Spatial Practices and Time in Estonia: From Post-Soviet Geopolitics to European Governance

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Abstract. The article examines spatial practices and time in post-Soviet Estonia as a particularly illuminating example of the issues involved in post-Soviet geopolitics and the geopolitics of European governance. The article makes use of recent critical geopolitics literature. It enquires into Estonia’s early–mid 1990s post-Soviet geopolitics that led to the emergence of the Estonian–Russian land border dispute, the Estonian–Latvian maritime border dispute and a conflict with Russia. These disputes faded away towards the late 1990s as Estonia’s essentially modern post-Soviet geopolitics became increasingly suppressed by the geopolitics of the expansion of the area of European governance, connoting both modern and post-modern spatial practices. In the more conceptual sense, the case-study analysis also highlights the pivotal role of identity politics and the politics of time and memory in post-Soviet geopolitics and geopolitics in general.

Being situated on what Samuel Huntington (1993) and his followers call a ‘civilisational default line’ between western European and Slavic-Orthodox civilisations, Estonia offers a particularly interesting case study for exploring the issues involved in post-Soviet geopolitics and their increasing suppression by the spatial practices of European governance towards the turn of the millennium. Having regained independence in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s 1991 August putsch, Estonia and the Estonians were faced with the task of constructing a de facto new political entity and defining its place in the broader regional context. This entailed invoking ideas guiding the construction of Estonia’s political space and the delimitation of its borders. Unfortunately, it turned out that the ideas put forth by the Estonian political élites in the early

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1990s, and which were supported by the broader public, led to a land border dispute with Russia, a maritime border dispute with Latvia and an interstate conflict with Russia. These events, coupled with the tensions between the ethnic Estonian majority and Estonia’s Russophone minority, naturally evoked concerns on the part of European and Euro-Atlantic organisations with an interest in the region such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Council of Europe (CE), the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

As it is well known, the geopolitics in the conflicts over Estonia’s political space and borders took more abated forms towards the late 1990s, with the Estonian–Latvian dispute settled in 1996, the technical details in the delimitation of the Estonian–Russian border agreed by 1997 and a draft treaty signed in March 1999. But the story has not come to an end. The Estonians and Western organisations are left in limbo, waiting for the Russian government to approve the treaty and the Duma to ratify it. At the same time, owing to Estonia’s accession process to the EU, which is set to make the Estonian–Russian border part of the EU’s eastern boundary, Estonia has become involved in the Union’s refugee, asylum-seeker and immigrant policies in the face of threat perceptions of a large mass of people and unwanted goods on their way to western Europe. As part of its preparations for eventually joining the EU’s Schengen treaty, Estonia has, against Russian preferences, introduced a harder border regime on its eastern border.

These developments in the Estonian case illustrate well the broader issue of how ‘post-Soviet geopolitics’ in the Baltic corner of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) is gradually becoming suppressed by the geopolitics of the expansion of the area of European governance. Within this shift, Estonia’s essentially modern post-Soviet geopolitics is becoming suppressed by a combination of the EU’s own just-as-modern insistence on pacifying its future ‘inside space’ by means of settling outstanding border disputes (Estonia, Latvia) and introducing the Schengen border regime (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and its post-modern insistence on constructive border co-operation both with other future members (Latvia) and outsiders (Russia) in the context of initiatives such as the Northern Dimension (ND).

The Estonian case manifests well the broader issue of what kind of spatial practices one should engage with in the post-Cold War era. In the early 1990s, in particular, Estonia and Russia were both tied to fairly traditional or modern, essentially realist spatial practices, whereas western European political élites would have preferred to see more so-called late-modern or post-modern practices in their mutual relations than were in evidence. But it is noteworthy that the EU’s concomitant own, very modern geopolitics in the Schengen borders question makes the whole setting very ambiguous, with no firm standard set for ‘desirable’ geopolitical behaviour. Modern post-Soviet geopolitics in the fringes and neighbouring territories of the EU is simply in the process of becoming suppressed by a rather uneasy combination of the EU’s own, both modern and post-modern, spatial practices. The EU has an incentive and intent to project stability, prosperity and power beyond its borders. At the same time, the categorisation of ‘beyond’ and the quality of bilateral relations offered to non-members differs from case to case, creating new borders and geographical variation in the prevalence of either ‘post-Soviet’ patterns or increasing
‘Europeanisation’. And, in addition to being a pivotal case, we argue that, in the more conceptual sense, the Estonian developments highlight the central role of identity politics and the politics of time and memory in geopolitics. To make these arguments, we first discuss some of the recent developments in geopolitical scholarship vis-à-vis international relations (IR) and political geography and opt for making use of the recent writing under the label of critical geopolitics.

Reconceptualising Geopolitics

There is a good case for speaking of a return of the term geopolitics into IR. The term acquired rather long-lasting negative baggage with the post-World War II perception that the Nazi regime in Germany had used geopolitical scholarship for its own imperialistic and expansionist ends. Yet, the grounds for this negative baggage may largely be debatable, as recent studies suggest (Luomahon, 2000; Ó Tuathail, 1996, pp. 16–17; see also Hyusmans, 1999). Be that as it may, the term appears now in forms it never did before, thus transgressing the earlier meanings in many senses. Yes, geopolitics still refers to the interface between geography and politics. But, crucially, it is surely no longer limited to being an interface between geography and the conduct of states’ foreign policy, nor is it limited to the realist power struggle in international politics. In a word, the new referents of the term geopolitics call for a more careful conceptual attention to the term itself (Sloan and Gray, 1999). But how should such attention be directed?

To begin with, it must be granted that at least a few relatively recent IR textbooks fail to notice this alleged return of geopolitics. If the term is mentioned at all, references to it come in fairly traditional forms. This unfortunate inattention to the term and its new meanings might be due to the fact that the comeback is taking place in fields of IR research somewhat detached from the mainstream. The most obvious place in which the term is to be found is, naturally, strategic studies. Another place to look for it is in the ‘new geopolitics’ literature, which has tried to dissociate itself from the old, geographically deterministic geopolitical tradition by pointing at ‘causal forces’ and factors other than pure geography influencing the formation of the contemporary geopolitical division and order. However, ‘new geopolitics’ has largely failed to make any decisive break with the old tradition, still offering a Cartesian, panoptical god’s eye view of global developments, often thinking of the world in the synchronic, ahistorical sense as consisting of essential geographical entities, whether heartland powers that are in an eternal conflict with maritime powers or variously defined ‘pan-areas’ competing with each other (Ó Tuathail, 1997, pp. 39–41; 1998a, p. 2; Tuomi, 1998).

A more thorough account of the term geopolitics is developed in the critical geopolitics writing. This literature is the product of a very heterogeneous group of scholars in political geography and IR, united in their commitment to post-positivist approaches, in order to challenge taken-for-granted knowledge of the world. Critical geopolitics is thus about an analysis of space and place “in a manner which seeks to resist the linguistic and epistemic conventions prevailing in the world of ‘real politics’” and the search for “alternative accounts of phenomena defined as ‘geopolitical’” (Häkli, 1998, p. 334). In this spirit, Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1999), Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby (1998) and Klaus Dodds (2001), for example, have made distinctions between various types of geopolitics. Formal
geopolitics is practised, for example, by military-strategic think-tanks and is about the materialistic, highly specialised knowledge of supposed geographical determinants of history and political developments. Practical geopolitics is about the tacit and unremarkable use of geographical terminology by political élites and intellectuals of statecraft, essentialising places, regions and identities. Finally, popular geopolitics is about the active legitimation and reproduction of practical geopolitical knowledge in the mass media, popular culture and schoolbooks, not forgetting everyday understandings and images of other peoples and places. Today, formal geopolitics is as much alive as ever, with both US and Russian academia, among others, producing geopolitical studies (for example, Brzezinski, 1997; Dugin, 1999; Tihonravov, 2000). Practical geopolitics is evident almost anywhere in foreign and security policy discourses, and popular geopolitics too is finding its way into scholarly analyses.

It is important to note that Ó Tuathail’s framework, which discriminates between formal, practical and popular types of geopolitics, focuses on institutions that are at various levels engaged in ‘geopolitical’ activities. The focus on institutions can be understood as a critical-minded effort to focus on those who are responsible for the emergence of particular geopolitical discourses. In this way, geopolitics loses some of its former mystical character and acquires more agency. However, because geopolitics on the whole must be understood as a constellation embracing all these institutions and their activities, practical and popular geopolitics are highly interrelated phenomena, being only analytically separate parts of the same process including discursive signification, policy formulation, legitimation and implementation, all of which can be studied by, for example, broadly understood discourse-analytical approaches. Also, borrowings from formal geopolitical terminology occur frequently in both practical and popular geopolitics, as policy-makers and the public use concepts and categories derived from traditional geopolitical analyses, although failing to display similar rigour in their use.

We show in this article that the whole constellation and the interrelationships between the institutions within it can be usefully elucidated by looking at conceptual focus points such as identity politics, which is practised by all these institutions. In the following section, we first introduce the broader post-Soviet context and the emergence of post-Soviet geopolitics in Estonia, which is mostly about practical geopolitics and its popular legitimation, with occasional borrowings from more formal geopolitical analyses. Secondly, we discuss how the various forms of geopolitics are imbued by identity politics, and explain how Estonia’s post-Soviet geopolitics has in Estonia’s EU accession process become increasingly suppressed by the geopolitics of the expansion of the area of European governance. Finally, we discuss the relationship between identity politics and the politics of time and memory in post-Soviet geopolitics and geopolitics as a whole before concluding the paper.

The Emergence of Post-Soviet Geopolitics in Estonia

The Post-Soviet Context

Several geopolitical readings of contemporary European developments have appeared recently. These have concerned, for example, the making of post-Cold-War Europe as a whole (Tunander, 1997), the EU’s enlargement project
(Christiansen et al., 2000) and Russia’s Eurasianist policies towards the ‘near abroad’ and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Erickson, 1999; Smith, 1999), with the focus usually being on formal and practical types of geopolitics and on the broader structural context in which these discourses are situated. Popular geopolitics has been somewhat absent from these studies. Strikingly, for the Russian case in particular, the geopolitical tone of the analyses stems from the peculiarities of post-Soviet Russian politics and not necessarily that much from the willingness of the authors to employ either ‘new’ or critical geopolitical perspectives. But the prevalence of geopolitics concerns many other post-Soviet cases as well (for example, Aalto, 2003a; Kolossov and O’Loughlin, 1998), very often giving rise for territorial disputes and interstate conflicts within the territory of the FSU—for example, between Latvia and Russia, and Ukraine and Russia (see, for example, Dauksts and Puga, 1995; Kuzio, 1997).

Similarly, geopolitics played an important part in the emergence of a territorial dispute between Estonia and Russia in the early 1990s. As regards the Estonian side, this dispute originated in what can be called Estonia’s ‘restorationist geopolitics’ (Aalto, 2000), a practice of constructing political space strongly coloured by the principle of restoration of Estonia’s statehood, and leading to the emergence and institutionalisation of a particular discourse of practical geopolitics: the geopolitical discourse of restitution. The proponents of this discourse aimed at getting back the small territories on the other side of the present Estonian–Russian border that Stalin annexed from the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR) in the aftermath of World War II. We will now turn to this case, our working assumption being that such case analysis often lends itself better to interesting theoretical considerations than pure comparative research (Eckstein, 1975), which, of course, should complement case studies of the type we embark on here.

Restorationist Ideas in Geopolitical Discourse

During the early stages of the anti-Soviet protest movement in the ESSR, many intellectuals and reformist members of the Communist Party of Estonia started to strive at freeing themselves of the rigid straightjacket imposed upon them by the geopolitical realities of the Cold War. Their initial quest for national autonomy within the Soviet empire in 1987–89 can be interpreted with some reservations as ‘anti-geopolitics’: efforts to extend societal space outside the control and discipline of the Soviet state. In the ESSR, specific activities like the public display of the Estonian national colours by the Estonian Heritage Society (EHS, Eesti Muinsuskaitsi Selts) and demands for the publication of the strongly geopolitical Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact documents by a special pressure group (Molotov–Ribbentrop Pakti Avalikustamise Eesti Grupp), signified moves to open up room for independent initiatives from below. Gradualist protesters formed the Popular Front of Estonia (PFE, Rahvarinne) to co-ordinate their activities, but the radicalisation of the protests in 1988/89 brought about the founding of the Estonian National Independence Party (ENIP, Eesti Rahvusliku Sõltamattase Partei). Through ENIP, EHS and the Christian Union, former dissidents and nationalist-minded intellectuals started to demand in an uncompromising spirit the restoration of the pre-World-War-II republic that had existed during 1918–40. Consequently, restorationists started to dominate the Estonian independence movement in late 1989 (Taagepera, 1993,
Effectively, they put forth a strong claim to the Estonian territory. This signified the fading away of the ‘anti-geopolitical’ elements in the protest movement and, concomitantly, the rebirth of both practical and popular geopolitics in Estonia in the form of ‘restorationist geopolitics’.

As will become evident below, the practical and popular forms of geopolitics that one may find for example in Estonia are very much political activities, with identity politics in a particularly pivotal position; for, restorationist geopolitics was a contested idea before its protagonists managed to popularise it and, eventually, regain independence for Estonia in late 1991. Thereafter, they needed to secure restoration. The best way to do that, as they saw it, was to anchor Estonia firmly into the 1920 Tartu Peace Treaty, which had laid the basis for Estonia’s international recognition, and in which Soviet Russia had recognised the independence and sovereignty of Estonia ‘forever’ (Thompson, 1998). The Estonian Constitution that was approved in a referendum in 1992, as a case in point, reads: “the land border of Estonia shall be established by the Tartu Peace Treaty of February 2, 1920, and other interstate treaties”. In this way, the Tartu Peace Treaty became depicted as the ‘birth certificate’ of the Republic of Estonia. The Estonian–Russian border defined in it came to signify a nation and citizenry that, at the time of signing the treaty, had gained independence from foreign rulers for the first time since the proto-Estonian community in the 13th century. In the early 1990s, the restorationists found it almost impossible to start negotiations over ‘existential matters’ and related symbolic meanings of this kind, thus making the constructed geopolitical discourse of restitution the official Estonian position. Unfortunately, the actual post-Soviet borders did not correspond to the Estonian–Russian border as defined in the Tartu treaty, because Stalin had annexed by an administrative decision the eastern bank of the Narva river—including the town of Ivangoord (Jaanilinn) and the Pechory (Petseri) area from the ESSR—from post-Soviet Estonia. Consequently, the actually existing borderline—with checkpoints and customs offices—came to be called the ‘temporary control line’. The 1994 Law on State Border defines the temporary control line as “a continuous imaginary line, which separates Estonian de jure territories into two parts, one that is under the current state jurisdiction and the other that is lacking it” (Riigi Teataja, 1994, p. 1559).

For international observers, it was fairly difficult at first sight to understand the reasons for this kind of geopolitical manoeuvring by a small power like Estonia that inevitably led to a conflict with Russia. To start with, Estonia’s historical right to these territories is somewhat dubious (Mattisen, 1996, pp. 101–103). Furthermore, the territories constituted only about 5 per cent of the territory of pre-war Estonia and they do not have any particular strategic or economic value. Besides, perhaps most crucially, today, they are inhabited mostly by ethnic Russians. Only an estimated 2 per cent of the current inhabitants belong to the Setu group that is culturally and linguistically close to the Estonians and only 20 per cent can claim to be descendants of the pre-World-War-II republic. Not surprisingly, it soon became evident that Russia would not accept the validity of the Tartu treaty and, with it, the idea of the restoration of Estonia’s independence and territory. Such an acknowledgement would have forced Russia to lose a part of its territory conceived of as sacred and inviolable (Baev, 1995, p. 86). But perhaps even more importantly, it would have obliged Russia to transport and resettle about half a million Russophone people who had migrated and settled in Estonia after World War II, and would have required
Russia to compensate Estonia economically for damages incurred during the ‘occupation’. That would also have set an unwanted precedent for other FSU states to follow. After all, aside from the Estonian–Russian case, Stalin’s annexations in the aftermath of World War II gave rise to two other open territorial disputes and five other potential such cases.11

Geopolitics and Identity Politics

Practical, Popular and Formal Geopolitics: On the Power of Post-Soviet Identity Politics

Hence, ‘restorationist geopolitics’ and the practical geopolitics in the geopolitical discourse of restitution was a near-fiction, through which Estonia’s territorial size was suddenly enlarged by 2000 sq km and its actual population cut by half a million people, as the Soviet-era immigrants were termed ‘illegal’ and thus not part of the restored Estonian republic. In 1993, this discourse was popularised and legitimated in various popular-geopolitical practices to the extent that all Estonian political parties and the majority of politicians and élites backed it, with 53 per cent of the broader ethnic Estonian public also expressing support for it. ‘Estonia’ became a state with certain territories where nobody normally resident in the country could go without crossing the temporary control line and where almost one-third of the actual population had only resident alien status, since in the official rhetoric the re-established Republic of Estonia was an old nation-state with a small minority population (about 10 per cent in the interwar period). Yet, in late 1994, the Estonian PM Andres Tarand said that it would be possible to negotiate on the border demarcation without changing the Constitution, because the Constitution mentioned that not only the Tartu Peace Treaty but also ‘other interstate treaties’ could be used in establishing the land border. Effectively, Tarand thus dropped the territorial claims. But there were pivotal identity political considerations giving rise to the dropped, apparently irrational, discourse and policy.

First, for the restorationists, it was essential to prove that Estonia did not gain independence for the first time, as one of those 12 FSU states with no previous history of lasting independent statehood, but rather, was restored its statehood after a 51-year ‘illegal occupation’—the fate shared by Latvia and Lithuania. The reasoning was: in order to apply the idea consistently and convincingly, the land borders of the pre-World-War-II state should be restored. The Estonian political élites, official establishments, pressure-groups with an interest in the ‘lost’ territories and the media rallied behind an impressive campaign in order to convince both the domestic and the international publics of the credibility of this argument. Popular-geopolitical practices such as history and geography lessons, school atlases and maps, and even weather forecasts depicted rather well this reality constructed by Estonian practical geopoliticians. Indeed, most of the geographical atlases and maps produced in Estonia during 1991–96 presented the pre-World-War-II borders, neglecting post-Soviet reality, which was simply acknowledged in passing by drawing a narrow ‘control line’ on the basis of constitutional premises and the Law on State Border (see Figure 1). Furthermore, on these maps, there were no cartographic signs labelling the lost eastern territories as disputed areas over which intergovernmental negotiations were taking place. Thus, instead of striped demarcations of the disputed areas, Estonian cartographers preferred to include these territories within the thematic
mapping of soils, vegetation, rainfall and average temperatures, making them inseparable parts of Estonia and fixing a Ratzelian Blut und Boden in stone (Berg, 2003). It does not require special skills in map reading to understand the geopolitical message hidden behind the innocent-looking cartographic representation.

Other popular-geopolitical practices such as political cartoons portrayed the potentially hostile ‘Russian bear’ as too dense to understand the right of small nations to self-determination or to take a note of the past injustices done to them. Sometimes the ‘bear’ was depicted to the Estonian public as fooling around and dragging its heels each time Estonia tried to approach the unresolved border issue. The message one gets is usually full of antagonism; at issue is the well-grounded belief that one cannot really trust the ‘Russian bear’ because she has invaded and annexed Estonia twice (1709–1918, 1940–91) and that there are no reasonable grounds for the Estonians to forget the historical past that quickly. Even several years after PM Tarand’s notable change of the course in the territorial claims issue, tensions remained visible. For instance, the 80th anniversary celebrations of the Tartu Peace Treaty irritated the Russian Embassy in Estonia and provoked Estonian cartoonists to sketch new alarming pictures of the eastern neighbour, doomed to be aggressive and not capable of co-existing peacefully with smaller neighbouring powers (see Figure 2).

Secondly, the Tartu Peace Treaty, with all its clauses on state borders, appeared to offer a firm demarcation of Estonia from the Russian Federation. This demarcation, the restorationists reasoned, would allow the Estonians to order and divide political space according to their wishes, labelling the Soviet-era

Figure 1. The delimitation of Estonian space. Source: Triin Laur and Regio Ltd.
immigrant Russophones as ‘aliens’ and excluding them from automatic citizenship. Moreover, dissociating Estonia clearly from Russia would also help in defining Estonia’s spatial extent and the arranging of its external relations. In particular, the perception was that it would assist in re-establishing the undoubted ‘Westernness’ and ‘European’ heritage of Estonia and the Estonians. That is, for the restorationists in the Baltic countries, as is well known, ‘Europe’ is the site of law and order, whereas the ‘East’ has a tradition of totalitarianism and terror, being the source of the half-a-century occupation (Lagerspetz, 1999, pp. 388–389). In the words of the former Estonian PM Mart Siimann (1998)

Estonia’s involvement in the European integration process is self-evident due to the centuries old belonging to the Western-European culture sphere. In this light accession into the European structures means the restoration of historical, economical, political and cultural ties. Moreover, it simultaneously finishes the 50 years of forced separation, and strengthens the Estonians’ European identity, which was repressed for such a long time.

The practical geopolitics of PM Siimann borrows from Huntington’s (1993) formal geopolitical analysis of the fundamental cultural divide between Western Christian and Slavic-Orthodox civilisations. This is a rather popular line of thought among Estonian political élites, intellectuals and the broader public alike. According to a few scholarly claims, for example, in Estonia, centuries-
old Swedish and German cultural influences as well as the legal and administrative system and the Protestant work ethic predominate despite Estonia’s non-Indo-European Finno–Ugric language and cultural background (Lauristin et al., 1997). This shows aptly how the very political tendency in formal geopolitics of postulating primordial-essentialist and mutually incompatible civilizational identities like the ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ ones, becomes smuggled into the practical geopolitics of Estonian politicians and scholars. Their rather innocent aim is to strengthen the case of their argument and to ensure its successful legitimation in popular-geopolitical practices by appealing to categories that have elsewhere been rendered ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’.

Characteristically, formal geopoliticians take a rather simple problem-solving approach to theory, treat the existing institutions and organisation of state power in an essentialist manner as they find them and argue from the perspective of these institutions and relations of power. This serves well their practical-geopolitical followers, whose goal is to contribute to nation-building and state formation; resurrecting the European border between East and West in a cultural sense and in the institutional sense through EU and NATO memberships, post-Soviet intellectuals and policy-makers want to make sure they end up on the ‘right side’ of the line. In short, identity politics is not only found in practical and popular geopolitics, but also in formal geopolitics; it functions as a link between all forms of geopolitics.

*The Structural Context of European Governance: On the Limits of Post-Soviet Identity Politics*

The ethnic Estonians’ primordial-essentialist identity politics found its limits when the restorationists were exposed applying their ideology inconsistently—i.e. in a fundamentally political way, in connection with the Estonian–Latvian maritime border dispute in the mid 1990s. Paradoxically, the Estonian–Latvian border seemed the most unlikely to present any obstacle to relations between the two countries as, during the interwar period, Estonia and Latvia had concluded some 20 agreements and treaties regulating it one way or another (Zhuryari et al., 1994). As expected, they signed a treaty on the restoration of the Estonian–Latvian land border in 1992. This still left open the definition of the maritime border, since there was no previous bilateral agreement to rely upon. However, according to the 1938 Law on Sea Ways, Estonia considered the width of her territorial waters to be 4 nautical miles from the coastline. If one compares the 1944 military map of Latvia and the 1939 geodetic map of Estonia, it emerges that the maritime borders in these documents coincide neatly (Karlep and Kümmel, 1996). Four nautical miles width of territorial waters was the general norm in the interwar period. And, following the restorationist logic, Estonia should have restored the 4 miles zonal width.

But this did not happen. Estonia declared the width of its territorial waters to be 12 nautical miles as allowed in the 1993 Sea Territory Act (see Figure 3). Supporters of the twelve-mile zone argued that it was necessary for security reasons and for considerations of natural marine resources. However, their actions endangered the free navigation through the Gulf of Finland and turned most of the Gulf of Riga into Estonia’s internal water body.

Although the Estonians did not declare sovereignty over waters closer than 3 miles to the axis line delineating the right to an economic zone in the Gulf of
Finland, thus trying to avoid making the issue into a geopolitical chokepoint, they nevertheless got involved in the so-called Herring War with the Latvians. As most of the herring catch took place in unilaterally declared Estonian territorial waters, this made the Latvians cautious and worried. This unfriendly act, of course, had nothing to do with restorationism. In the end, the 1995/1996 Herring War did not develop into serious confrontation or military conflict and was soon resolved by diplomatic measures.

This episode helped the Estonians to understand that their practical and popular-geopolitical practices were out of touch with the prevailing spatial practices in the broader structural context of European governance. For, the pre-war state existed in an era characterised by what can be called the modern states-system. This is the Westphalian system, implying a sharp delineation of internal and external spaces of state sovereignty and the adoption of the sovereign state as the undisputed basic unit. The purpose of state-building was to unify and strengthen the internal space, in order to contain external powers that, in turn, were unwilling to interfere in the making of social order within other states, being rather interested in their resources and territory. Ideas pertaining to international order, for their part, were bound to become subdued as self-help, power politics and anarchy were the defining principles in international politics. By contrast, post-Soviet Estonia exists in an era of European governance coloured by a tension between modern and late-modern or post-modern features. Modern features compete increasingly with late-modern or post-modern ones that connote the erosion of the strict delineation of internal
and external spaces and, consequently, less excessive obsession with state sovereignty. As is often argued, this shift is due to processes like globalisation and the rejection of power politics in favour of ‘democratic peace’, leading to the coming of new entities such as the ‘multiperspectival’ EU polity at the expense of fully sovereign nation-states, and to fundamental changes in interstate relations, away from the overwhelming dominance of politico-military considerations towards economic and societal issues (Buzan and Little, 1999; Ruggie, 1993). Although sovereignty continues to be an issue for post-Soviet states and EU member-states alike, it is precisely the expected simultaneous play of the modern and post-modern games that Estonia could not manage: refraining from making any border claims to other ‘future insiders’ and thus not obstructing the prospective development of the EU polity where internal boundaries vanish (for example, Estonia, Latvia) and external boundaries become tight (for example, Estonia, Russia) as an effect of the Schengen regime, and yet concomitantly engaging in cross-border co-operation in post-modern-type, open and flexible frameworks such as the ND that includes both sovereign and non-sovereign participants (for example, regional organisations).

This all means that, clinging to their restorationist geopolitics—in the euphoric times of the early 1990s, when it perhaps seemed that all past injustices would simply be wiped out—the Estonian élites invoked a political unit clearly part of the purely modern agenda and thus ill-suited to post-Cold-War European reality. Yet, by stressing certain identity political elements referring to the national past and pre-World-War-II sovereignty, and having control over the use of these arguments, they created a powerful device of shaping practical and popular geopolitics in post-Soviet Estonia. Not surprisingly, however, their obsession with territorial sovereignty appeared increasingly problematic as the 1990s progressed. The CBSS, CE, EU and OSCE started to voice criticism towards their ‘restorationist geopolitics’ and the restitutionist discourse within it. Domestic factors also started to work in favour of more open identities and the opening-up of Estonia’s political space (Aalto, 2000, pp. 72–79). This line of development gained more strength through Estonia’s ever-increasing European-level interaction with these organisations. The Estonian political élites learned quickly that territorial claims were against the 1975 Helsinki consensus on borders and that NATO too unambiguously disapproves of such claims. Another lesson that the Estonians learned was that applicant or accession countries should not claim anything from the ‘EU outside’, like Estonia did, but together with the Union they could engage in regional geopolitics by adopting the Union’s Schengen practices and using its supposedly ‘post-modern’ cross-border co-operation framework and rhetoric to influence politico-economic developments in the ‘East’. At first, the Union’s double-edged, both modern and post-modern approach was difficult to accommodate with the primordialism of Estonia’s post-Soviet geopolitics.

It is important to stress that, in engaging Estonia into European-level interaction, the EU is also teaching its own spatial practices to the Estonians, who are conceived of as ‘learners’ determined to enter European political space (see, for example, Berg, 2000). The Union requires accession countries such as Estonia to adopt these practices at face value, with very little domestic debate as to their suitability to the local contexts and providing few or no counter-measures against the many negative side-effects. The Schengen regime originates in member-states’ identity politics, in particular their concerns over an inflow of
immigrants, refugees and cheap labour from the CEE and post-Soviet space (Grabbe, 2000). Consequently, the simplified border-crossing regime that was in place on the Estonian–Russian border until September 2000 and applied to about 17 000–20 000 people on the Estonian side and 3000 on the Russian side, is now abolished.\textsuperscript{14} Paradoxically, a border regime which was to help local people with economic or family ties on the other side of the border, and which helped to erode the conflict between Estonia and Russia, was dropped because of the spatial preferences of the EU. Also, the new regime, set to control Europe’s ‘east–west’ divide, is prone to increase the number of Russian citizens in Estonia (and the future EU) as many non-citizen Russians in north-eastern Estonia will find it easier to take Russian than Estonian citizenship to serve their border-crossing needs (Berg, 2002). Yet, this very modern geopolitics in EU enlargement is all too often overshadowed by the more explicit formal geopolitical calculations motivating NATO enlargement. Russia has been much more willing to welcome the EU’s enlargement project due to its economic prospects than the more brutally framed NATO project. Were the EU to switch to a more formal geopolitics, this situation could change.

Geopolitics and Time

Our Estonian case-study analysis highlights how geopolitical constellations in contemporary Europe are defined by tensions between post-Soviet identity politics and the EU’s identity politics. In the more conceptual sense, it also highlights the very strong linkages between geopolitics, identity politics and the politics of time and memory that are, unfortunately, not always understood adequately in contemporary debates. In Estonia, the political elites and state-builders tried to escape from the Soviet time that witnessed Estonia’s inclusion into the Soviet Union, to the different time of the pre-World-War-II republic. This was perceived as a means of joining the greater European space, conceived of as a safe-haven for Estonia and the Estonians, and as a means of securing Estonia’s very existence by geographical factors. But crucially, with Estonia’s dropping of the territorial claims to Russia, Estonia is increasingly joining European time. And this, in turn, is very much what for example the EU expects in order to expand its own area of governance. In short, in order to join European space, one first needs to join European time. And note here the difference between the EU’s idea of the space–time relationship and that of the formal-geopolitical classic Halford Mackinder: whereas Mackinder identifies a Columbian and a post-Columbian epoch, specifying time in terms of space and producing spatially defined categories with a supposed innate transparency, the Union instead looks at its own and surrounding spaces in terms of the time that they live.

Thus, to look at identity politics on a more conceptual plane, we can say that

collective identity is a robust declarative statement that a group makes, under the pressure of collective memory and contextual forces, to itself and to others about its normative constitution and its practical competence when facing the world (Cruz, 2000, p. 310).

The Union’s identity politics is centrally bound to member-states’ experience of a dis-ordered and conflictual past in interstate relations that it attempts to overcome as a large-scale peace project. The identity politics of Estonia and
Latvia, who have experimented with ideas of a temporal return to the supposedly rosy interwar era, does not appeal to the Union which on the contrary perceives that era as a grand failure that must be overcome for good. The conceptual nexus is the same in both cases, but different identity-coloured perceptions of the status of a certain time-period lead to the adoption of different geopolitical discourses. Returning to the issue of boundaries, we thus find considerable empirical support for Michel Foucher’s (1990, p. 178) thesis that boundaries are time written in space.\textsuperscript{15} This means that geopolitics becomes explicitly both about space and time. This is in contrast to the recently debated, purposefully provocative writings of figures like Paul Virilio that have inspired authors like Ó Tuathail and Timothy Luke (2000) and James der Derian (1992). Long before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Virilio argued that ‘chronopolitics’ is now more important than geopolitics: “The loss of material space”, he asserted, “leads to the government of nothing but time”. For Virilio, new doctrines characterise the post-modern era

Territory has lost its significance in favour of the projectile ... space is no longer in geography—it’s in electronics ... there is a movement from the geo- to chronopolitics: the distribution of territory becomes the distribution of time (quoted in Ó Tuathail, 1997, p. 36)

For der Derian, Virilio’s project to politicise speed and to accentuate how new technologies are transforming international politics means the compression of the distance between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. The ‘other’ becomes an image accessed by speedy technologies and cast in the mind of the ‘self’ as a reified, real-time object of surveillance. This means that we see less and less of ourselves in the ‘other’ as it becomes simply a meaningless, speedily transmitted image (der Derian, 1992, p. 4). The thus constructed dichotomy between geopolitics and chronopolitics can also be related to the discussion on reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation. As a consequence of the supposed new reign of chronopolitics, deterritorialisation evokes the challenges posed to the status of territory and, by extension, our territorially embedded understandings of geography, governance and geopolitics, states and places, which in this vision are supposedly withering away. However, the majority opinion in the contemporary literature seems to be that the dichotomy is falsely constructed and that both phenomena can exist simultaneously in the same case (see, for example, Forsberg, 1996, pp. 356–357; Ó Tuathail, 1998b, p. 82). Therefore, there is no use in equalising increasing speed in international politics with the ‘death of geography’ as space as such remains, no matter how speedily we can move across it, or what kind of consequences it will have to our identity and placeless feelings in the ‘borderless’ (Western) world. Without really going into the endless reterritorialisation–deterritorialisation debate which is characterised more by mutual misunderstandings than genuine and productive debate, we want to direct attention to how Estonia and the other post-Soviet cases can be taken as interesting laboratories in thinking of the co-existence and intertwining of these processes. Here, it is not time that is replacing space as the key category but, rather, the defeat of a particular perception of time by another is giving rise to a shift from one type of geopolitics to another. There are no either–or issues involved, but case-specific interrelationships and dependencies.

We suggest that these linkages between geopolitics and time are there because territorial issues can be used to appeal to peoples’ personal historical perceptions
and experiences and to their desire to have a (territorial) state firmly anchored in history, or in a certain time-scale. Time is thus always deeply involved in geopolitics, as the past unavoidably casts its shadows on the present and shapes the context in which the political battle of defining the present spaces takes place. State-builders in Estonia and elsewhere are engaged in reinventing, defining, clarifying and homogenising spaces and boundaries, which derive from past experiences and are designed to help with reaching future goals. These practices of state-building involve ensembles of acts directed at creating both nation-spaces and nation-times (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998, p. 3).

Concluding Remarks

Our use of some critical geopolitics tools in this article has showed how this literature can help us to understand better a whole range of issues, from the curiosities of post-Soviet geopolitics to European governance.

First, we showed that, looking from a critical geopolitics perspective, geopolitics is not going to wither away. There is geopolitics at all levels of analysis ranging from post-Soviet border disputes and their popular legitimation to contemporary European governance, with the CEE countries and post-Soviet states ‘learning’ from the EU in the face of a politico-economic stick-and-carrot game. Those most successfully in the process of ‘transition’ are simply switching to a different form of formal-analysis-informed practical geopolitics much better in tune with the spirit of the times and are assisted in this process by popular-geopoliticians. Geopolitics embodied in various institutions continues to prevail even if balance-of-power practices are giving way to ‘mere’ governance in contemporary Europe.

Secondly, we highlighted the pivotal role of identity politics in geopolitics. For example Gertjan Dijkink (1996, p. 14) has argued that national identity considerations always underlie the formation of geopolitical discourses, because states’ geopolitical visions should be understood as “translations of national-identity concepts in geographical terms and symbols”. Such a linkage between the Estonians’ need to accentuate Estonia’s identity as a restored state firmly demarcated from Russia and the Estonian patterns of practical and popular geopolitics became evident in our analysis. Yet, we also directed attention to the fact that national identity politics does have its limits. Post-Soviet identity politics does not have a free reign, as was sometimes provocatively declared in the 1990s, but is crucially constrained and increasingly suppressed by the combination of both modern and post-modern identity politics and consequent spatial practices of expanding European governance.

Thirdly, alongside identity politics, we highlighted the use of the politics of time and memory. Geopolitics is still all too often considered simply as the spatial dimension of international politics. This, in broad terms, also remains the case with critical geopolitics perspectives regardless of the new referents of geopolitics that they introduce. But remarkably, we showed that studying geopolitics does not lead to an overspatialised conception of political developments at the expense of other important aspects such as historical and temporal considerations. With these remarks, we trust to have shown how geopolitics can be a useful perspective for post-Soviet studies, IR research and political geography. Nevertheless, we think that we would benefit from more studies exposing
the multifaceted operation of geopolitics in post-Soviet space and European governance.

**Notes**

1. For example, Brown’s (2001) textbook omits the term geopolitics; Holsti (1995, p. 256) mentions geographic and topographic characteristics as features of the domestic context influencing the formulation of foreign policy; Kegley and Wittkopf (2001, p. 20) introduce a traditional account of geopolitics.

2. Rationalism (connoting realism and liberalism) and constructivism (for example, Alexander Wendt, Peter Katzenstein, John Ruggie) come close to being the current mainstream of IR. The status of strategic studies within the mainstream of IR has declined since the end of the Cold War.

3. We do not use here Gerard Toal’s (Gearóid O Tuathail) term *structural geopolitics* due to the fact that it appears to lack the discursive basis of the other forms of geopolitics identified by Toal. It looks somewhat more like a traditional formal geopolitics approach of mapping the structural characteristics of the world combined with a critical theory spirited risk society thinking. For a more extensive discussion of structural geopolitics, see O Tuathail (1999) and Toal (2002).

4. For studies of practical geopolitics in countries normally not thought of as geopolitical agents, see, for example, Aalto (2000) and Moisio (1999). For popular geopolitics in these cases, see Berg and Oras (2000) and Paasi (1999).

5. We understand discourse in the broad sense as including both signification practices and policy recommendations that may be translated into actual policies. See, for example, Neumann (2001); also O Tuathail and Agnew (1992).


7. For the centrality of the ‘political’ in geopolitics, see Painter (1995).

8. Yet, the temporary power organ, the Presidency of the Supreme Council of Estonia, stated earlier—right after the regaining of independence, in September 1991—that the precise demarcation line should be determined in interstate negotiations. But, the Constitutional Assembly then used the Tartu Peace Treaty as the defining idea of the Constitution and the restorationist Estonian political elites then in power soon afterwards viewed border changes to be impossible without changing the Constitution (Mattisen, 1996, pp. 87–91).

9. Estonia obtained the territories as a tactical concession by the Soviet leaders, largely reflecting the demarcation line between Soviet Russian and Estonian troops at the time of the armistice pact on 31 December 1919 in the Estonian War of Independence (Mattisen, 1996, pp. 45–51).

10. According to Forsberg (1995b, p. 250). Mattisen (1996, p. 102), by contrast, argues that the territories are valuable from the economic point of view, due to some 400 million tons of oil shale deposits and other mineral resources. However, the growing controversy over the ecological consequences of oil shale energy production somewhat erodes this argument.

11. Pytalovo (Abrene) on the Latvian–Russian border and the Kurile Islands in the Far East; Bessarabia and northern Bukovina in Moldova, Transcarpathia /Carpatho-Ukraine, eastern Poland, the northern part of East Prussia/Kaliningrad and Karelia; see Forsberg (1995a).


13. The ND was initiated by Finland in 1997. The ND Action Plan, which outlines projects in various ‘soft security’ fields such as the environment, energy, health, crime, etc., was accepted by the Feira European Council in 2000. For more detail, see Aalto et al. (2003).

14. As for the Estonian side, the procedure has been replaced by a system of simply issuing free multiple entry visas for 4000 people (see Berg, 2002).

15. For the post-Soviet context, see, for example, Kuzio (1997).

**References**


