hazy shape the future had for the people during the transformation years. Coming from the ancient Greek, the word signifies a land which does not exist. Therefore, it marks a dream that is dreamt about something unknown. The understanding of the new society (of what it will become) was so vague that it can only be described as a land that does not exist (yet). Moving towards the unknown land probably meant also that not all respondents articulated any personal utopias in it, since they did not grasp the full range of opportunities which would be available. As a matter of fact, many did not have a clue about what they wanted to become. In the overall atmosphere of change they were, however, not worried much about the outcome. In a sense, the certainty that had become rooted during the Soviet era intertwined with the uncertainty that emerged during the transition period. The negative scenarios (such as unemployment) were usually not considered. Partly because of their youth, partly because of the overall optimistic atmosphere in the society, partly because they had not witnessed massive unemployment, bankruptcies and failures on grand scale. In addition, life had offered many chances which they had not anticipated and they had witnessed the success-stories of those only slightly older than themselves (the 1960s cohort). Thus, the uncertainty for them was not always threatening, but often appealing, offering possibilities

that they had previously not known to have had existed. Jens O. Zinn has suggested that uncertainties are perceived, acknowledged or denied depending on how social reality is constructed (Zinn, 2005). As the construction of the social reality is probably strongly influenced by one's socialisation experience, so is the perception of uncertainties. Using Zinn's classification, this group can be characterised as using the *contextualisation mode* of uncertainty perception. In this mode, the uncertainties are not prepared for, but when they appear, they are treated as opportunities for new actions and experiences. In other words, for this group, transition did not mean how to adjust to changes (as it may have been for several other social groups), but how to creatively rework the possibilities that appear in their way (Sampson, 2008, p. 223).

## Habitus, Capitals and Change: Applying Bourdieu

This perception of uncertainties can also be defined as part of the *habitus* of this respondent group as *habitus* is a compilation of dispositions, habits and practices which have been developed during the socialisation of a person (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2005). The 1970s cohort was in this context in a unique position. Their *habitus* was developed both during the time of their childhood (that is, the Soviet period) as well as during the transformation years and the years of the regained independence. The structural *fields* were undergoing transformation, and were shaped by the *habitus*es of the actors at the time as well as shaping the *habitus*es of the same actors simultaneously. Thus, the *contextualisation mode* of perceiving uncertainties is in a way the outcome of mutual interdependence of these processes.

During the regime change and the restructuring of the *fields*, the resources and capitals were partly re-distributed. In the time of social change, it is inevitable that some social groups are deprived of certain resources while others gain new resources. To use Bourdieu's terms, certain accumulated capitals become exchangeable to secure a favourable social position, while others lose their significance. When the *fields* are being restructured, the character of capitals may change as well. In fact, some types of symbolic capitals that never existed before may begin to matter. As Nils Niitra (born 1976, cited in Chapter 6) recalled, he entered the job market, which was governed by a youth cult where "every kind of experience was a burden." In other words, in the overall atmosphere of change involving many fields of society it was those who had been involved in the previous system that were losing their symbolic capital of



experience while youth as a category began to gain a special status in society (a new type of symbolic capital). Involvement in the old system was not always treated as virtue (though in many cases it still worked as such), thus opening new doors to the members of younger cohorts and enhancing their upward social mobility.

However, though the symbolic order of the society was being restructured, the capitals people possessed were not altogether lost. While not indulging into any further discussions about the redistribution of different kinds of capitals among adults, some of the aspects of Bourdieu's theory seem to be particularly relevant for the study of the 1970s age group in Estonia. As the overall economic situation during the transformation was scarce (to put it mildly), the differentiation on the level of economic capital was rather marginal, if not inexistent. However, the other forms of capitals were relevant. Social capital was especially vivid in many of the narratives relayed by the respondents and often went hand in hand with cultural capital. Many stories of upward mobility included the element of randomness, like meeting someone on the street who asks to join in a project, having an idea while spending time with friends in a sauna, or hearing about a vacancy from a friend. These are common *leitmotifs*. In all these accounts, social capital plays a vital role. However, such meetings are often also connected to the cultural capital, as the base of many useful contacts was laid in school or university. In addition, the respondents also made use of the parents' social capital or, occasionally, even classmate's parents' social and symbolic capital (in this case, we deal with a combination of capitals again). In these accounts, the *mechanism* of the accumulation and exchange of the different capitals during the time of change may not have differed significantly from those in more stable times. Yet, the *proportion* of different kinds of capitals in people's biographies still differed due to the marginal role played by economic capital as opposed to social, symbolic and cultural capital.

There is still more to it though. As brought out in the introductory chapter, in contemporary society, economic success and upward social mobility are not the only components that are important when talking about social class (Skeggs, 2004; Crompton, 2001; Devine and Savage, 2005). In an individualised society, the issues of identity have become central (Honneth, 2004). It is not only about the wealth, it is about the entitlement (Skeggs, 2004) and symbolic resources that enable one to build up one's personality and facilitate access to practices, social relationships and cultural resources (Schröder, 2008). To put it differently, it is not only about well-being, but about having a "voice" to be able to set agendas and articulate one's identity (Devine and Savage, 2005).

Within the framework of Bourdieu's theory, this means that the proportion of symbolic capital in the society has become more important. Various forms of symbolic capital exist, but perhaps not all are relevant in terms of this research. One of the symbolic capitals relevant is the above mentioned symbolic capital of youth – at a certain time, being young could boost one's upward mobility. Risking simplification, one could say that this type of capital in the form it existed during the 1990s in Estonia has lost much of its symbolic power.<sup>50</sup>

As time has passed, other types of symbolic capitals have emerged that the 1970s cohort (though not only them) has become to find useful in discursive battles. It is difficult to find a perfect name for it, but one could embrace it under the notion of “generational” capital (see also Misztal, 2003; Aareleid-Tart, 2012). This captures the experiences of the Soviet period as well as transformation, and the witnessing of, or participation in, the restructuring processes. All these experiences are used creatively in several situations but mainly in terms of aiming for entitlement to argue one thing or another in various discursive fields. Memories of the Soviet period provide the legitimacy for taking part in discussions over the moral evaluation of the period and to know what aspects of that period are considered appropriate to be laughed about while deciphering which ones should be clearly condemned. Feeling themselves as being part of the Soviet past allows the cohort in question to evaluate older or younger age groups as significant “others”. The older ones can be stigmatised for having been part of the old system; the younger ones can be blamed for their ignorance, for “not knowing enough to understand.” The Soviet past can be used as a resource for a specific kind of humour. At other times, it becomes a resource for defining values such as the value of the current independent state (an additional value to patriotism); or the value of today's comforts and consumer society. One could go on with such examples, but the main point is clear: having been children during the past regime enables the 1970s cohort not to feel responsible even if they took part in questionable ideological activities (something that some of the older cohorts cannot claim) and to remember enough to “know” the regime (something the younger ones cannot claim). Interestingly enough, often phenomena that are not connected directly with the regime but rather with technological progress (long bus rides,

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<sup>50</sup> Being youthful is still a virtue in society, as being young means often also being physically attractive. However, in terms of job market, the character of its importance and appeal has changed. Experience and education are usually more important than just the age. With the spread of discursive patterns that were referred to in Chapter 6, youth is often depicted in discursive fields as not diligent or tough enough.

absence of contemporary communication technology, difficult access to music etc.) or material well-being (lack of sanitary conditions such as central heating or hot running water), are tied up with the political system and used to create an aura of martyrdom.

In a similar vein, the transformation experience is also a symbolic resource. As a rule, the respondents were not old enough during the transformation time to have had a substantial impact, but this also means they were not able to do anything wrong either, for example, participate in matters with shaky legal grounds or implementing reform measures which seem rather harsh retrospectively. Thus, both their experiences as well as “non-experiences” work as some kind of symbolic weapons that can be used in battles to gain dominance in discursive fields. The prime minister (born 1979), who stepped into office in 2014 was not vulnerable in the way the other candidate for the post was as a former head of the National Bank during the 1990s (a circumstance which ultimately caused the withdrawal of his candidacy).

## A generation, or perhaps just a cohort?

Almost a century ago, in 1923, Karl Mannheim published his essay on what he called the “problem of generations”. Though his theoretical framework has been challenged, reinterpreted and complemented, the core of the concept of generations as he developed it, still (or, perhaps again) has strong resonance for society. Every now and then, someone points to the emergence of a new generation or refers to a generation formed by some social process in the recent past. Sometimes it seems that we have reached a point when generations surround us everywhere. As we have seen not least in this study, however, generations are in constant flux. The phrase “a new generation” can at times refer to everyone from 35–50-year olds (as in politics, the politicians who have been involved in politics only after the Soviet regime), at others, refer to 5-year olds (kids who have been raised by i-Pads). Those born in Estonia in the 1970s are also sometimes defined as part of the newest (post-transitional) generation: the first generation whose adult lives have been lived during the period of regained independence. However, there are numerous other “new” generations in the discursive fields competing for the title. Not all those doing the labelling have Mannheim or any of his writings in mind. The concept of generation, though owing much of its essence to him, thus lives its own life. However, even Mannheim did not claim generations were something with clear and

fixed borders but rather insisted that they were constantly constructed and reconstructed.

As the 1970s generation then (if we allow ourselves to use the term) is in their mature years, they are still very much “under construction” – they are an age group which is at the time socially active and thus, the discursive practices that are created *by* them as well as *about* them are matters of continuous negotiation in social, political as well as in discursive fields. Mannheim himself analysed mainly the generations that had already fought their battles and marked their ways. Thus, it may be risky to draw conclusions about the existence of a generation within these borders just yet. Another questionable matter is relying on the birthdates which have been comfortably constructed because our background in maths influences us to measure much through a decimal-system: that is, a generation with borders 1970–1980. These borders are comfortably round, yet I am sure there are enough data to talk about the generation within a somewhat broader time frame (1968–1983), or a bit narrower (1972–1978), depending on what we consider our main criteria of analysis.

However, what this study has also shown is that such borders are not entirely random. As it is, there are many distinguishable processes characteristic of this specific cohort and it is possible to draw a portrait of a generation born during the 1970s relying on many features sociologists have relied upon when interpreting Mannheim’s theory. Generation as *location* and as *actuality*, as well as *generational consciousness* is well present among the researched group. Looking at the measurable markers (*generation as location*) there are many distinguishable processes which had its start among the cohort born during the 1970s. The demographic processes of prolonging transition to adulthood which began in Western societies during the 1970s happened in Estonia in the 1990s and the first cohort initiating these processes was the 1970s cohort. The first trend was the gradual liberation of sexual behaviour, which at first resulted in higher birthrates among younger women. The latter, however, was not a lasting trend and the age of giving birth started to rise among those born in the second half of the 1970s with a pace not often seen in stable societies. Also, this was the cohort among whom the cohabitation pattern instead of marriage became common practice. They have also been the ones witnessing the spreading of tertiary education (though not necessarily being the most highly educated of cohorts) and the ones entering a job market which favoured them. None of these processes happened overnight, and many exceeded the nice borders of the decade, involving some of those whose birth years were at

the end of the 1960s and the other trends continued among those whose birth years were during the 1980s.

Yet these measurable markers are just one part of the story. Numbers that are changing to a statistically significant degree are always indicators of some larger processes that are often not so easy to put in scales and charts. The social and political changes in the society were fast and overwhelming, and those born in the 1970s lived through these transformations while they were coming of age. During those years, not only the political system they had been raised in, but also the economical structures of the state were turned upside down. Living through these changes can be categorised as defining a *generation as actuality*, though Mannheim defined it as participation in common destiny or “a characteristic type of historically relevant action”. In the case of the social developments during the 1990s, most of the cohort was not running at the forefront of the changes. Yet, they lived through the changes, and in many cases were participating on levels that made a difference to them. Many of them had the feeling of being part of the change, thus being in the background of the change. The transformation experience left everyone different prints, but it probably had its impact on all of them: thus, Mannheim’s *generation as actuality* can be traced, as well.

When carrying out the interviews, it was not hard to find *generational consciousness* among the respondents. Most of them had sensed in one context or another the feeling that their socialisation experience had influenced them to see older or younger age groups as somehow different. What is tricky, however, is how this consciousness is contextually shaped and playfully changed in different contexts. So, rather than speaking of generational consciousness in the singular, it would be possible to talk about generational consciousness in the plural. It is not only that for the respondents the borders were blurred, but the borders kept shifting depending on the subject discussed. Nevertheless, several respondents clearly sensed that the 1970s are unique and that they differ both from previous and later cohorts.

Yet apart from the malleabilities of personal perceptions, what is significant here is that the respondents were sensing a generational consciousness as such. In terms of social theory, it was thus interesting to see, what the generational consciousness of the respondents was based on. Indeed, the demographic markers which are commonly measured were usually not among the features brought out by the interviewees. The most distinctive and consistently reoccurring *leitmotif* was the political and social change of the 1990s, which acted as a kind of watershed between the generations. Interestingly enough, both the

younger and the older were often defined using the same 1990s time-frame: the older were defined as those who were already adults at the time (and had become adults during the old regime) and were running the scene. The younger were defined as those who either were not born, did not remember enough or were not old enough to understand the change. The political and social change of the 1990s offered a large enough umbrella to cover many features, structural as well as discursive. The older and younger were also defined by the structural conditions defined by this period. The older were described as those who got to build the base of the new society (while the 1970s helped to build the walls and the roof), the younger ones were those who did not get to enjoy the upward mobility which the respondents did. The younger were, however, also distinguished by their social opportunities (study possibilities in abroad, technological progress etc). The era of change enables us also to define discursive features by which the generational lines are drawn, relying on the memory of this period, which is often used as a cultural resource. The remembering of the Soviet time is also frequently considered important in order to understand and evaluate several contemporary social processes. Memories and experiences of the Soviet period are also used to draw a line between the older generation (and especially here, it keeps shifting depending on the context).

To cut a long story short, the structural features often easily detectable in numbers by quantitative researchers do not translate directly into the generational consciousness. The fact that measurable numbers and the narrated generational features do not always coincide, does not mean that the numbers are irrelevant, it just signifies that quantitative research measures different things compared to qualitative one.

This research has explained that the formation and grouping of a generation can be achieved differently, depending on the questions asked and the methods used in research. One way to detect a generation would be thus measuring quantitative statistical data, the other by qualitative data about self-perception and generational consciousness. Neither of these methods is superior, though sometimes they might contradict each other (at other times, complement). Both approaches are equally viable depending on the aim of the research and how the concept of a “generation” is operationalised as an analytical tool. The quantitative approach is beneficial in understanding the social conditions of young people and developing adequate social policies. The subjective self-reflexive approach helps us to understand the cohesion of society (how different age groups value each other), but also how crucial political and social events during development years shape a young person’s identity and whether (and how)

certain age groups are potentially mobilised during times of crisis (Nehring, 2007, p. 58). According to some of the respondents, the social networks often function on the basis of this type of generational identity.

To sum up, those born during the 1970s are in many ways standing on the doorstep: they stood on the threshold of their lives when the new society was established during the years of regaining the independent state. They faced the new society, but their back was supported by the old. They are in many ways in-between, however, rather than feeling hesitant (as often the guests standing at the doorstep are), they treat this position as favourable: they have a broad view towards both directions. Their age group can also be defined as being a doorstep for a new generation: starting new patterns and paving the way for those coming after them, but not being completely cut off from the previous generation.

In other words, defining the 1970s birth cohort as a separate generation is a question of interpretation. One could easily split the decade and merge the first half (or the third) into the previous and the other half (or two thirds) into the next generation. Or, depending on the angle one looks from, include them within even broader generational frames. The representatives of the narrow group interviewed for this book tended to prefer rather narrow lines and saw themselves as a distinct generation. I believe they have the right to do so. However, as the society around them is changing and they get older, they might reconsider the generational borders according to some broader processes. I hope when they do, there will be enough sociologists to notice it and write another book about it.

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# APPENDIX I

## Charts describing the sample

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### 1. Basic data and time of interviews

Time of conducting the interviews	Pseudonym of the respondent	Gender	Year of birth
December 2003 – March 2004	Meelis	M	1973
	Mari-Liis	F	1973
	Kristel	F	1973
	Taavi	M	1972
	Merle	F	1973
	Tanel	M	1973
	Ülo	M	1974
	Marek	M	1973
	Natalia	F	1974
	Maria	F	1974
March – May 2005	Olev	M	1973
	Kristi	F	1974
	Mart	M	1972
	Harri	M	1973
	Mihkel	M	1974
	Liisa	F	1974
	Merike	F	1974
	Riina	F	1973
April 2008	Tiina	F	1973
	Peeter	M	1974
July – August 2010 <sup>51</sup>	Toomas	M	1975
	Janek	M	1970
December 2012 – August 2013	Urmo	M	1977
	Karin	F	1976
	Anneli	F	1976
	Ave	F	1973

<sup>51</sup> Interviewed together with Kirsti Jõesalu.

Time of conducting the interviews	Pseudonym of the respondent	Gender	Year of birth
	Hannes	M	1973
	Sven	M	1978
	Tarmo	M	1976
	Ketlin	F	1973
	Merje	F	1977
FOCUS GROUPS	Meelis	M	1973
Dec 2009 FG I	Kristo	M	1973
	Henri	M	1975
FG II <sup>52</sup>	Alina	F	1971
	Kati	F	1970
	Tanel	M	1975
FG III <sup>53</sup>	Anna	F	1977
	Kaido	M	1970
	Kaisa	F	1975
	Tauno	M	1976
FG IV	Kristjan	M	1973
	Marko	M	1974
	Martin	M	1976
FG V <sup>54</sup>	Katrin	F	1975
	Kaja	F	1975
FG VI <sup>55</sup>	Kalle	M	1975
	Juhan	M	1973

<sup>52</sup> Interviewed together with Kirsti Jõesalu.

<sup>53</sup> Interviewed by Kirsti Jõesalu.

<sup>54</sup> Interviewed together with Kirsti Jõesalu.

<sup>55</sup> Interviewed together with Kirsti Jõesalu.

## 2. Geographical locations during childhood

<i>Urban areas</i>	<i>Rural areas</i>
A capital in the former Soviet Union	Harjumaa county
Haapsalu (2)	Jõgeva county
Kiviõli	Läänemaa county
Kohtla-Järve	Lääne-Viru county
Kuressaare	Pärnu county
Otepää	Saaremaa county (2)
Pärnu	Tartu county (2)
Räpina	
Tartu (10)	
Tallinn (15)	
Viljandi (4)	

## 3. Place of residence during the time of the interview

Pärnu (3)  
 Räpina (1)  
 Tallinn (29)  
 Tartu (10)  
 Viljandi (1)  
 Harjumaa (3)

## 4. Professions during the time of the interview

<i>Business field</i>	Bank official (2); Real estate manager; Salesmanager (2); Project manager; Owner of private company (4); CEO of a retail company; Chief financial Officer in a retail company; Managing Director.
<i>Service field</i>	Flight attendant; Saleswoman
<i>Field of Culture, Media and Science</i>	Journalist; Creative director of advertising agency; Designer; University lecturer, Researcher (2), Research Assistant in University; Member of Board in a Research Institute; High-level manager in museum (2); Professional in museum, Manager in Media institution, Writer (2), Film producer (2), Actress, Free-lance designer and singer.
<i>Field of state or legal service</i>	Prosecutor; Lawyer; State official; Local municipality official (2); High-level state official (2)
<i>Field of Medicine</i>	Veterinarian; Doctor
<i>Other</i>	Unemployed; On maternity leave (2)

## APPENDIX II

### A chronology of the Estonian transition: turning points

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April 1988	Foundation of the Estonian Popular Front, the first one in the Soviet Union.
June 1988	Estonian First Secretary Karl Vaino replaced by the more liberal Vaino Väljas.
16 November 1988	Estonian Supreme Council passes Declaration of Sovereignty.
27 July 1989	Supreme Soviet in Moscow accepts Baltic economic self-management, as proposed by Estonia.
23 August 1989	“The Baltic Way”. Some two million people form a human chain from Vilnius to Tallinn to call for independence.
12 November 1989	Estonian Supreme Council declares Soviet annexation illegal.
13 June 1990	Estonian Supreme Council passes law providing for the right of full return of private property.
12 January 1991	Estonia and Russia sign treaty recognizing each other’s sovereignty and guaranteeing free choice of citizenship.
13 January 1991	Soviet troops seize the television centre and tower in Vilnius. Fifteen people shot to death or crushed by tanks.
3 March 1991	Referenda in Latvia and Estonia produce large majorities for independence, including the votes of many local Russians.
19–21 August 1991	Attempted military coup in the Soviet Union.
20 August 1991	Latvian and Estonian Supreme Councils declare full independence. In the following weeks, all three Baltic States receive international diplomatic recognition, and are admitted to the UN and the CSCE.
13 January 1992	Prime Minister Savisaar demands right to declare economic state of emergency in Estonia following a sharp reduction in fuel supplies and major power and food cuts. On 23 January, following the blocking of this demand by the parliament, Savisaar resigns.

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20 June 1992	Introduction of the Estonian Kroon (Crown), the first independent convertible currency in the former Soviet Union.
28 June 1992	In a referendum, Estonians pass, by a huge majority, the proposed parliamentary constitution.
20 September 1992	First official democratic elections after the Second World War result in electing Lennart Meri as the first president and Mart Laar as the first Prime Minister of the restored republic.
1992–1994	Liberal “shock therapy” reforms introduced. One of the most crucial reforms was the restitution of private property and real estate. The reform restoring real estate had its inception in June 1991, but its several additions and extensions were passed during a long time period, with its last extension passed in 2006.
1994	Withdrawal of the Russian military from Estonia.
1997	Estonia included in the first round of candidates of European Union accession among Eastern European countries.
2001	Estonian presidential elections won by Arnold Rüütel, the former Head of the Supreme Soviet, a former member of the Communist nomenklatura.
2004	Estonia joins NATO and European Union.
27–28 April 2007	The Bronze Soldier, symbolizing the victory of the Red Army over Germany, removed from the centre of Tallinn to the Military Cemetery. The statue symbolised the occupation in Estonian memory and was thus widely detested as a symbol in the centre of Tallinn. For the Russian-speaking community, it symbolised the victory over fascism and for many it was a part of their national identity. The removal of the monument led to riots of young people in the streets.

*Sources: Lieven 1994, p. 426–431; Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2009.*

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This book draws a sociological portrait of the age group born in the 1970s in Estonia and discusses its generational features and constructions. This cohort's coming of age coincided with the social and emotional turmoil of the re-independence movement in the late 1980s and with the transformation of society in the 1990s. This was the first cohort to negotiate its transition to adulthood in the new society, starting some new patterns of socialization, while also sharing some practices and experiences with older cohorts. Based on qualitative interviews as well as an analysis of media discourses and statistical data, the book traces the emergence of a new generation that draws its very own lessons from the past and from the social transformations that influenced life courses and careers. The book provides an intriguing discussion of socialization patterns and generation formation against the backdrop of post-socialist transformation. In addition, it provides a fascinating insight into the mind-set and experiences of a generation in the making, already shaping today's society and culture.

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