

## TIME AND SPACE IN THE CONTENT OF ESTONIAN DAILY NEWSPAPERS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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**Abstract.** The present study aims to describe the dynamics of spatial-temporal relations in daily newspaper texts. This includes agreements on what constitutes the ‘present’, the extent of the ‘past’ and the ‘future’, and where the reader’s hypothetical place in space is. The temporal dimensions that emerged in Estonian newspapers (*Päevaleht*, *Rahva Hääl*, *Eesti Päevaleht*) were strongly future-oriented. This was a characteristic tendency throughout the 20th century and it can be noted even today. The orientation towards future is notable in comparison with Finnish (*Helsingin Sanomat*) and Russian (*Pravda*) newspaper texts.

**Keywords:** journalism, newspaper, temporal structure, ideology, future, longitude of content, Estonia, Finland, Russia

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### 1. Introduction

The idea of this study is inspired from the works of G. Gerbner as presented in *Towards ‘Cultural Indicators’* (Gerbner 1969). The central question is whether some components of journalistic texts have special meaning – a certain “scheme of social accounting for trends in the composition and structure of mass-mediated public message systems”. We ask the Gerbnerian question, whether changes in the understanding of time, space and society bring about systematic variations in the content of public messages that are realised through the cultivation of the collective consciousness about elements of existence.

The spatial dimension has been a productive area of research for media sociologists who have analysed the experience of space in the ‘life-world’ of individuals (Berger, Luckmann 1966). This includes their articulated interest in space (including cultural space), their personal experiences in different cultural spaces, and the experience of spaces mediated by media consumption. Some

recent studies have illuminated the influence of the mediation of space by Estonian newspapers on the mental mapping of the world; regions that are featured in the Estonian press appear in mental maps, while others do not (Vihalemm 2004). Time, which includes the past, has been studied as memory and also as the experience of generations (Aarelaid 2006). Research has shown a great extent of the influence of mediated spatial-temporal experiences on the general world-view of the public and differences of European cultures and states in this respect (Kempf et al. 1996).

In totalitarian states, the temporal dimension seems to be under special control as an important ideological dimension. One could say that the past is presented in order to justify the present. For example, German history has been portrayed as a kind of nation-centred pattern and Russian history as a story of revolution and class struggle:

*Mythology needs 'holy' or 'sacred' legitimisation for activating and developing its forms and ideas; 'positive laws' are designed to function as stabilising factors for the ever changing movements of men. In the interpretation of totalitarianism, all laws have become laws of movement. When the Nazis talked about the law of nature or when the Bolsheviks talked about the law of history, neither nature nor history is any longer the stabilising source of authority for the actions of mortal men; they are movements in themselves (Arendt 1958:463).*

The goal of our research is to find out which are the temporal-spatial dimensions of the construction of social reality in the Estonian press and to examine other characteristics of mediated reality to which the temporal dimension is most frequently connected. We analyse how the temporal dimension is presented and what elements of journalism are needed to establish or support the framework of the newspaper construction of social reality in this respect. The inter-subjective 'here and now' forms the heart of experiences in newspaper construction. In the everyday life-world, "the temporal perspective is that of the standard time that originates in the point of intersection of internal duration and world time, as the temporal structure of the inter-subjective world" (Schutz, Luckmann 1973:36). What has been the general context of the representation of 'time' and how the attitudes of daily newspapers towards 'time' have changed? Are there any distinctive qualities that can be identified as characteristic of the Estonian press?

## **2. Method of study – model for longitudinal textual analysis**

To reveal the social reality of a specific epoch, Harold Lasswell developed in the 1920s a method of content analysis for journalistic texts (Lasswell 1948, Lazarsfeld 1960). With this method one can investigate communication messages by categorizing message content into classifications in order to measure certain variables (Rogers 1997:214). Unlike the classical version of the content analysis (Berelson 1952), where a researcher should avoid taking into account latent or

connotative meanings of texts, we follow “a constructivist reconceptualization of quantitative measurement” (Schröder 2002:105), where the analyst is a reader of the meanings of a text (Krippendorff 1980:22).

The text as a research object is qualitative as it includes *cultural meanings, signs* and *codes* (Jakobson 1960). Therefore, it necessitates the use of a methodology that will open these meanings, i.e. the use of textual analysis is here suitable. Our methodology is specially designed for the ‘quantification of meanings’, where particular textual units are ascribed to the analytical categories – e.g. time zones handled in newspaper texts – past, present, future (Lõhmus 2009a, 2009b). By concentrating on the elements of texts that we call ‘cultural indicators’ (e.g. topics, time, space, actors, and relations between those elements like Gerbner (1969) suggested), we were able to study changes that took place in a course of a larger time span.

From the rather long list of variables in our research, for the following discussion we chose the dimensions of ‘time’ and ‘space’. To see changes in the analytical category of ‘time’ and to be able to interpret them it was necessary to design comparable samples of newspaper texts of different countries. We decided to compare the content of Estonian, Finnish and Russian dailies<sup>1</sup>. As the most important newspapers that had been published throughout the 20th century *Päevaleht/Rahva Hääl/Eesti Päevaleht* (*Daily/The People’s Voice/Estonian Daily*), *Helsingin Sanomat* (*Helsinki Messages*), and *Pravda* (*The Truth*) were chosen for sampling<sup>2</sup>. Our aim has been to gather a typical sequence of daily newspapers, a generalizing strategy that does not include exceptions that would disrupt the ‘big picture’. What makes our model specific is its orientation to describing changes in the ‘public making ability’ of mass media in the conditions of both – the totalitarian and democratic regimes<sup>3</sup>. The period of study started with the year 1905 and every fourth year was included in the sample (until 2010), to reach an interval that is neither too short nor too long to represent the main tendencies in the analytical categories. From every selected year ten newspaper issues were randomly chosen.

From each selected newspaper issue, the sample was composed from: 1) articles on the first page of an issue as the most accentuated by edition – front page texts; additionally were included 2) editorials; 3) letters from readers; 4) opinion articles (written about different topics); 5) news stories<sup>4</sup>. We mapped the content of 2139 Estonian, 1723 Russian, and 2079 Finnish daily newspaper articles. The

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<sup>1</sup> Participants in the project *Contemporary values and heroes in the daily newspapers* were researchers from the Journalism and Communication Institute of Tartu University and from the Department of Communication of the University of Helsinki.

<sup>2</sup> *Pravda* and *Rahva Hääl* were Communist Party publications; *Rahva Hääl* from the 1940s to the 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Model’ is used here as the specification of the type of data that must be entered into the database and how it should be done.

<sup>4</sup> The materials left out of the analysis were those with formal content, for example short news and notices, advertising, PR materials, obituaries, official notices, TV and radio programmes, pictorial news, weather broadcast etc. If illustrating materials had been added (including picture captions, informational blocks, figures etc.), they were also considered as a part of the article.

method used for analyzing all three dailies was similar – on the basis of code-book evolved in the pilot study the researchers possessing the knowledge of all three languages coded the content of texts based on analytical categories.

The analytical category of ‘space’ was basically twofold: a) the space of action (social space that the text represents) and b) the spaces that are referred to in relation to the space of action (that may have been either a particular geographical space or virtual space, such as the ‘capitalist world; or the ‘Wild West’). In addition we also defined whether the space is considered important at all and how different spaces relate to each other. For example: whether the ‘capitalist world’ is hostile towards the countries of the Warsaw pact or not.

### **3. Time as an object of textual analysis**

In order to analyse the category of ‘time’ we conducted a multistage textual analysis. On the first level, the primary event depicted in the article was documented, then the connection of its main topic to aspects of time: past, present, future, or timelessness. We coded periods using the following heuristics: ‘distant past’ (a time period including many generations), ‘near past’ (one generation), ‘present’ (contemporary), ‘near future’ (within two to five years) and ‘distant future’ (more than 5 years). For instance, in the discussion of “in the past our life was better – Estonians were a free nation with an ability to decide their own fate”, the temporal dimension was coded as the near past in the statement “...now we belong to the Soviet Union and life in our country is flourishing and in the future the inequality and other problems will disappear”, the temporal dimension of the near future was coded. The view to the past or to the future usually includes the comparison to the present, thus if the present did not feature prominently, it was not coded as ‘present’. With every article the principle of depth of discussion was applied to the coding of temporal zone. The mention of time in a single sentence was not sufficient; the principle was that at least the whole section of an article focuses on a particular time-zone. The temporal dimension was absent in the discussion of timeless topics like ‘the natural need of a man to take care of its offspring and create the best circumstances for their development’. It was usual that many temporal zones were handled in an article and they were all coded.

We also mapped the evaluations that were given to time in the following categories: ‘positive, hopeful’, ‘ambivalent’ and ‘negative, frightening’. Mostly it was easy to distinguish between positive and negative approach to ‘time’ (for example: “the plan for the next 10 years allows us to take more care of each other, to think more about future generations”; an example of negative evaluation: “700 years of slavery was a time of darkness and bitterness for Estonians”), the definition of ambivalent evaluation was a bit more complicated. For instance, ‘ambivalent’ appeared rather often in a sentence that was analysing a present situation: “...we have accomplished a lot, but there are still unsolved problems concerning certain issues”.

The analysis of the construction of the future in the newspaper texts makes it possible to include the perspective of the future. Here we pay special attention to the question whether the view of the future is ‘pluralistic’ or ‘monolithic’. In the first case, different scenarios of the future are proposed, while in the second case only one possible scenario is offered. On the basis of these elements, certain tendencies in the degree of pluralism in the vision of the future become apparent.

The second level of our analysis related time-focus with the main topic of an article: What topics appear more frequently in which time zones? Subject fields were divided into six groups: 1) topics of state, politics, and legislation; 2) topics of economics and infrastructure; 3) topics of culture and education; 4) topics of everyday life and personal relations; 5) abstract, philosophical topics; and 6) topics dealing with history and the past. Relating these topics to different time periods makes it possible to demonstrate the ‘temporal construction’ of a given ‘subject field’, although inclusion of the spatial dimension is also important. However, in this analysis we concentrate mainly on temporal questions and refer to spatial dimension only if the temporal-spatial connection is significant for understanding the construction of the content of a newspaper text.

We assume that the periods of changes in society are visible in the content of newspapers; these are periods when the category of time changes rapidly in the newspaper construction of social reality. All the following arguments are based on and subsume the data collected through our study. Therefore, as we speak of the countries, we refer to the results of the analysis of the studied articles. As follows, we focus on the Estonian example, but our interpretations and conclusions are contextualised via comparisons with the neighbouring countries of Estonia.

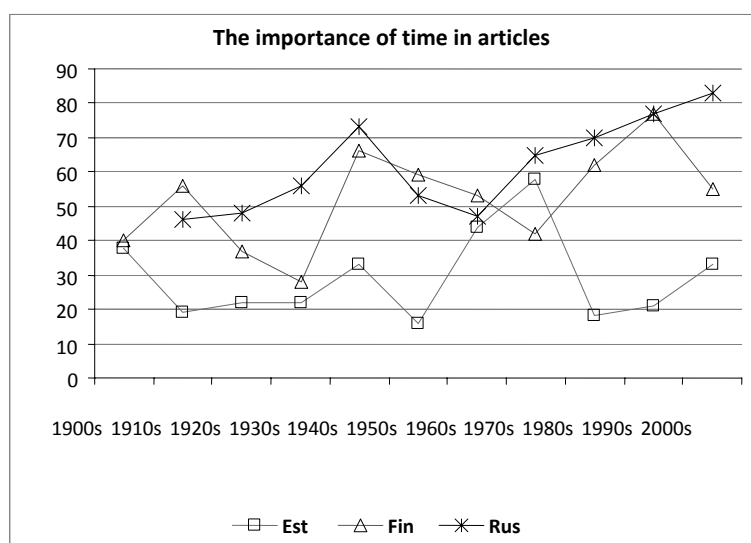
#### **4. Importance of temporal-spatial dimension in the content of a newspaper**

To analyse the changes in the representations of time in newspapers, we first follow the change in the number of articles exhibiting a significant spatial-temporal dimension in different decades in the newspapers of the three countries. Time, or time-flow, is stressed in articles that focused on historical questions, or where changes are compared with the current situation, or in articles about ‘better and worse times’, etc. Comparing the number of articles where time is emphasized reveals a rather unstable picture during the 20th century<sup>5</sup> (see Figure 1).

In all three countries, the number of articles with time-emphasis rose in the 1940s, when all three were in the grip of war and it was unclear when and how the war would end. In Estonia, the 1950s witnessed relatively little attention towards the issue of time. This was so because it was the period of repressions in all areas of national culture that basically meant erasing all that was left of the ‘old’ culture before the Soviet occupation. In the 1960s the new optimistic generation stabilised

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<sup>5</sup> Importance of time: in each article, the central question or topic was treated with emphasis on *time* (e.g. ‘we have such times because of...’, ‘it is in the world generally such a time that...’; ‘nowadays, we are no longer...’).



**Figure 1.** Number of articles emphasizing time in the Estonian, Finnish, and Russian samples (% of analysed articles of the decades).

the presence of the dimension of time. The shift from the silenced 1950s and hopefully future-oriented 1960s is paradigmatic. In Estonia, two decades feature a rise in the frequency of discussions about time: in the 1970s and at the beginning of the new century. In the 1970s, Estonia ‘awoke’ after the first period of Sovietisation, time of ‘second round of Sovietisation’ supposed to strengthen the change hitherto as it started to accentuate the temporal dimension. This could be named Sovietisation through time and of time, as the ideology and propaganda required new dimensions as proof; hence, temporal references in newspaper texts were again permitted. In the 1970s the amount of discussions of the near past, including how the veterans of WWII and The Great Fatherland War were presented, grew in Estonia (see Figure 3).

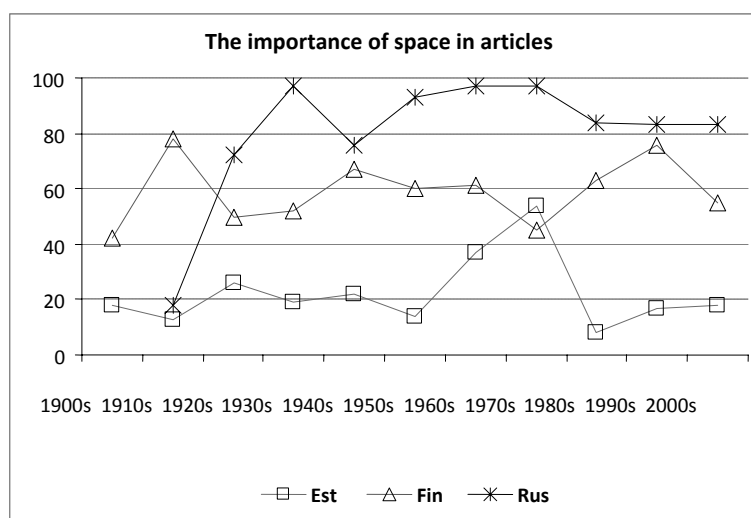
The downfall at the actualisation of time in the 1980s looks like a result of ideological work, which became more intense as the economic situation in the Soviet Union worsened. *Rahva Hää* (People’s Voice) as the publication of Estonian Communist Party was heavily censored. The style of the newspaper was oriented towards ‘social reality’, references towards the future and past were often prohibited (Kuuli 1999). The end of the 1980s witnesses the comeback of distant future and distant past to the mediascape. In the 1990s, i.e. the period of restoration of the Republic of Estonia, the emphasis on the dimension of time did not grow. The 1990s are characterised specially by the focus on the practical issues of the changes in political structure. In the 2000s, Estonian society had completed a period of radical/total change of structure that occurred in the 1990s and began the more analytical contextualization of time and space of Estonia. During this period

there is a rise in the frequency of references to the ‘distant past’ and ‘distant future’ in Estonian texts (Lauristin 2000).

The Estonian and Russian newspapers had similar discussions of the temporal dimension throughout most of the century, although in the Estonian press time was less stressed than in the Russian press. From the end of the 1970s onwards, the discussions in the media of these two countries started to separate: presumably the main reason was the emerging difference in the understanding of the temporal dimension between these two cultures.

Although our focus is the temporal dimension of media content, the study of spatial dimension is necessary, as ‘space’ and ‘time’ are variables that become meaningful only if they are considered as complementary.

For Estonian public and mass media the issues of space have been relatively less important, compared to Finland and Russia (Figure 2). In the Estonian sample, the number of space-emphasizing articles is the smallest, and the number is quite stable throughout the century; only in the 1970s did the frequency rise significantly. The explanation would be the rise in structural and analytical subtleness in Estonian texts in the 1970s; the temporal-spatial dimension became an argument in practical propaganda and in cultural discussions in the new more stable Soviet era in the 1970s.



**Figure 2.** Number of articles emphasising space in the Estonian, Finnish, and Russian samples (% of analysed articles of the decades).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Importance of space: in each article, the central question or topic was treated with emphasis on space (e.g. ‘in this region we have the problems of...’, ‘return to Europe....’, ‘this country attributes to the influence zone of Russia...’ etc).

Space has been a persistently significant aspect in the Russian press. In its state-building process, Russia has often identified itself through imperial ambitions, and thus territory has been an important aspect of Russia's construction of identity. Estonia and Finland appear to have dealt primarily with questions of visibility: Estonia's strong identity as a small and thus non-influential country, and Finland's location on the geographical periphery of Europe. For the Estonian culture, of course, the understanding of 'environment' ('cultural space', 'fatherland', etc) has been in a rather fundamental position from the point of view of national identity. The idea of Estonians living in 'Estonian space' was prohibited (Lõhmus 2002). The Soviet regime rather tended to suppress national identities; therefore one cannot really refer to such spaces during the period of occupation.

In Finland and in Estonia, time and space show a positive correlation – if time is important, space is important too<sup>7</sup> (compare Figure 1 and Figure 2). In the Russian press, the situation was the opposite: when space was no longer important (the collapse of the Soviet empire), the press paid more attention to questions of time. In general – space as a category has always been important for Russian media. *Pravda* as the very central medium was the ideological medium for the 1/5 of the planet that was supposed to create a collective identity for the citizens of the Soviet Union.

### 5. Treatment of past and future in newspaper content

We assume that in troubled times, the identity of a society and its relationship to other societies is questioned, and newspapers deal more with history and talk more about the future. The most important time for the journalistic construction is of course always the present: daily newspapers write about events that happened yesterday or what is happening now or will happen tomorrow. This is clearly seen in the samples of all the analysed newspapers in the three countries.

Our analysis showed a significant difference in the composition of time in Estonian newspapers compared to Russian and Finnish ones. In the case of Estonia, the focus on the present was accompanied with the focuses on past and future (see Figure 3). Through our period, Russian and Finnish newspapers refer to future and past in a considerably lesser extent than we see in the case of Estonia.

In Finnish newspapers the articles dealing with the past exceed one fifth of the selection in every decade. The stable construction of time started to erode in the 1980s, but more recently a stable situation has been re-established. This may be associated with Finland's entry into the European Union, when a public debate of Finnish identity and its wider positioning in Europe was needed.

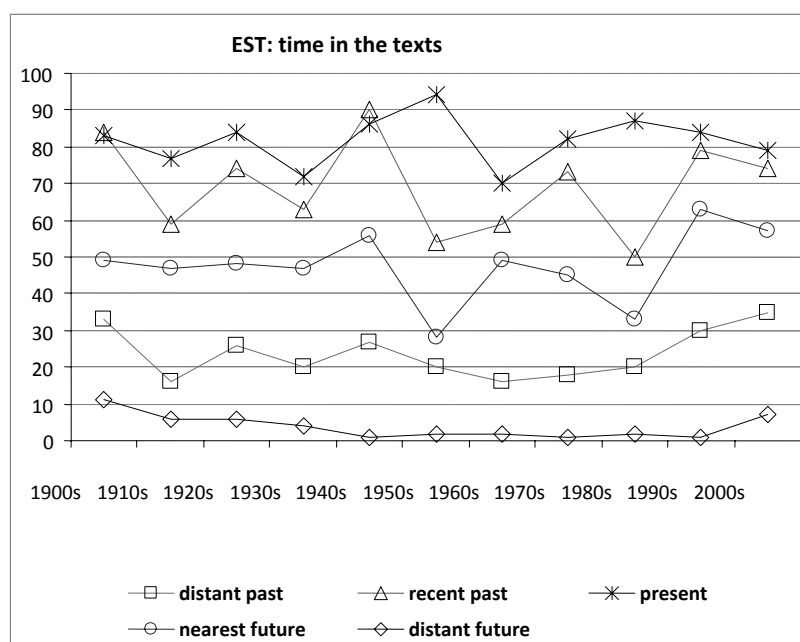
In Russian newspapers there was only one decade, the 1940s, with the frequency of articles dealing with the past exceeding 45%. In Russia, a change in

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<sup>7</sup> Correlation between articles emphasizing time and space (Pearson's  $R = 0,554$  in Estonian sample;  $R = 0,650$  in Finnish sample, and  $R = -0,680$  in Russian sample, all correlations are significant).



the significance of time can be observed in the 1940s, the 1970s–1980s, and in the last analysed decade. In Russia, the dominant focus throughout the century was present-centric: only in the 1940s and 1970s the focus on the present diminished and the focus on the near past grew. Both the 1940s and 1970s were times of ideological pressure: the time of war in the 1940s, and the time of an active reviving of the memory of the victory in the war in the 1970s.



**Figure 3.** Number of articles with a different time-perspective in the Estonian sample (% of articles of the decades).

We can conclude on the basis of this composition of time that in Estonia, a process of significant change persisted throughout the century. The problematic period for Estonia started with World War II, after which the depiction of time in newspaper articles shifted repeatedly across the decades. This suggests a kind of unstable view towards future, specially concerning distant future. Considering that the media of this period was subjected to the customary mechanism of central five-year plans, it may be deduced that the ideologies and plans for shaping identity were inconsistent, permanently changing and, thus, ineffective. In the Russian print media, a greater stability in dealing with time is observable. In comparison with Finland and Russia, the uniqueness of the situation in Estonia can also be seen in the much larger number of references to the *distant past* necessary to construct social reality. This can be considered a product of the nation's creation of identity.

### 7. Special meaning of the *future* in newspaper text: ‘pluralistic’ and ‘monolithic’ view

The future was especially important in the Estonian press at the end of the 20th century. Almost throughout the century in Estonian journalistic discussions, positive portrayals of the future prevailed, perhaps as a particular kind of Soviet ideological optimism (Figure 4). At the beginning and at the end of the 20th century, there were eras of varied discussions, where critical tones were evident.

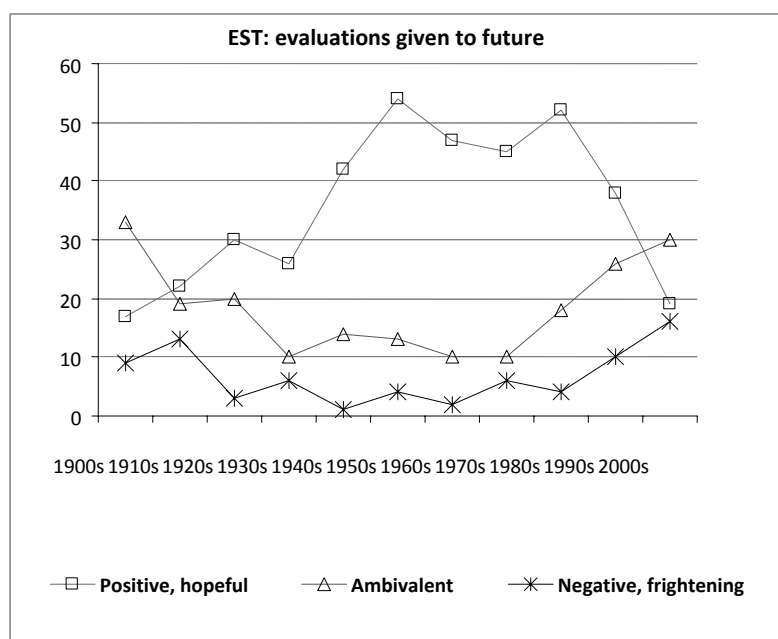


Figure 4. Evaluations of the future in the Estonian sample (% of articles of the decade).

For instance, during the whole century in Finland, discussions of the future were predominantly ambivalent, while in Russia, ambivalent and negative discussions were almost completely absent with the exception of some minor instances of negative or ambiguous thinking over the future in the texts of the 1990s. In *Pravda*, for example, the negative view of the future was mainly connected with personal topics.

Most of those articles in the Estonian sample that displayed negative views of the future were written by experts; and then mainly in articles about the economy, or about the state and legislation. Discussions by state officials were optimistic. Surprisingly few negative views of the future were presented by cultural experts – with them mainly ambivalent viewpoints prevailed.

At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, a positive view of the future was supported by events in the cultural and educational sphere.

Another dimension of the description of the future is the issue of whether only a single model of the future is portrayed or whether there are multiple possibilities. A clear indication of the difference of the ideologically directed and free and democratic journalistic constructions is here evident. Before and after the Soviet occupation the possibility of different scenarios of the future can be seen in the sample texts, whereas during the Soviet period only very few differing futuristic viewpoints and images appear; censors and controllers allowed these few pluralistic views in the context of the dominant new communist society (see Figure 5).

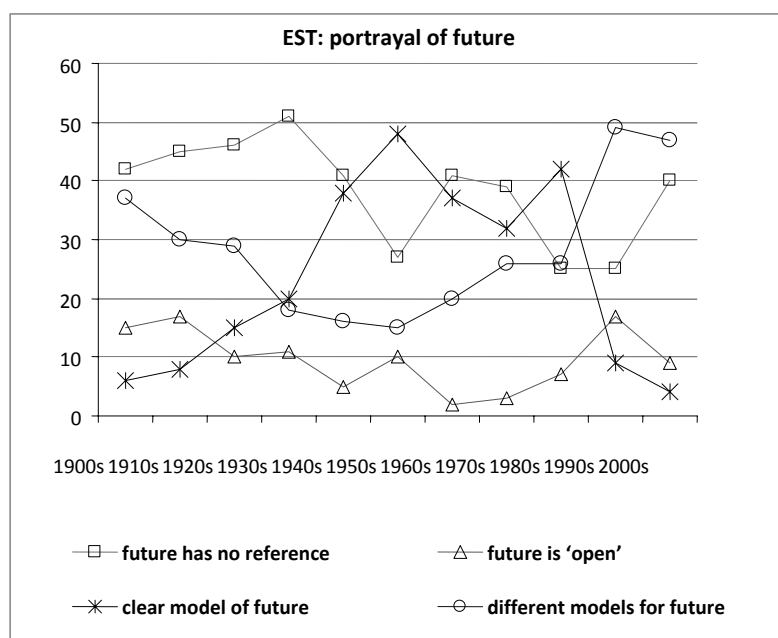


Figure 5. Portrayals of the future in the Estonian sample (% of all articles of the decade).

It is possible to point out four periods in the discussion of the future in the Estonian press. First: from the beginning of the century up to 1930, articles mentioning the future were scarce. The second period during the 1930s, i.e. single ready-made model of the future started to appear and the liberal variety of views in presenting the future diminished.

The third period, between 1940 and 1980, featured a further emphasis on the ready-made model of the future; the number of discussions not dealing with the future diminished. The fourth period, from the end of the 1980s up to the 2000s,

carried as the dominant feature the open future and futuristic pluralism; the ready-made model of the future disappeared.

In the Finnish sample, the ready-made model was not dominant in any period – the future was either open or diversified, especially intensive discussion of the future was carried in Finnish newspapers from the end of the 1940s up to the early 1970s.

In the Russian sample throughout the 20th century, the future was presented through a ready-made model, which entered into the journalistic discourse in the 1940s. However, the share of the articles dealing with the future in Russian newspapers was rather small. With one slight exception: in the 1990s when the expectations about the future really dominated in the journalistic constructions as they were spread in society. A diversity of futures was well present, all scenarios were considered possible. This exception occurred only once and by the beginning of the 21st century the Russian press returned to its usual way of presenting the future.

## **8. Conclusions**

Temporal variables, including past and future, are indicative structural elements in the newspaper construction of social reality. The social construction of reality is strongly bound to the dimension of the present that is shown differently during stable and unstable times. It is also important to note that at the period of instabilities the variety of different times is larger.

We found that the temporal dimension associated with the political and cultural context of an era and with the rate of political change motivates changes in the portrayal of temporal dimensions and the framing of discussions in temporal terms. When the political context changes, a need for the analysis of the past and of the possible future emerges.

Perhaps an explanation of the Estonian yearning for the past was the lack of opportunity for Estonia to freely build its own state in the 20th century and its dependence on the arbitrary decisions of a dominating foreign society. A second explanation might be the weakness or scarcity of the dimension of the future that could replace the dimension of the past. Or, has the discussion of the dimension of the past been a continuous and permanent preparation for the discussions of the dimension of the future, which for various reasons has been constantly postponed?

The last interpretation supports the idea of Juhan Peegel (1996) that Estonian journalism was born and has existed predominantly as cultural journalism, with the goal of educating the nation and directing it towards the pursuit of development and social challenges. This tradition continued in the Estonian press in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

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