

Laulupidu and Identity Politics in Estonia

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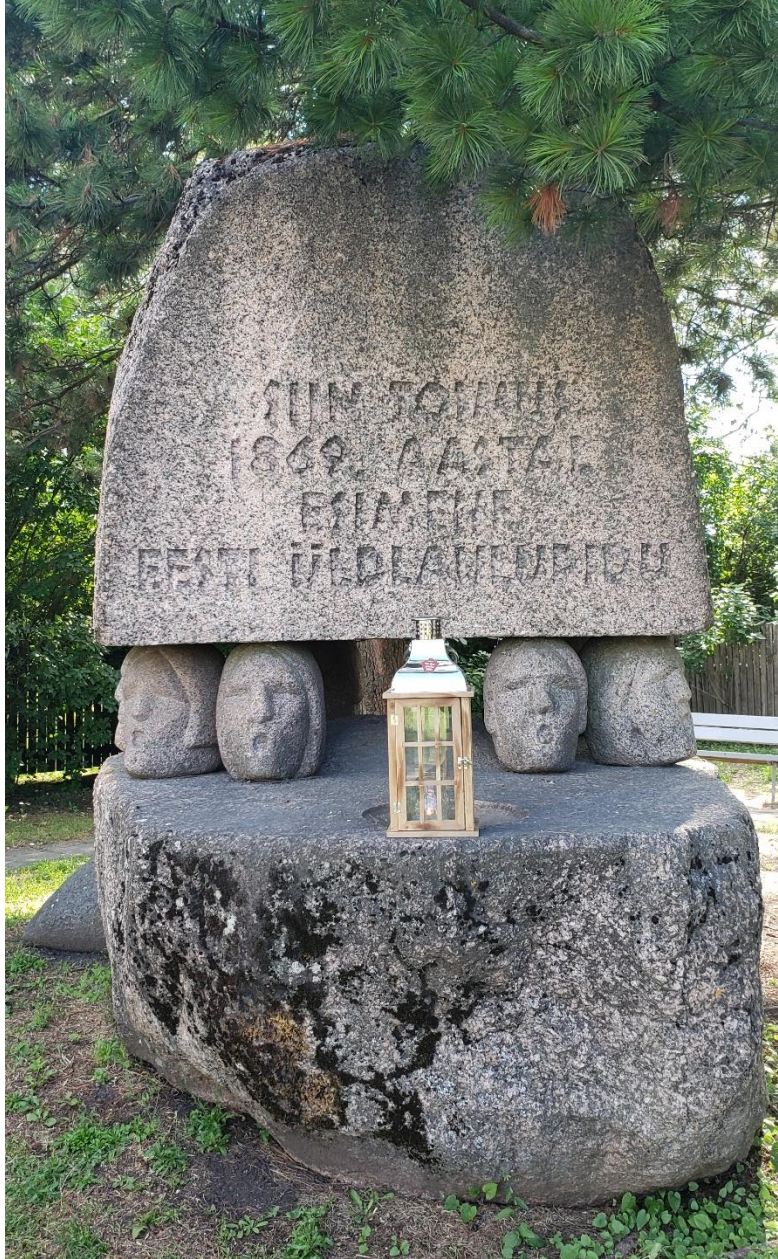


Figure 1. Monument sculpted by Mati Karmin in Tartu to mark the 125th anniversary of the first Laulupidu. “The First Estonian General Song Festival was held here in 1869.” Photograph taken by author 23 June 2019.

Walking up Narva Highway to get from the center of Tartu out to Raadi Manor for Midsummer Eve celebrations, I passed by a monument to the first all-Estonia Laulupidu (Song Festival) held there in 1869. Mati Karmin began work on the monument in 1989 in the midst of Estonia’s Singing Revolution, which culminated in Estonia’s independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991. Reflecting back on this work for an exhibition at the Tartu Art House, Karmin described his idea for the monument: “between two millstone-like plates there would be singing heads as grains that are being ground down. People are singing despite the incredible pressure.

Back then, for me the top stone symbolized the tsarist powers and the bottom stone reality, austerity and punishing farm work. It was a time of national awakening, of resistance and protest (in 1989 as well as 120 years earlier).”¹ This monument provides a physical representation of the place of song in Estonia’s national identity, and also of song’s role as a means of protecting that identity and of political protest. Karmin highlights the parallels between the pressures of tsarist and Soviet rule and the ability of Estonians under both oppressive settings to continue utilizing their song as a source of strength and resistance.

Laulupidu is therefore a long-standing tradition and method that Estonians have used to promote their language and identity under periods of both autocracy and democracy. This event helped preserve the Estonian language under difficult conditions and played an important role in obtaining Estonia’s independence from the Soviet Union. Occurring about every five years, Laulupidu brings together a large proportion of the Estonian population during the event itself and through the months or years of preparation beforehand. In contemporary Estonia, Laulupidu remains an important symbol and promoter of Estonian identity, broadcasted across the country and bringing in members of the Estonian diaspora from abroad. This year, Estonia’s President Kersti Kaljulaid participated in Laulupidu as a member of one of the over 1000 choirs at the Tallinn event. Combined with the motto of the 150th anniversary Laulupidu, “The Land of My Fathers, the Land that I Love,” the government’s participation signals the continued value of the event to both Estonian identity and politics.

Utilizing participant observation of the 2019 festival in Tartu and Tallinn, and observations of Estonian museums that include festival exhibits or items, I compare the politicization of the event during and after the Soviet era. I focus my comparison on the actors involved in the event, both participants and audience members, government intervention in the festival, the festival’s themes and programs, and narrative accounts of the festival in media outlets and museums. Since Estonia is now a democracy with many open avenues for political participation, I would expect Laulupidu to lose some of its political character. Since Estonians can freely voice their preferences regarding language and identity politics through elections and open dialogue on a regular basis, these options could be sufficient. However, if Laulupidu remains similarly politicized, this would be an example of an enduring legacy of political activity outside of formal political channels. This result would point to the complementarity of such political actions, rather than competition between or substitution for them.

Culture, politics, and regime type

Cultural activity can be as political as voting or protest. In democracies, protest music, political plays, or other cultural events demonstrate political preferences and serve to bond the political community together. In authoritarian countries with limited political rights and opportunities, these cultural events and practices can be one of the few spaces where political expression is possible with less fear of repercussion. They can partially substitute for a lack of free expression in more

¹ Mati Karmin LX: Tartu Art House, 2019. 7-8. Available at <https://www.digar.ee/arhiiv/en/books/119862>, Accessed 1 May 2021.

overtly political spheres. Therefore, cultural political activity is arguably even more important in these settings and can take the place of closed channels for voice.

While citizens use cultural spaces for voice, governments also engage in cultural activity and control to build pro-regime and nationalist sentiment. By connecting the regime to a particular national identity, to its language, history, music, and art, and positioning itself as the nation's protector and promoter, leaders can attain greater legitimacy with less reliance on costly repression or economic provision. The cultural sphere is therefore a contested political space in which various actors compete to gain supporters and achieve hegemony.

Culture can both reflect and influence power relations and conflict over policy, ideology, or identity. In democracies, candidates for office choose campaign songs that will draw, resonate with, and animate voters. In countries with constrained political competition, leaders still employ music, national dance, and costumes at their rallies or during holidays to strengthen their emotional ties to the nation. In 2000, new to the presidency and beginning attempts to reign in the regions, Vladimir Putin attended Sabantuy, a Tatar folk holiday, in Tatarstan, participated in dances and wore a tubeteika, a Tatar hat. On the other side of the equation, citizens also turn to culture to express their preferences and organize with like-minded people, especially when other avenues for political participation are blocked.

These links among power, culture, and identity are by no means new. In the 1840s, Verdi's operas, mediated through audience interpretations, played a key role in mobilizing support for the unification of Italy (Stamatov 2002). In addition to unifying states, music assists separatists, such as the Irish independence movement (White 1998), by transmitting knowledge of historical and contemporary grievances and martyrs, as well as by bonding those participating in the music's production and dissemination. In both Italy and Ireland, culture provided a means to shape, strengthen, and assert alternative national identities that challenged the dominant powers.

Culture provides an opportunity for those shut out of power to make their voices heard. Social movements turn to culture to recruit, mobilize, and unite supporters, utilizing a resource that is readily available, powerful, and recognizable. In the United States, music has played a key role in black liberation struggles from "sorrow songs" of slaves, to anthems of the civil rights movement such as "We Shall Overcome" (Eyerman 2002), to hip-hop culture that facilitates and amplifies voices often pushed to the margins of society (Rose 1994). Music can both express and form political sentiments and organizations, providing opportunities for communication and bonding within communities (Matten 1998; Street 2003).

In countries where protest, public rallies, and free voting are constrained or denied, culture provides a rare avenue for voice and organization. Even in democratic contexts, culture and music can be a "direct way to express one's opinion against the system" when conventional avenues of political participation are closed to or mistrusted by minorities (Martiniello & Lafleur 2008, 1207). While it is relatively simple for government personnel to deny permits for protests, shutting down all autonomous cultural production and consumption would detract too much from the legitimacy that even autocrats need to stay in power (Gerschewski 2013). An art show or concert brings people together with others who share their proclivities and facilitates discussions that could turn to the

political. In addition to this organizing potential, the art or music itself can have political messages imbedded within it, ranging from the language of lyrics to the subject of a painting. Popular and folk culture enable people to embed “hidden transcripts” legible only to their intended audience within stories or songs, while avoiding sanction by not directly opposing the dominant, “public transcript” (Scott 1990, 157-158). For example, Beausoleil (2013) finds that the use of metaphor, African languages, and material with multiple possible readings enabled South African protest theater to challenge apartheid and provide alternatives, even in the presence of state censors and police.

Those in power, realizing the political power of culture, often attempt to constrain or guide it to suit their own needs. Gramsci (1989) notes the importance of both dominance, coercing obedience, and cultural hegemony, obtaining consent through the distribution and reproduction of norms and worldviews in cultural life, for consolidating power. Scholars of nationalism (Hutchinson 1987; Gellner 2006), also view cultural production as a key element of shaping and consolidating national identity, whether it is directed from the regime or from below. A shared culture facilitates common views of the possible, recognition of community members, and dialogue among them by providing shared points of reference, modes of expression, and collective consumption of cultural products. These possibilities make culture a contested site as those with and without power strive to achieve hegemony and reap its benefits.

Therefore, “cultural policy reflects a hegemonic struggle” as political leaders and those active in civil society seek to support their particular worldview and identity through culture (Feder & Katz-Gerro 2012, 375). In Estonia, the nature of this struggle has shifted between autocratic and democratic periods of its history. Laulupidu has remained a constant under tsarist, independent, Soviet, and now democratic rule, but its place in cultural policy and political struggles has varied. In the next sections, I analyze how museums look back at these different periods and describe Laulupidu’s development and meaning. I then discuss the politics of the 150th anniversary Laulupidu held in 2019.

Contemporary Depictions of Laulupidu History

Laulupidu is widely represented across Estonia’s symbolic landscape, from monuments, to singing grounds, to museum exhibits. These representations tend to tell a story of the song festival in a way that ties it to the present, making the case for continuity in utilizing this event to celebrate and promote Estonian identity. While much of the form of the song festivals remained consistent over the decades, “each national song festival had by necessity to be formulated as a manifestation of support for the existing regime, which was in sharp contradiction with the expressed undercurrent of the national identity and solidarity” (Brüggemann & Kasekamp 2014, 261). In telling the story of national awakening and independence through song, both the undercurrent and the outward manifestation of Laulupidu under different regimes are emphasized in different ways.

Song Festival Museum, Tartu

As the birthplace of Laulupidu, Tartu has a museum dedicated to the history of the song festival. This museum received support from the European Regional Development Fund, as well as from the Estonian government. Inside the building, you walk into a newly renovated exhibit room on

the first floor that details the origins and development of the song festival through photographs and text in Estonian and English.² Noticeably absent is translation into Russian as well, a practice of some other Estonian museums. The expectation is that visitors will know one of these two languages to learn the history and historical meaning of Laulupidu.

The exhibit includes interactive components, inviting visitors to listen to recordings of past festivals and speeches and to think about their relationship to Laulupidu. For example, one part of the exhibit asks visitors to place a ball in a cylinder under “Which part of the song festivals should become a tradition?”, with the leading choice at the time being “The festival days and the day after them should be a legal holiday.” Another part of the exhibit, at its chronologically placed end, asks “Song festivals can be loved in several ways, but what do they mean to you?” and leaves space for visitors to write their answers (Figure 2). By creating these opportunities for interaction and encouraging thinking about the current state of Laulupidu, the museum places visitors into the narrative where the historical development and importance of the song festival meets the present.

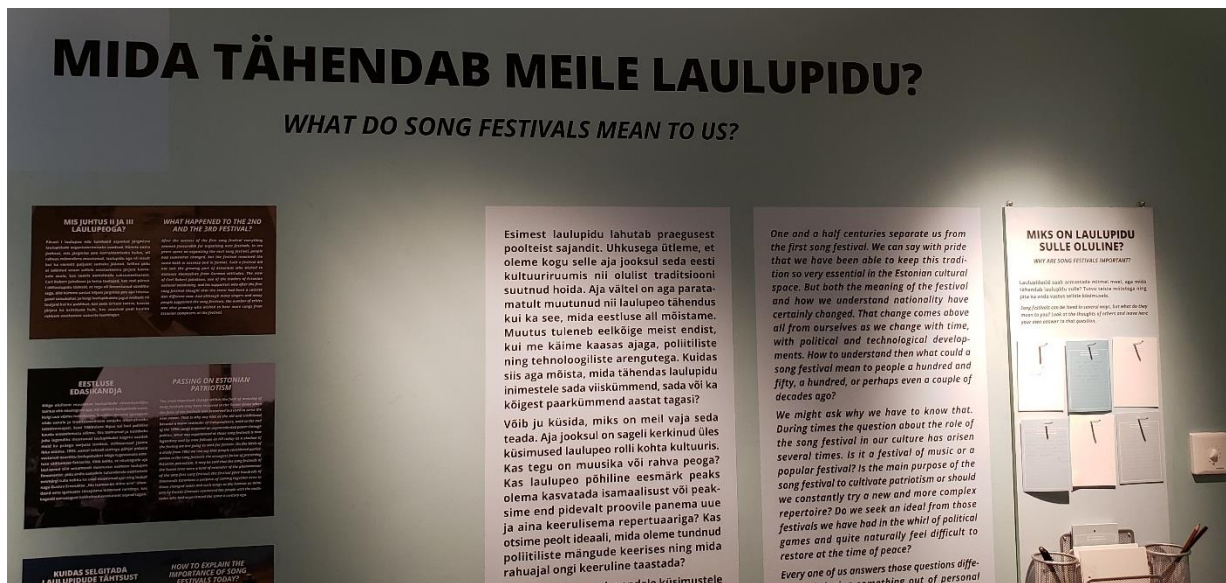


Figure 2. Photograph taken by author. Tartu. June 21, 2019.

During the song festival season, the grounds of the museum are also activated into a site for choral music concerts, connecting the past history to an ongoing tradition. Free of charge, visitors could walk through the grounds; read about the history of the museum building, which included connections to song festivals, theater, and the first Estonian kindergarten; and listen to Estonian songs. With its open-ended questions inside and performances outside, the Song Festival Museum presents a narrative of Laulupidu’s past, but leaves open for consideration what it means to people today.

Depictions in other Museums

Even when Laulupidu and Estonian song is not the main focus of a museum or particular exhibit, it tends to be included as part of the general narrative of Estonian history. For example, at the

² Author’s observations. 21 June 2019.

Estonian National Museum in Tartu, a children’s exhibit displays the history of Estonia and the world from 1900 to the present in drawings.³ Included towards the end is a drawing of the first Rock Summer in Tallinn. Held at the song festival grounds in 1988, the slogan was “Glasnost Rock – Rock for Peace!”⁴ Though the songs at this concert were not traditional Estonian choral music, holding it at the song festival grounds connected it to this tradition and contributed to the power of the Singing Revolution. The National Museum also contains a display on the first song festival, calling it a “major event in the national awakening” and “one of the most important expressions of Estonian national identity” today. The display also notes the 2019 festival about to take place in the context of identifying objects to observe, such as song books and the first baton used in 1869.

In Tallinn, the Estonian History Museum at Maarjamäe Palace also places the first song festival within the narrative of Estonia’s national awakening, noting that “In the span of a lifetime, the peasantry had become Estonians.”⁵ Another museum in the same complex includes a display on the Singing Revolution and Rock Summer in an exhibit “Sound of Freedom! The Story of Estonian Popular Music.”⁶ It described the 1988 “Song of Estonia” event as a time for people to “sing together and express the people’s mentality.” When the Song Festival was brought up at Tallinn’s Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom, it was in the context of Soviet repression. The audio guide commented that “The Song Festival was and is the major event of the Estonian people, which the Soviet regime naturally hijacked to serve its own interests.”⁷ Here, the emphasis is on the limited freedom of Estonians during the Soviet era such that even the Estonian Song Festival comes under the control of the Communist Party.

Museums in Tartu and Tallinn emphasize two main aspects of Laulupidu: its place in Estonian national identity and its role in political struggles for freedom and control.

Laulupidu in 2019

This most recent Laulupidu took place on the 150th anniversary of the first. Such anniversaries invite reflection on an event’s origins, development, and current place in society, much as the 125th anniversary did for Karmin in his monument construction. While the main festival has moved to Tallinn from its initial site in Tartu, connections to and remembrance of the past remain prominent in both the Tallinn festival, and the Tartu one held a couple weeks earlier.

President Kersti Kaljulaid participated as a singer in the Tallinn festival. Though holding this high political position, Kaljulaid blended into the mass of choirs comprised of over 30,000 people while adding her voice to theirs. She did step out to give a brief speech, embodying the full support of the government for the festival and characterizing the political significance of its past. Kaljulaid recounted the oppression of the tsarist and Soviet eras, and credited song as what “gives Estonians

³ Author’s observation. June 26, 2019.

⁴ <http://rocksummer.ee/en/history/about-rs-festivals>

⁵ Author’s observation. June 30, 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Author’s observation. July 2, 2019.

courage...makes Estonians free.”⁸ Going further, she said the song and dance “made us feel a bit more Estonian.”⁹ Here Kaljulaid directly connects Estonian song with Estonian identity, defining a part of what it means to be Estonian. At the end of the speech, she passed on her power to the conductors stating, “Our conductors are your conductors, and this weekend the power is entirely in their hands.”¹⁰ For this weekend, the power in the country lies not with politicians or business leaders, but with conductors, those leading Estonians in song.

The connection between the festival and political freedom is also made in the choice of location for one of the affiliated events. The Folk Music Celebration concert was held at Independence Square in Tallinn where a monument to the Estonian War of Independence (1918-1920) in the form of Estonia’s Cross of Liberty was erected in 2009 (Figure 3). With the monument in the background, Estonian music, costume, and traditions are tied to the concept and experience of freedom, linking them and the spectators in one narrative of Estonian identity.



Figure 3. Photograph taken by author. Tallinn. July 5, 2019.

Since the current government is so fully supportive of and integrated into Laulupidu today, participation is no longer a sign of protest or a way to push back against those in power. It is instead a sign of support for the current Estonian identity and promotion of its place in society. Those in attendance waved Estonian flags or ribbons in the flag colors of blue, black, and white, singing along with some of the songs. Pawłusz (2016) describes Laulupidu as an “instrument of language policy,” both emphasizing the ethnic nature of Estonian national identity and offering a potential mode of integration for Russian speakers who do participate. The festival grounds become a

⁸ 6 July 2019 <https://www.president.ee/en/official-duties/speeches/15333-address-of-the-president-of-the-republic-at-the-xxvii-song-festival/index.html>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

potential site of either integration or exclusion for outsiders to the community and site of affirmation for insiders.

Therefore, challenging the status quo can come from non-participation, particularly among Estonia's ethnic minorities who do not see a place for themselves in the festival, who don't "feel a bit more Estonian" when singing the songs. The website for the festival is written in Estonian, English, and Russian, inviting non- or weaker-Estonian speakers to participate. However, despite perennial debates over whether Russian-language songs should be included into Laulupidu's repertoire (Yatsyk 2017), the songs sung at Tartu and Tallinn remained exclusively in Estonian in 2019. According to a survey by RusDelfi, a Russian language media source in Estonia, more than 70% of its readers did not plan on watching the festival.¹¹ When its editor asked why there is no Russian songs in the program, leadership of the event responded that "When choosing songs for the song festival, one proceeds not only from their language. It is important that the holiday program is seamless and consistent with the main idea of the festival."¹² Some Russian speakers do still attend or watch the festivities, including one who helped with the organizing team and thought "one such concert replaces ten Estonian lessons,"¹³ but others do not see a place for them in its narrative and repertoire.

Politics and Laulupidu: Then and Now

Just as Laulupidu took on a different meaning under tsarist, independent, and Soviet rule, it takes on yet another meaning in Estonia today. When Estonia was governed by authoritarian regimes, the song festivals served a double duty. In the eyes of the Soviet authorities, the song festivals were "socialist in essence, national in form" to serve the goal of moving socialism forward in Estonia.¹⁴ Yet underneath that, they served as a means of resistance and preservation of an Estonian identity through the collective singing of Estonian language songs and creatively working within the bounds of censorship. For example, at the 1975 festival, the singers performed "Lenin's Words" by Veljo Tormis that incorporated Lenin's own writings, but only those that focused on national self-determination.¹⁵ During the Soviet era, and particularly under Stalin, criticism of Lenin, communism, or Soviet rule could result in imprisonment, deportation, and death. Therefore, songs and the song festivals served as a means of resistance in a way less visible to Communist Party authorities and less likely to result in punishment.

Today, performing at or attending Laulupidu is no longer a means of resisting political authority. Estonians can freely voice their discontent through the ballot box or through protest instead. Additionally, the current government is fully supportive of and integrated into the event. In this context, attending shows support for the version of Estonian national identity promoted through Laulupidu, one based on Estonian language, deep connections to the land and place, and

¹¹ Andrei Shumakov. 5 July 2019. <https://rus.delfi.ee/statja/86746923/pesnyami-na-russkom-turkmenskom-ilinganasanskom-yazyke-nichego-popravit-nelzya-izvestnye-zhiteli-estonii-o-tom-pochemu-russkih-ne-interesuet-prazdnik-pesni-i-tanca>

¹² Andrei Shumakov. 3 July 2019. <https://rus.delfi.ee/statja/86727909/prazdnik-kotoryy-dolzhen-vseh-obedit>

¹³ Mark Efimov. 22 July 2019. <https://rus.delfi.ee/statja/86902367/odin-takoy-koncert-zamenaet-desyatok-urokov-estonskogo-yazyka-kak-ya-okazalsya-v-samom-centre-sobytyy-prazdnika-pesni-i-tanca>

¹⁴ Author's observation. Song Festival Museum, Tartu. June 21, 2019.

¹⁵ Ibid.

narratives of survival under and triumph over Soviet occupation. However, just because it is no longer oppositional and a means of resistance does not necessarily mean that Laulupidu has become apolitical. It promotes and symbolizes an Estonian national identity that requires a certain type of integration to become part of the national political community. In this context, nonparticipation can be a form of resistance for those who do not see themselves in that national community and want a re-envisioning of what it means to be part of the Estonian community.

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