

NOSTALGIA FOR SOVIET ESTONIA: DISCURSIVE ELEMENTS OF SHARED MEMORY IN THE FACEBOOK GROUP “SOVETSKAIA ESTONIIA – EESTI NSV”

KAPITOLINA FEDOROVA

TALLINN UNIVERSITY

NATALIA TŠUIKINA

TALLINN UNIVERSITY

Received September 30, 2023; Revised December, 20, 2023; Accepted January 17, 2024.

Abstract

This paper explores the role of online platforms in shaping a nostalgic discourse around Estonia's Soviet past, focusing on the Facebook group “Советская Эстония – Eesti NSV” (Soviet Estonia). Despite official condemnation of the Soviet legacy, this bilingual Russian-Estonian group fosters a positive representation of the era through shared photos and personal memories. Utilizing sociolinguistic methods, the study examines posts and comment threads, unveiling discursive mechanisms employed to reinforce group identity and leverage nostalgia. Members engage in discussions that not only counter the official narrative regarding the past but also extend to contemporary political issues. The research highlights the impact of digital tools and social media in facilitating the construction of collective memory and challenging dominant historical perspectives.

Keywords: nostalgic discourse; online social groups; group identity; social media; memory studies; Estonia

DOI: 10.14712/23363231.2023.16

Kapitolina Fedorova, PhD. is Professor of Russian Studies at Tallinn University. Natalia Tšaikina, PhD. works as Associate Professor of Russian at Tallinn University. Address correspondence to Tallinn University School of Humanities, Narva mnt 25, EE – 10120 Tallinn. E-mail: kapitolina.fedorova@tlu.ee, natalia.tshuikina@tlu.ee.

Introduction

Sharing memories and narratives focused on an imagined past is a process important for creating and maintaining new – even if they are seen as being “old” – group identities. According to Ron Eyerman, memory is important both to individual and collective identity construction, as it “provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping orient who they are, why they are here and where they are going.”¹ Following Alon Confino and Allan Megill, Kerwin Lee Klein promotes the idea that “memory has become the leading term in our new cultural history.”² Modern technologies, including the digitalization of archive documents and photos and online communication with strangers via social media, provide many new opportunities for such practices.³ They can be studied both as a source of data on public memory and as a means to develop and maintain cultural memory, to create, in Jan Assmann’s terms, “diachronics identities.”⁴

In many post-socialist countries, the phenomenon known as “nostalgia for communism” is quite common.⁵ The Soviet past and its legacy there is quite often condemned by state officials who try to distance their countries both from the Soviet Union and from Putin’s Russia. On the other hand, the same past can be represented favorably in many public discussions and in interpersonal everyday interaction, including online communication. This is especially true among the members of the Russian-speaking population in the former Soviet republics.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, nation-building policies of independent states radically changed the role of Russian speakers: in most cases, instead of being representatives of the state’s majority, they became local minorities,

¹ Ron Eyerman, “The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory,” *Acta Sociologica* 47, no. 2 (2004): 159–169, here 161, doi: 10.1177/0001699304043853.

² Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse,” *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000): 127–150, here 128, doi: 10.2307/2902903.

³ Dario Henri Haux, Antoinette Maget Dominicé, and Jana Alexandra Raspotnig, “A Cultural Memory of the Digital Age?” *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 34 (October 2020): 769–782, doi: 10.1007/s11196-020-09778-7.

⁴ Jan Assmann, “Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory,” in *Memory in a Global Age. Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 121–137, doi: 10.1057/9780230283367_1122.

⁵ Joakim Ekman and Jonas Linde, “Communist Nostalgia and the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 21, no. 3 (2005): 354–374, doi: 10.1080/13523270500183512; Mitja Velikonja, “Lost in Transition: Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-Socialist Countries,” *East European Politics and Societies* 23 (2009): 535–551, doi: 10.1177/0888325409345140.

and had to adjust to their new, underprivileged, status.⁶ In this situation, the emergence of online communication became crucial for virtual unification of these new diasporas.⁷ Nowadays, thousands of Russian-medium online groups exist on platforms such as Facebook and Vkontakte. These groups enable their members not only to solve practical problems, but also to share their feelings, thoughts, and memories with people who have similar life experiences and speak the same language.

The present article deals with one particular case of using online platforms for sharing memories, contributing to the creation of a nostalgic memorial discourse of Estonia's Soviet past. The study focuses on the Facebook public group with a bilingual Russian-Estonian title, *Sovetskaia Estoniia* [Soviet Estonia] – *Eesti NSV* (an abbreviation for “Nõukogude Sotsialistlik Vabariik,” which means “Soviet Socialist Republic”). Within this group, members post photos depicting various places and scenes of Tallinn and Estonia during the Soviet period, sometimes accompanied by texts that reference personal memories of those places. A significant number of these posts provoke reactions from other group members, resulting in lengthy discussions. By analyzing the data from this group, our aim is to reveal newly developed discursive mechanisms of sharing and creating memories in a digital space; and to show how these mechanisms are used by the Russian speaking minority for strengthening its group identity and harnessing nostalgic feelings to challenge the official narrative, not only in relation to the past but also in current political issues. Memory, according to M. Schudson, may characterize groups, revealing a “debt to the past” and “moral continuity”⁸; sharing “diverse and shifting collections of material artifacts and social practices,”⁹ which are the core of memory, may create a sense of belonging to an imagined community rooted in the past, perceived as common by different individuals.

The structure of the article is as follows: first, we provide a brief description of the historical and social background necessary to understand the context of the study. Next, we detail our research methodology and describe the data we

⁶ Federica Prina and Aziz Berdiqulov, “Majorities and Minorities in the Post-Soviet Space. Continuity and Change,” *ECMI Working Paper* 105 (November 2018): 1–34.

⁷ Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, and Nils Zurawski, “Virtual (Re)Unification? Diasporic Cultures on the Russian Internet,” in *Control + Shift. Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet*, ed. Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, and Natalja Konradova (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006), 120–146.

⁸ Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 51.

⁹ Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory,” 130.

collected. Then we present and discuss our main findings concerning the content and structure of communication within the group. Finally, in the Conclusions section, we attempt to conceptualize our results within the framework of memory studies in the Estonian context.

Historical and Social Background

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the current situation, it is crucial to mention some historical background facts regarding the presence of Russian speakers in the territory of modern Estonia. Historical documents indicate that Russians have been present there since the 12th–13th century. In the 17th century, the Russian community was further complemented by the arrival of Old Believers, who continue to reside mainly in the area near Lake Peipsi.¹⁰ Under the rule of the Russian Empire (1721–1918), the migration of Russian speakers to Estonia was quite modest. Prior to the first period of independence, in 1897, there were approximately 53,000 Russians, accounting for 4.7% of the population, living within the borders of modern Estonia.¹¹ However, during the period of the Russian Civil War (1918–1922), the number of Russians doubled to 91,100, constituting 8.2% of the population. By the end of World War II, this number decreased once more to approximately 23,000.¹²

During the Soviet era, Estonia experienced a significant influx of Russian speakers. It is important to note that not all of these people were of Russian origin, as they came from various parts of the Soviet Union. When Estonia restored its independence in 1991, the majority of these individuals and their children, who spoke Russian as their mother tongue, chose to remain in the country, contrary to the hopes of many Estonian politicians. In 1998, it was reported that there were 409,111 Russians, making up 28.2% of Estonia's population. Together with other nationalities, they formed a "Russian-speaking population."¹³ These

¹⁰ Galina Ponomareva, "Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov'. Staroobriadchestvo. Kulturnaia zhizn'. Sistema russkogo obrazovaniia Estonii," in *Russkoe natsional'noe men'shinstvo v Estonskoi respublike (1918–1940)*, ed. Sergei Isakov (Tartu: Kripta, 2000), 170–192.

¹¹ Il'ia Nikiforov, "Istoriia russkogo natsional'nogo men'shinstva Estonii do 1945 g.: opyt istoriografii," *Zhurnal rossiiskikh i vostochnoevropeskikh istoricheskikh issledovanii* 92, no. 9 (2017): 154–170, here 156.

¹² Sergei Isakov, "Istochniki i istoriia izucheniiia russkoi emigratsii v Estonii (1918–1940). Obzor," in Sergei Isakov, *Kul'tura russkoi emigratsii v Estonii (1918–1940). Stat'i. Ocherki. Arkhivnye publikatsii* (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 2011), 21–60.

¹³ "Minorities and majorities in Estonia: problems of integration at the threshold of EU," *ECMI Report*, no. 2 (March 1999), 6, https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/pdf/report_2.pdf.

historical events and policies have had a significant impact on the relationship between Russian and Estonian speakers, shaping the discourses and ideologies that exist today.

The most recent census, conducted in 2021, provides the most up-to-date information.¹⁴ However, it is important to note recent changes resulting from the presence of Ukrainian refugees who sought shelter in the country after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Some of them still reside in Estonia, while others have relocated to other EU countries or have returned to Ukraine. A significant number of the refugees are Russian speakers, originating from the eastern regions of Ukraine. The children among them are typically bilingual, speaking Russian at home and studying in Ukrainian at school. Although the refugee numbers are not included in the statistics, they, most probably, do not significantly impact the overall results.

Here are some findings from the 2021 census. Estonia exhibits a rich linguistic scene, with 243 different mother tongues spoken. The number of nationalities (according to ethnic self-identification) among Estonian residents amounts to 211. It is crucial to acknowledge that the distribution of speakers across these languages is highly uneven. Additionally, some native speakers are bilingual or even multilingual. The questionnaire of the 2021 census allowed individuals to specify two first languages rather than just one native language. The Estonian population in 2021 was 1,331,824. Out of these, 30,710 individuals reported being bilingual, with Estonian and Russian being the most common combination, noted by 18,160 people. Estonian is spoken as the first language by 895,493 individuals. Russian holds the second position, spoken by 379,210 people. Ukrainian, with 12,431 speakers, is the third most widely spoken mother tongue (according to 2021 data).

Facebook Russian-speaking groups in Estonia have regularly attracted the attention of state authorities and the general public. For example, in their Annual Report published in 2023, the Internal Security Service (KaPo) pointed out that social media groups play a more significant role for Russian-speaking residents in Estonia than for Estonian-speaking ones.¹⁵ Russian-speaking online communities are usually much larger in terms of the number of participants, sometimes boasting tens of thousands of members. A couple of years before this review,

¹⁴ "Demographic and ethno-cultural characteristics of the population," Estonia counts 2021, <https://rahvaloendus.ee/en/results/demographic-and-ethno-cultural-characteristics-of-the-population> (accessed September 23, 2023).

¹⁵ *Estonian Internal Security Service Annual Review 2022/23*, published April 12, 2023, https://kapo.ee/sites/default/files/content_page_attachments/Annual%20Review%202022-23_0.pdf.

ERR journalist Anton Alekseev attempted to find out why a disproportionately large number of Russian speakers were hospitalized with severe forms of COVID-19 during the pandemic. He highlighted that typical Russian speakers had more sources of information compared to Estonian speakers. This information, originating from both Russia and Estonian Russian media, was often confusing and prevented people from following health instructions.¹⁶

KaPo also claims that some members of Facebook groups have Russian telephone numbers, and “they actively participate in threads, share news stories and links, and express opinions, shaping dominant views” aimed at influencing the attitudes of group members, often with a hostile stance towards Estonia, Ukraine, or the West.¹⁷ The negative impact can primarily be attributed to comments, as the posts have to maintain at least a neutral tone in order to pass through the filters imposed by the platforms.

Anthropologist Aimar Ventsel published his observations on the Russian-speaking online community *Nasha Estoniia* [Our Estonia] in a news portal. He drew attention to the fact that among the 2,500 members of the community, only about 20 are top contributors. The article was published on May 25, 2021, and focused on the prevailing attitudes of group members during the pandemic. Ventsel noted that such a community forms a specific ecosystem, acting as a distorting mirror where things take on different meanings and emphasis is often inverted. Administrators and contributors within this community tend to be staunchly loyal to Russia and supportive of decisions made by Russian authorities, especially during the pandemic. Conversely, they exhibit an extremely negative attitude towards Estonia and NATO. Ventsel pointed out that he could not explain why any action by Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid did not receive any approval, even when she had taken risks, such as visiting Putin after 2014.¹⁸

Ventsel emphasized that there was almost no fabricated or deceptive data; instead, users manipulated actual information to fulfill their influencing goals. Regarding Russian-speakers’ loyalty, Ventsel drew attention to the fact that such attitudes are not new in history, comparing it to the loyalty many residents of America once had towards the British Empire. In an earlier study, Ventsel claimed that Russian-speaking communities were more likely to embrace

¹⁶ Anton Alekseev, “Venelase inforuum on laiem kui eestlase oma. Arvamus,” *ERR*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.err.ee/1608160213/anton-alekseev-venelase-inforuum-on-laiem-kui-eestlase-oma>.

¹⁷ *Estonian Internal Security Service Annual Review 2022/23*, 9.

¹⁸ Aimar Ventsel, “Vene maailm eesti internetis. Arvamus,” *ERR*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.err.ee/1608225133/aimar-ventsel-vene-maailm-eesti-internetis>.

conspiracy theories, especially when the topics were related to politics.¹⁹ In a recently published book, Ventsel, Madisson and Lotman revealed the mechanisms of the spreading of those theories through new forms of media.²⁰

It may be worth mentioning that the administrators of Nasha Estoniia, Rodion Denissov and Leonid Tsingisser, responded to Ventsel's article.²¹ They highlighted that the community had a larger number of members, almost twice the figure mentioned by Ventsel. They argued that Ventsel perceived hatred in the group's posts because he wanted to see it. They provided an example: while everyone approves when an Estonian in Argentina expresses their love for Estonia, people tend to view a Russian-speaker in Estonia who loves Russia as an enemy. They also contested Ventsel's claims about the sources the community members shared, asserting that the majority of shared content consisted of Estonian media publications.

Russian online groups in Estonia, therefore, have been treated, mostly, as a controversial political topic in media discussions and, to some extent, as a source of data for intelligence services. There are very few scientific studies on the matter. For linguists, they can provide useful data on language use in the case of language contact between Russian and Estonian,²² but so far there were no attempts to address the issues of communication and memory construction in those groups, and the role they could play for Estonian Russian speakers' group identity. At the same time, such a study could be instrumental in better understanding of the social processes and tendencies within post-socialist societies. The opposing views on the Soviet and post-Soviet periods of Estonian history and different kinds of traumas associated with them coexist and compete in the divided Estonian society, resulting in contested memories and memorial practices, reflected, among other things, in online communication.²³

¹⁹ Aimar Ventsel, "Kõige taga on oblastikomitee. Arvamus," *ERR*, November 28, 2020, <https://www.err.ee/1172452/aimar-ventsel-koige-taga-on-oblastikomitee>.

²⁰ Aimar Ventsel, Mari-Liis Madisson, and Mihhail Lotman, *Varjatud Märgid ja Salauhingud. Vandenõuteooriate Tähendusmaailm* (Tartu: Postimees Kirjastus, 2023).

²¹ Rodion Denissov and Leonid Tsingisser, "Vastukaja. Facebook-i Grupist Meie Eesti. Arvamus," *ERR*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.err.ee/1608323183/vastukaja-facebooki-grupist-meie-eesti>.

²² Alessandra Dezi, "Estonskie vkrapleniia v internet-diskurse russkoiazzychnykh zhitelei Estonii," *Yearbook of Finno-Ugric Studies* 13, no. 2 (2019): 331–342, doi: 10.35634/2224-9443-2019-13-2-331-342; Alessandra Dezi, "Funktsii inoiazzychnykh vkraplenii v internet-diskurse russkoiazzychnykh zhitelei Italii i Estonii: sopostavitel'nyi aspekt," *Russkaia filologija* 31 (2020): 336–351.

²³ Alena Pfoser, *Borderland Memories. The Remaking of the Russian-Estonian Frontier* (PhD thesis, Loughborough University, 2014); Eneken Laanes, "Transcultural Memorial Forms in post-Soviet Estonian Narratives of the Gulag," in *Narratives of Annihilation, Confinement, and Survival: Camp Literature in a Transnational Perspective*, ed. Anja Tippner and Anna Artwińska (Berlin:

Methods and Data

For the purposes of this study, we had to combine two main methodological approaches: conversational analysis of online communication and critical discourse analysis.

The first method aims to analyze all forms of communication, including online posts and status updates, as instances of social interaction organized according to “an institutionalized substratum of interactional rules, procedures, and conventions.”²⁴ Applied specifically to online communication, this method also explores how different features of platforms such as Facebook or Twitter shape online interactions.²⁵ In the case of Facebook, the most significant factor defining the structure of communication is the distinction between “posts” (or status updates) and “comments” organized in threads. Additionally, the use of “reactions” (various forms of “likes”) and “reposts” (hyperlinks) adds complexity to these interactions.²⁶

Critical discourse analysis focuses on “the empirical study of the relations between discourse and social and cultural developments in different social domains.”²⁷ By identifying various textual elements and structures and analyzing their social implications, this method unveils ideological dimensions that both reflect the existing social world and contribute to its construction and maintenance. Intertextuality, in this sense, plays a critically important role, as every text and communicative event inevitably draws upon earlier texts and events. In the context of online comment exchanges, these intertextual chains, as described by Norman Fairclough, become salient.²⁸ Power relations in society determine different actors’ access to various discourses, and some discourses wield more influence than others. However, they must still contend with each other, as all social groups participate in the process of negotiating meaning.²⁹

De Gruyter, 2019), 51–70; Meike Wulf, *Historical Culture, Conflicting Memories and Identities in post-Soviet Estonia* (PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2006).

²⁴ Charles Goodwin and John Heritage, “Conversation Analysis,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (October 1990): 283–307, here 283.

²⁵ David Giles, Wyke Stommel, and Trena M. Paulus, “The Microanalysis of Online Data: The Next Stage,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 115 (July 2017): 37–41, doi: 10.1016/j.pragma.2017.02.007.

²⁶ Matteo Farina, *Facebook and Conversation Analysis. The Structure and Organization of Comment Threads* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

²⁷ Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 60.

²⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 77.

²⁹ See also Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 200–207.

Contesting discourses about the past coexist in any society, but in many post-socialist countries polarization of opinions about the period of the Soviet rule is very strong which can “throw into doubt official/elite expectations around a shared moral national valuation of the social memory of communism.”³⁰ The Facebook group studied for the purposes of the present article serves as a prime example of the ongoing struggle between the official approach to the past in Estonia and a distinctly different perspective held by some of its citizens.

The “Sovetskaia Estoniia – Eesti NSV” (hereinafter referred to as SE) was created on May 2, 2020, as an open public group. This means that both the group itself and all its publications are visible to the public. Anyone with a Facebook account can join without an invitation or approval from moderators and can start posting. Commenting and reposting are also open to everyone, even without joining the group. As of September 24, 2023, the SE group had 33,456 members, and its membership continued to grow. For example, on September 23, it gained 46 new members, and similar numbers (averaging 30–50 new members per day) were observed during the spring and summer of 2023.

We obtained the data from the SE group in two ways. First, starting in January 2023, we systematically collected the most “popular” posts in the group. By “popular,” we mean those that received significantly higher attention from the audience in terms of comments, reactions, and reposts. In total, we collected 212 posts using this method. Second, in order to obtain more precise quantitative data on the group’s content through continuous sampling, we analyzed every post published within two sample periods, each consisting of three days, in July and August 2023 (a total of 91 posts). We considered the following parameters:

- Number and types of reactions (Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry)
- Number of reposts
- Number of comments
- Number of the first level comments (and the ratio of this number to the whole number of comments)
- Number of comments in the longest comment thread

The last two parameters are important for identifying posts that triggered the most heated discussions.

³⁰ Cristian Tileagă, *Representing Communism After the Fall. Discourse, Memory, and Historical Redress* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 51.

In addition to the statistical data, we also coded the content of the posts, including the main topic, the referred time period, the presence or absence of visual content, the presence or absence of text, the inclusion of links to other resources, and the languages used in the posts and comments.

The initially collected data (“popular posts”) were subsequently reevaluated in light of our sample data. We selected the most prominent posts according to each parameter for further in-depth thematic and critical discourse analysis. This process allowed us to identify the most provocative topics that sparked lengthy and emotionally charged discussions, as well as those that received passive approval from the audience. We also conducted an analysis of the communication between commentators, identifying typical phrases and ideologically loaded clichés related to various memorial, socio-cultural, and political discourses.

It is important to note that, in order to protect the privacy of SE group members, we do not reference their actual names (Facebook usernames) but use pseudonyms (alphabetic aliases). Additionally, we do not provide hyperlinks to specific posts and comments; all quoting is done in an anonymous form. On screenshots, we have covered the names and avatars and added pseudonyms to distinguish between different commentators.

Topics and Post Types

First and foremost, the research findings highlight the paramount role of visual content within the studied group. The overwhelming majority of posts, including all those within our sample periods, feature some form of visual content. Primarily, group members share photographs related to various epochs in the history of Soviet Estonia. The sources of these photographs vary and include personal archives, media and online publications, books, and photo albums. In most cases, the authors do not provide references to the sources. According to our sample data, only 3% of posts consist solely of images without any accompanying text. In contrast, 68% of posts consist of photo captions, while the remaining 32% include longer texts containing detailed information or personal memories from the author.

There are also reposts, which make up approximately 20% of all content in the group. These reposts come from the personal profiles of the primary contributors within the group, as well as articles from news portals, YouTube videos, or content from other Facebook groups. Similar to original posts, what distinguishes reposts in the group is their consistent inclusion of images. Approximately 75% of reposts are complemented with some text, which can sometimes be quite lengthy

and is written by the person doing the reposting. Interestingly, there is no clear correlation between the presence or absence of text and the number of reactions and comments. Therefore, we can conclude that visual elements contribute significantly to the process of memory dissemination within the group, with images serving as catalysts for generating comments and initiating discussions.

The images shared as posts within the community encapsulate diverse facets of Soviet Estonia, which can be categorized into the following groups:

- Photographs featuring various locations within Tallinn, and to a lesser extent, other locations in Estonia, encompassing streets, squares, buildings, and related subjects (= images of places);
- Depictions of specific products that were prevalent during the Soviet era, including automobiles, ships, clothing, household and food items (= images of objects);
- Portraits of notable figures from the period, as well as representations of different societal groups (e.g., punks, students engaged in dictation exercises) and personal family photographs (= images of particular people);
- Imagery capturing various events, such as car races, meetings of mineworkers, or festivals (= images of events).

Quite often, contributors do not specify the times when the pictures were taken (in 32% of the posts). However, most of the shared pictures were taken during the late 1960s, 1970s, and the early to mid-1980s. There are only a few pictures from earlier or later periods. From time to time, photos from outside the period of Soviet Estonia's existence (such as the early 20th century when Estonia was part of the Russian Empire and the 1920s and 1930s during Estonian independence) are also posted, but none were found within the sample periods. In essence, the depiction of Soviet Estonia in the SE group does not solely encompass Estonia during the Soviet rule but more precisely represents a phenomenon associated with the late socialist period or the era of stagnation (known as *zastoi* in Russian), which began with Leonid Brezhnev's leadership in the USSR and ended with Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*.

The majority of the initial posts are authored by a select group of individuals, identified by Facebook as top contributors. Only 5% of the images are contributed by regular members of the group. Throughout the group's existence, the identities of these top contributors have periodically shifted. Typically, within relatively brief intervals, approximately 20 individuals consistently engage in regular posting activities, often sharing multiple posts within a single day. It is worth noting that

one of the group moderators, AA,³¹ is responsible for nearly half of the group's content, highlighting their significant and active role in shaping the group's discussions and shared content. Commentators, on the other hand, exhibit great diversity and include even non-members. There are, however, a few very active members who frequently comment and participate in almost every discussion.

Triggering Topics and Embodied Memory

An analysis of the quantity of reactions and comments proves instrumental in elucidating the most favored subject matter among group members. While "likes" represent a common form of expressing support for a post, it is noteworthy that members also employ "love," "haha," and "wow" emoticons, albeit to a much lesser extent than "likes," to convey their approval of posts.

Generally, images of Tallinn, particularly those captured in the old town, tend to garner more attention from group members. In contrast, reposts of articles from news portal, such as www.tribuna.ee, exhibit comparatively lower popularity, typically receiving 22–25 reactions, with minimal reposts (1) and comments (0–1).

Explaining the extraordinary popularity of specific images within the same thematic category may pose a challenge. Thus, the overall number of "reactions" observed in the sample periods, ranges from a minimum of 7 to a maximum of 1202, exemplifying the considerable variability in member engagement. For instance, a photograph depicting the busy Viru Street in Tallinn (Figure 1) amassed over 1100 reactions, comprising both "likes" and "love" reactions. Furthermore, it garnered 70 reposts and drew 33 comments, indicative of its exceptional resonance within the community.

Another picture with almost the same amount of reactions (1102 "likes," 67 reposts and 20 comments) also depicted Viru Street in the 1970s. And the highest number of reactions obtained yet another photo of Viru Street (in 1979), with 1202 "likes," 62 reposts and 39 comments. Overall, posts referring to Tallinn draw more attention than those devoted to other places in Estonia, and within Tallinn, the Old Town and particularly Viru Street with its medieval gates are most popular. One of the most popular posts in the group as a whole (over 5400 reactions) presents an 11 minutes long documentary video from 1981 depicting young female tourists in their strolls around Tallinn.

³¹ Hereinafter, as mentioned above, we use alphabetic aliases instead of the actual names of group members.

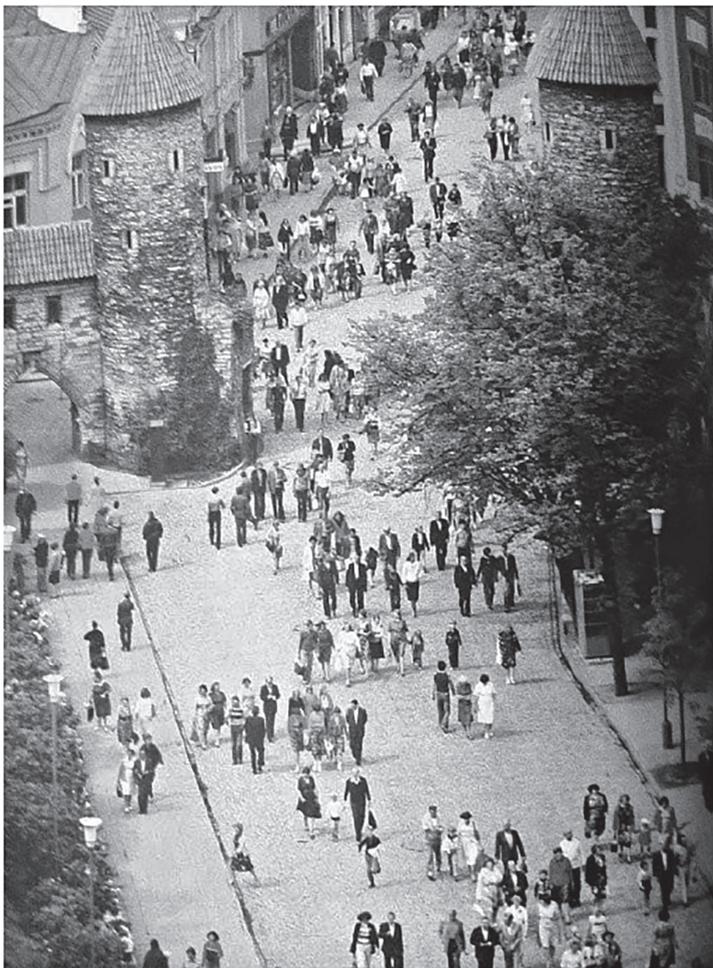


AA

Модератор Топовый соавтор · 31 июль 2023 г. · 🌐



1975 год
Виру



👍👎 1,1 тыс.

33 комментария Поделились: 70

Figure 1: Photo of Viru street in 1975 posted in the SE group. Screenshot.

While reactions and reposts are important for demonstrating the audience's interest and approval of the given content, the quantity of comments it receives is an even more significant indicator of engagement among group members. On average, within our sample periods, each post garnered approximately 18 comments, with the range spanning from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 150 comments. Some of the most commented-upon posts outside the sample periods received as much as 264 comments (such as the post about the assortment of fish in shops in SE), 734 comments (the aforementioned post with the 1981 video), and even 966 comments (the post about tar used as a chewing gum, which will be discussed in detail below). However, typically, the number of comments falls between 60 and 130.

Posts with minimal commentary tend to be reposts from news portals, as well as stories featuring well-known figures (e.g., economist Hanon Barabaner or Günther-Friedrich Reindorff, the artist responsible for designing banknotes in prewar Estonia). Similarly, posts centered around motocross and car racing, as well as images depicting "specific," less captivating, or less trendy locations such as the Põlva shopping center, canteens, Emajõgi berth in Tartu, and Pärnu beach, tend to attract fewer comments.

However, it is important to note that this localization trend is not absolute. For instance, a post highlighting the Pärnu amusement park, referred to as "Lunapark," garnered 21 comments (alongside 355 "likes" and 8 reposts). This can be attributed to the fact that many community members did not associate Lunapark with Pärnu, as it was an amusement company originating from Czechoslovakia that toured the USSR with its equipment. Consequently, community members are engaged in discussions surrounding childhood experiences and emotions in their comments, with only a few individuals having actually visited the attraction in Pärnu.

The most valuable material for memory research is undoubtedly provided by posts that amass the maximum number of comments, especially those fostering extended comment threads resembling online dialogues, exchanges of opinions, and, on occasion, discussions that may escalate into provocative and impolite exchanges. Our analysis of the topics of such highly commented posts reveals the following subjects that can trigger a maximum response from the audience: food (everything related to eating and drinking, as well as smoking), clothing and fashion, and children's games and activities.

The topic of food is especially popular in the group, comprising more than half of all posts with the highest response rates. This is well in line with the important role of food as an instrument of claiming and expressing identity:

“food-related practices can be regarded as a shortcut, or a faster way, to perform identity.”³² Food-related posts include photos of specific dishes and products (such as caramelized condensed milk), displays in grocery stores, labels of popular brands, and images of dishes and cooking utensils. Typical responses to such posts involve “recognition” (“I remember it too!,” “Taste of my childhood!,” “We used to eat it too in my family,” etc.) and “appraisal” (“How delicious it was!,” “Yummy!,” etc.), usually accompanied by comparisons with modern products, not in favor of the latter (“You can’t get anything like that now,” “Now the quality is much worse,” “It was all natural, not like now,” etc.). The topic of food is so popular that even fully textual posts asking food-related questions, for example, “What types of fish do you remember being on sale in Soviet shops?” can draw significant attention (264 comments), which is unusual for posts without any visual content.

Clothing and fashion are rarely discussed, but when such posts appear, they tend to receive a high response rate. In some cases, the topic of clothing is not mentioned in the original post but arises in the comments, which often provokes more responses. For instance, a photo from 1986 taken in front of a pond in Kadriorg park, depicting a smartly dressed family of three (554 likes, 33 comments), garnered significant attention. Typically, personal family photos in SE receive limited engagement (30–50 likes, 1–5 comments). However, in this case, the very first comment (“Parents are so fashionable!”) initiated a chain reaction of comments on fashion and style. It is likely that Facebook algorithms increased the post’s visibility and showed it to a larger audience. Comparisons, often unfavorable, with modern fashion and clothing quality are also common.

Another triggering topic, which also provokes “recognition” and “appraisal” comments, revolves around the activities of children in Soviet Estonia. This includes various outdoor games, carousel rides, festivals, and concerts in schools and kindergartens, as well as “practices of friendship,” such as publishing announcements in newspapers to find new friends. For instance, a post on this topic received 659 reactions, 180 comments, and was reposted 42 times. Sometimes these posts can also touch upon one or two other triggering topics discussed above, leading to maximum engagement from the audience.

For example, a post by AA (the main contributor to the group) dedicated to the practice of wearing a pioneer tie (see Figure 2) by Soviet children received

³² Abel Polese, Oleksandra Seliverstova, Tanel Kerikmae, and Ammon Cheskin, “National Identity for Breakfast: Food Consumption and the Everyday Construction of National Narratives in Estonia,” *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 6 (2020): 1015–1035, here 1016, doi:10.1017/nps.2019.131.



Moderator

Top contributor

September 4 at 1:16 PM · 🌐



Пионерский галстук
Любили носить или снимали?



Figure 2: The post about a pioneer tie. The text reads: “Pioneer tie. Did you like wearing it or did you take it off?” Screenshot.

136 comments. People discussed whether they liked or disliked doing that in their childhood and shared reminiscences of where and when they joined the pioneer organization. The topics of clothing and children’s activities intersect here, providing group members with the opportunity to reminisce about another aspect of their memory, contributing to a broader image of a “Happy Soviet childhood.”

The absolute champion by all measures (12,000 reactions, 966 comments, 822 reposts) among all the posts published in 2023 is the post by the same author, AA, featuring a photo of a piece of tar and calling it “chewing gum Gudron (tar)” (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Chewing gum “Tar.” Screenshot.

It refers to the practice of chewing tar in the absence of any real chewing gum, which was a scarce product in the USSR. Many commentators related to this memory and shared their own experiences, as well as reminiscences of other “wild” activities (such as playing at construction sites or looking for cartridges and unexploded shells on former World War II battlefields) that they considered “unheard of by today’s modern children with their smartphones.” Childhood, in this sense, is closely related to other topics important to the group members. These topics intertwine and create what can be called an “embodied memory.” The things and actions that trigger the process of recognition and validation of the shared experience are those associated with the body. People can “like” what they see, but they “comment” about things they could experience through touch, feeling, and consumption.

Taken together, all these comments reaffirm each other and create a monolithic image of a country where “everyone was happy,” and people “knew how to appreciate the simple joys of life.” It is a country that no longer exists, but in comparison, it makes the modern world appear gloomy and unattractive. Phrases like “We lived really well and were very happy” become a mantra, with

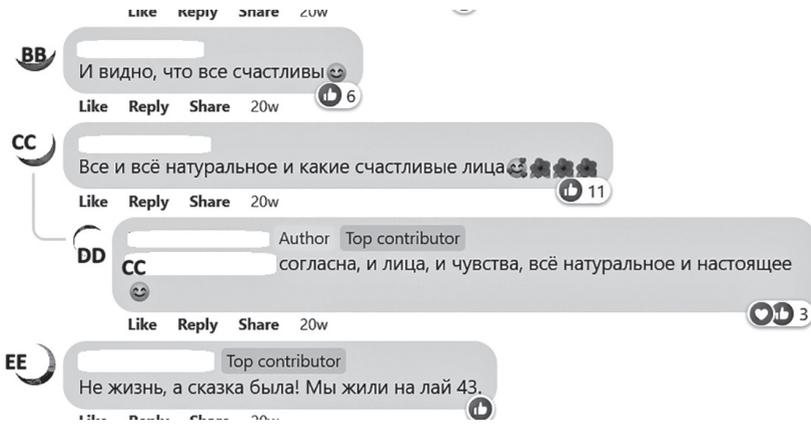


Figure 4: “Everyone was happy” comments under the photo of a New Year family party from the late 1960s. Screenshot.

synonymous comments merging into a single, lengthy, and redundant text, or rather a hypertext, where words like “happy,” “cheerful,” “satisfied,” and “joyful” sound like an endless refrain.

A perfect example can be found under the post by DD, presenting a family photo depicting three young women, including DD’s mother, and one man sitting at the kitchen table with their wine glasses in front of a New Year’s tree. Some commentators became interested in discussing festive food and female styles, but almost half of the comments (22 out of 49) repeat in different ways, “Oh, how good it was, how happy we were!” (see Figure 4). Moreover, those comments, in turn, receive a large number of approving reactions (“likes” and “love”). Commentators not only confirm each other’s statements but also express their solidarity with this happy image by employing reactions, emoticons, and gifs. The most popular comment (52 “likes”) reads: *Mne ochen’ povezlo zhit’ v sovetskom vremeni. Byla radost’ ot prazdnikov i uverennost’ v zavtrashnem dne* (“I was very lucky to live in Soviet times. There was joy in the holidays and confidence in the future”).

Provocative Questions and Ideologically Loaded Clichés

With all their popularity, most posts about food, fashion, and a happy Soviet childhood generally do not provoke serious discussions, as commentators do not contradict each other but rather provide support and appraisal. Overall, the ratio

between the number of first-level comments and the total number of comments is around 0.6–0.8, indicating that people do not initiate long threads or engage in debates. However, there are some posts with a ratio as low as 0.1–0.2, indicating that instead of contributing to the “happy memory” hypertext, commentators begin to disagree and argue with each other. This can happen in two different ways.

First of all, there are posts that touch on sensitive and controversial subjects, provoking discussions in the comments. For example, the post with the highest number of comments within our sample periods defies some statistical expectations. It is a repost of a news article from 2013 in which Estonian historian Heiki Pärdi delves into the topic of hygiene among Estonians before and after the Second World War. In contrast to the relatively small number of reactions (148), the number of comments is huge – 150. There is a relatively small number of first-level comments, and the longest thread within the researched period gained 50 comments. This indicates that the topic of whether Estonians actually benefited from Soviet rule provoked a serious debate.

Indeed, the content and style of many comments are very different from the happy chorus described above. Commentators use expressions like *O gospodi, kakaia chush'!* (“Oh my God, what crap!”) or *sovetskofashistkaia propaganda* (“Soviet-fascist propaganda”). Sometimes, after a long exchange of arguments, they resort to direct insults and obscenities, such as *Zasun' svoi tupye voprosy kuda-nibud' sebe poglubzhe* (“Shove your stupid questions somewhere deeper inside yourself”).

Interestingly, the aforementioned longest thread of 50 comments has very little to do with the topic of the post itself. It was started by a commentator (EE) who stated: *Da i ne zabyvaem, chto Estonskii iazyk, kotorym nas tak pichkaiut, i za kotoryi tak boretsia nashe pravitel'stvo, neimeet i 200 let.-. otkuda vziat'sia kul'ture?* (“And we should not forget that the Estonian language, which we are so inundated with and which our government fights so hard for, doesn't even have 200 years [of history] ... where could it get any culture from?”). Unsurprisingly, this obnoxious and derogatory statement divided the audience: some commentators supported EE, while others condemned them and tried to refute their view. Such heated arguments quite often attract group members who usually refrain from active engagement with the posts. As a result, the entire composition of the comment exchange transforms. Instead of unanimous admiration for Soviet Estonia, we can see polarized opinions and attempts to hurt and ridicule ideological opponents.

This example illustrates the second possible way to generate a real discussion in the SE group – by posting a provocative comment. These comments can



Figure 5: The photo of the exposition in Kolkhoz house (Estonian Open Air Museum), which provoked negative reactions among the SE group’s members. Screenshot.

be either radically “pro-Soviet” (or “pro-Russian”, “anti-Estonian”) or explicitly “anti-Soviet.” In both cases, supporters and opponents of the expressed position become embroiled in an irreconcilable struggle and do not hold back in their attempts to prove the inconsistency of the opposing viewpoint.

Moreover, when the opponents are not actually present in the discussion but their positions are constructed based on external content, group members can find unanimity and spiritual comfort in joining together to post negative comments. This creates not a “happy chorus of sweet memories” but rather a “chorus of menacing voices” cursing the enemies of Soviet Estonia.

A prime example of such “negative unanimity” is the group’s reaction to a post featuring photos of reconstructed Soviet apartments from the Estonian Open Air Museum. This post generated 144 comments, with only 58 being first-level comments, and most threads containing between 5 and 7 comments. Interestingly, most comments focused on just four photos out of 35, which

depicted the apartment reflecting the social and economic turmoil of the early years after Estonia regained independence (see Figure 5). Ignoring this historical context of the early 1990s, many commentators laid blame on “Estonians” for distorting the Soviet past, expressing extreme indignation. For instance, one commentator stated: *Muzei kakikh-to alkashei. Protivno smotret’. Nikogda u nas takogo ne bylo* (“A museum of some drunks. It’s disgusting to watch. We’ve never had anything like this”). Other commentators reinforced this sentiment through both likes and additional comments echoing similar sentiments.

The same negative unanimity may occur in “happy posts” as described above when someone begins to compare the happy Soviet past with the not-so-happy reality of the present or mentions the anti-Soviet (“Russophobe”) position of Estonians, especially the Estonian government. Group unification then occurs in the fight against the figure of an imaginary enemy constructed using ideologically loaded clichés, irony, and memes.³³ The topic of these clichés and their integration into everyday speech, media, and online discourses in the Estonian socio-political context demands a separate study. Here, we will describe several prototypical phrases most commonly used by SE group members in their interactions.

First of all, there are two typical reactions of “appraisal” and “recognition,” usually expressed as *Kakaia krasota!* and *Krasota-to kakaia!* (“What a beauty!” or “Such a beauty!”) and *Ia pomniu!* and *I ia!* and *Ia tozhe!* (“I remember!” or “Me too!” or “Me as well”). These can be followed and supplemented by more expanded and more ideologically explicit statements like *U nas bylo samoe schastlivoe detstvo!* (“We had the happiest childhood ever!”) and *Kakaia strana byla!* (“What a country it was!”). These reactions constitute the majority of comments, representing the positive aspect of the SE group’s memory practices: people unite in their shared appreciation of their past life in Soviet Estonia by contributing to the endless ritual hypertext of the glorious past. In doing so, they focus on their collective feeling of sweet nostalgia.

However, there is also a dark, negative side to this emotional reunion. The stress in the phrase “What a country it was!” can be placed on the last word, in the past tense, emphasizing the notion that this happy land has sunk into oblivion and cannot be reached anymore. This is where the question is raised: *I gde*

³³ Bradley E. Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Ana-Maria Bliuc, Laura G.E. Smith, and Tina Moynihan, “‘You wouldn’t celebrate September 11’: Testing Online Polarisation Between Opposing Ideological Camps on YouTube,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 23, no. 6 (2020): 827–844, doi: 10.1177/1368430220942567.

vsio eto teper’?! (“And where is all that now?!”). Normally, this cliché is employed in discussions of Soviet industry and agriculture (for example, “What happened to our fisheries?!”), as well as traditional values and Soviet ethics destroyed by capitalism and “liberal propaganda” (“Girls looked like girls”; “People trusted each other”).

Inevitably, there should be someone responsible for this loss, someone who could be blamed. This is where an obscene expression, extremely popular in Russian colloquial speech, becomes useful: *Kakuiu stranu prosrali!* (“What a country they screwed up!”, literally, “what a country was defecated”). Unsurprisingly, though, an indefinite-personal sentence, which in Russian does not even have a grammatical subject, may seem insufficient since the culprit is, in fact, obvious for many commentators. And then the figure of the ideological opponent and oppressor in the form of the Estonian government or all ethnic Estonians comes to the foreground. In this case, the Estonian official narrative of Soviet occupation and hardships of life under Soviet rule becomes ironically inverted: *Posmotrite na nikh, kak oni stradali pod ‘okkupatsiei!* (“Look at them, how they were suffering under the ‘occupation’!”). In particular, commentators claim that Estonians used to live better than Russians and much better than people from other Soviet republics. They enjoyed all possible privileges and freedoms, including education in their mother tongue and state support of their cultural traditions. This idyllic (and certainly very far from reality) picture is opposed to the “deplorable situation” of Russians in modern Estonia who, in turn, are represented as victims of unfair policies and prejudices on the part of Estonians.

Multilingual Practices and the Audience Composition

It would be very easy to describe the SE group as exclusively Russian, created by Russian speakers for the benefit of other Russian speakers – people feeling nostalgic for the times when they were in power and suffering from the loss of their former status. Moreover, the description of the SE group written by its creators states: *Zdes’ delimsia istoricheskimi sobytiiami, fotografiiami, kino-video materialami o SSSR, Sovetskoi Estonii, Talline. My posmotrim na nashu stranu, kakoi ona byla 30-70, ili dazhe bol’she, let nazad. (...) V kachestve iskliucheniia dopuskaiutsia i drugie istoricheskie publikatsii na RUSSKOM iazyke* (“Here we share historical events, photographs, film and video materials, memories of the USSR, Soviet Estonia, Tallinn. We will look at our country as it was 30–70, or even more, years ago. (...) As an exception, other historical publications in

RUSSIAN are allowed”). The status of Russian as the only language of communication in the group is mentioned explicitly and even stressed by using caps lock.

However, the reality is much more complicated, as our analysis of multilingual practices employed by the group members reveals. In fact, even the list of main contributors to the group contains many Estonian names. Certainly, names alone cannot provide conclusive evidence since they may not be real. Moreover, some native Russian speakers and Russian-Estonian bilinguals may have names and surnames typical for Estonians due to family reasons. A more decisive factor in defining the group’s ethnic and linguistic composition is the analysis of language choices people make both in their activity within the group and in their publications on Facebook in general. Based on the analysis of data from group members with open profiles, it can be assumed that at least 10–15% of active participants are not native speakers of Russian. Most of them are Estonian speakers; however, there are also people from other former Soviet republics, such as Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, or Uzbekistan, who still live in Estonia or used to live there many years ago and, by joining the group, can relive their past.

If we look at the posts and comments themselves, we will see that while the primary language of communication within the group is indeed Russian, it is noteworthy that other languages and different alphabets are also occasionally observed. The presence of Estonian top contributors facilitates sporadic posts in Estonian, either in their original form or as reposts from external sources. This linguistic diversity results in a fusion of languages and a fascinating blend of multilingual practices within the group.

Moreover, the group’s communication exhibits also a unique form of “paradoxical politeness”³⁴ in which Estonian-speaking community members compose comments in Russian when engaging with Russian-speaking individuals. The Russian speakers reciprocate by responding in Estonian. For example, in the exchange represented in Figure 6, the Estonian speaker (GG) replies to the initial comment in Russian, but in Latin script. In response, FF, the author of the initial comment, switches to Estonian in their reply (Figure 6).

These phenomena imply that Estonian-speaking community members often possess competence in Russian, effortlessly switching between the two languages as needed. Moreover, many Russian speakers readily resort to Estonian when prompted by comments in the Estonian language, and even when refraining

³⁴ Cf. Anna Verschik, “Russian-Estonian Language Contacts, Linguistic Creativity, and Convergence: New Rules in the Making,” *Multilingua* 24, no. 4 (2005): 413–429, doi: 10.1515/mult.2005.24.4.413.

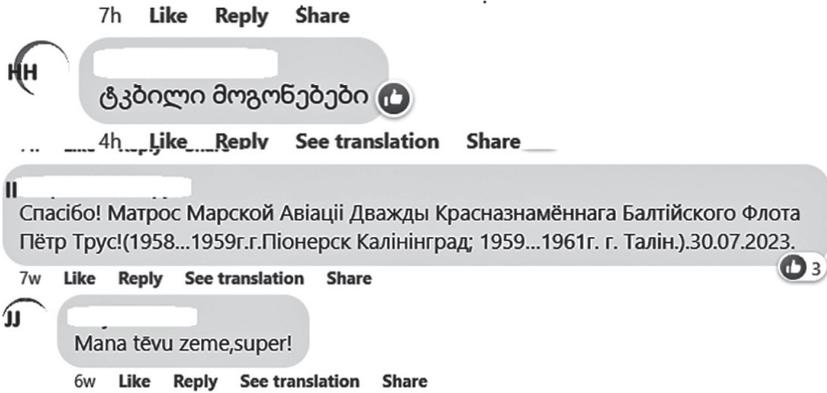


Figure 7: Examples of comments in different languages (Georgian, Belarusian, Latvian). Screenshot.

Through sharing memories and maintaining the sense of belonging, group identity is constructed not (only) on the basis of language (Russian) but rather on common beliefs and discourse practices regarding the past. Multilingualism as an ability to transgress linguistic and cultural differences represents, in this sense, a conviction, explicitly expressed by many SE group members, that there were no serious ethnic and linguistic conflicts in the USSR, “and everyone used to live in peace and harmony.” While undoubtedly false, this belief turns out to be very important for everyone for whom nostalgia for the Soviet past becomes one of the foundations of their own identity.

Concluding Discussion: “Localization of Nostalgia”

The SE group, therefore, serves as a platform for individuals to practice collective nostalgia. By joining the group, its members gain access to images of the past they can relate to, even if not from personal experience but from those of their parents. It is almost impossible to collect fully reliable demographic data on the authors of the posts and comments, but with some users, it is evident that they are younger than what could be expected from the group’s target audience.

In particular, there is one active contributor to the group who regularly posts staged photos of himself in the role of a Soviet man from the 1970s and early 1980s (using period clothing, shoes, and accessories) in various scenes: smoking in the kitchen among empty bottles and dirty dishes, sleeping fully clothed on the sofa among the remnants of a drinking party, and more. Judging

by his appearance, he is no more than forty, which means he can remember only the very last years of Soviet Estonia's existence. However, he puts a lot of effort into creating those images and actively interacts with older commentators who are happy to point out his mistakes and deviations from the "historical truth" (for example, sneakers that are too new, clothes that are not dirty enough, etc.). At the same time, the majority have an extremely positive attitude towards his activities and praise him for "making us all happy."

Overall, if we exclude "controversial" posts and long comment threads provoked by those commentators who do not share a 100% positive image of the past, communication in the group and its general atmosphere is almost idyllic. In comparison with many other Russian-speaking online communities, and Russian-medium online communication in general, which is usually described as extremely toxic and negativistic,³⁵ the SE group gives the impression of a "safe haven" where polite and pleasant people exchange impressions about what is dear to them. Under the photos of Tallinn, they express their appreciation for bustling streets with numerous pedestrians, a scarcity of automobiles, verdant surroundings, and the preservation and restoration of historical buildings by the Soviet authorities. Significant emphasis is also placed on the individuals featured in the photographs. Women and girls are often depicted wearing dresses and skirts, accompanied by heeled shoes and elegant hats, all complemented by ladylike and sophisticated hairstyles; the group members do not fail to approvingly comment on that. Occasionally, the sentiments and backgrounds of the group's members can give rise to discussions on the topic of "traditional values" in contrast to modern perspectives on gender issues.

Furthermore, descriptions of food featured in the posts evoke a sense of nostalgia and longing. Visual stimuli and confirmation of the validity of one's personal experience from others create a shared image of the past and what can be called an "embodied memory." Members reminisce about the superior taste and natural quality of food during that era. Occasionally, there are mentions of the challenges associated with waiting in lines and procurement difficulties, but such accounts appear incongruous when juxtaposed with documentary photographs that depict abundant supplies of delectable items, including fish, jars of canned goods, sweets, chocolates, and chocolate-glazed cottage cheese bars. These images challenge the notion of scarcity and evoke a sense of abundance that

³⁵ Vera Zvereva, "Attitudes to Linguistic Accuracy among Russian-speaking Social Media Users," *Languages and Nationalism Instead of Empires*, ed. Motoki Nomachi and Tomasz Kamusella (New York: Routledge, 2023): 63–77, doi: 10.4324/9781003034025.

leaves viewers' mouths watering. At the same time, they never tire of repeating how good Soviet Estonian products were and how better supplies and life in general were in Soviet Estonia than in other places in the USSR, while deliberately avoiding discussions related to the occupation and the consequences of the Second World War, or the ongoing Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

This focus on the past and, at the same time, avoidance, whenever possible, of engagement with current political turmoils distinguish the SE group, on the one hand, from other Russian-speaking online groups in Estonia like *Russkoiazychnaia Estoniia* ("Russian-speaking Estonia") or *Tallinntsy* ("Tallinn residents"),³⁶ and on the other, from more direct and aggressive audiences like *SSSR. Prekrasnaia strana, v kotoroi my zhili* ("USSR. The beautiful country we used to live in"). The latter, it may seem, exploits the same nostalgic feelings and targets the same audience of people unhappy in their present and mourning their past, but on a larger scale – on the whole territory of the former USSR. The difference, however, is significant. Despite the fact that *SSSR* is not a group but a Facebook page managed by several individuals and generating likes and comments from a quarter of a million followers, its rhetoric and overall goals and ambitions are much more straightforward: to promote the memory of the "beautiful country." To do that, the authors heavily use propaganda clichés and employ exaggerated, almost comical in its agitation, style of Soviet-time slogans: in the page's description, out of 29 sentences 18 ends with an exclamation mark. Comments often follow this style and contain a lot of exclamations and caps locked words and phrases. The SE group, in contrast, sounds less aggressive and provocative, and subtler in its approach to Soviet memory.

Moreover, it overwhelmingly stresses the second part of its name, "Estonia," and not just "Soviet." The posts within the group exclusively revolve around Estonia during the Soviet era and have very little to do with modern Russia or the entire Soviet Union. Photographs of school buildings and children on their way to school not only evoke cherished memories of childhood; they also trigger discussions and descriptions related to Estonian school uniforms worn during that era, which were distinctive from uniforms in other Soviet republics and are always described as superior to them. The same is true for discussions of food, clothes, architecture and other aspects of life: everything Estonian was much better and should be remembered as such.

³⁶ Kapitolina Fedorova and Natalia Tšaikina, "From 'oppressors' to 'oppressed': Baltic Russian Post-Soviet speakers in search of a new identity through social networking," *REGION* (forthcoming).

The aforementioned cliché “What a country it was!” therefore refers not to the USSR but is very much localized in Estonian context. The Atlantis of Soviet Estonia is opposed not only to modern “capitalist” and “Russophobic” Estonia, but also to Soviet Russia and other Soviet republics and is depicted as a true paradise where everyone was happy and never suffered from oppression.

However, this idyllic chorus of “happy memories” can take a provocative turn when, for example, someone brings up the fact that, during Soviet times, Estonian schoolchildren had the opportunity to study in their mother tongue. This is in stark contrast to the current situation where Russian-medium schools in Estonia are transitioning into fully Estonian-language instruction. These discussions may evoke strong emotions and differing opinions about language policies, education, and cultural identity in contemporary Estonia. The same sharp turn in rhetoric happens every time when someone tries to challenge the mytheme of the “happy Soviet shared past” and expresses opinions more in line with the official Estonian view of the Soviet occupation. Such attempts immediately meet with unanimous resistance on the part of the majority of SE group members.

Group unification, in other words, may exist in two modes, positive and negative, the one based on the “glorious past” and the one built on self-victimization and a feeling of loss. The notion of cultural trauma refers to a “dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion.”³⁷ Unsurprisingly, those who refuse to see themselves as victims and an oppressed group, in the current situation of polarization and radicalization against the backdrop of war, started to reject the SE group. Recently, several Estonian public intellectuals who are native speakers of Russian but are well integrated into the Estonian cultural establishment published posts about their controversial or purely negative feelings towards the SE group. They blamed it as toxic and explained that even looking at the historical images, which used to be entertaining, now became almost impossible. Soviet nostalgia, in this sense, turns out to be a powerful instrument of both unification and disengagement, identification and de-identification. How long will this last, and what will prevail? Only time will tell.

³⁷ Eyerman, “The Past in the Present,” 160.