

Hannes Palang

From Collectivisation to Commodification: Transformations in Estonia's Rural Landscape and Identity

Abstract: Estonia's rural landscape has undergone a significant transformation from its Soviet collectivisation era to its post-re-independence restitution process and EU membership. Following Soviet collectivisation and rural depopulation, land restitution in the 1990s was driven by nationalistic ideals linking land ownership to identity and justice. However, initial idealism was tempered by economic and logistical challenges. EU integration accelerated agricultural professionalisation and concentration, with fewer but larger, specialised farms driving increased productivity. Concurrently, rural depopulation and urbanisation led to abandoned infrastructure and declining traditional livelihoods, though small-scale tourism and community initiatives have revitalised certain areas. The countryside, increasingly commodified as a recreational "playground", now serves diverse roles, blending heritage preservation with contemporary leisure. These changes highlight a shift from utilitarian rural landscapes to multifunctional spaces reflecting urbanised values, necessitating a re-evaluation of national identity and the socio-economic future of rural Estonia.

Keywords: land restitution, agricultural professionalisation, rural depopulation, landscape commodification, national identity.

1. Introduction

When Estonia declared its re-independence again in 1991, for many it sounded like a possibility to go back in time, pick up the landscape from where we left it just before WWII and continue from there.

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By 1939, Estonia was an agricultural country. People lived predominantly in the countryside, the rural landscape was kept alive by about 140,000 private farms that used about two-thirds of the territory for different activities (Palang 2010; Mander, Palang 1994). The turbulent 1940s changed this drastically. People left – about 10,000 fled to the West before the advancing Soviet army, and about 20,000 were deported to Siberia for different reasons. Initially, the Soviet government had promised to leave the land alone, then decided to confiscate it, but leave the farmers the right to use it for an indefinite period, then started pressing on collectivisation of agriculture. People were reluctant to join, but the resistance was broken with the wave of deportations of 1949. But this collectivisation also triggered a process that some call rapid urbanisation, some others rural exodus.

However, slowly, but constantly the rural life took off again and from the 1960s onwards the new, socialist countryside started functioning again. The concentration of agriculture was the main keyword here. By the end of the Soviet period, in the mid-1980s, the number of collective farms in Estonia reached 302 (Mander, Palang 1994). They also took over the role of rural municipalities – and provided their workers/members with all sorts of services, such as schools and shops. In better-off collective farms salaries were comparable with those in urban areas and it was rather common for girls who studied humanities at universities to seek a husband from an agricultural university.

However, the feeling of loss was also there. A private piece of land had been a part of the Estonian dream for centuries; by the 1930s many had had the chance to fulfil that dream, but the Soviet collectivisation had cancelled it. The former borders of the private farms were kept in mind. Peeter Maandi (2009) has shown how people who owned land before the Soviet occupation kept track of the officially annulled pre-Soviet land rights, by relating to inertial landscape elements as memory aids. Similarly, the former borders were respected when organising everyday life on the collective farm – people tried to keep their berry picking and grazing of the private cow within the limits of their former land (Palang, Sooväli-Sepping 2012). When it was possible to get their land back in the 1990s, the old dream re-emerged.

2. Restitution

For many in the post-socialist European space, (land) restitution is the main, era-defining feature. As said before, many just wanted to go back to the year 1940 and continue from there. The reality, of course, was much more complex and complicated.

A thorough summary of the restitution process in Estonia has been presented by Anu Printsmann, Railu Nugin and Hannes Palang (2022). This was a process

that touched, directly or indirectly, almost everyone in the society, and the outcome of it defined the development lines of our rural life for the coming decades. It included fierce parliamentary debates, different legislative initiatives, discussions on who is eligible and how the lands should be restituted, etc. Printsman et al made four important conclusions from that study:

- first, the borders of land plots can be traced through the whole Soviet time back to the middle of 19th-century land reforms and thereby act as a reference system for national identity;
- second, that the restitution process is much more sophisticated than just adopting some legislation;
- third, idealism was one of the main drivers of the whole process and people learned the hard way that the past is indeed over and cannot be recovered;
- and fourth, there is a plenty of questions about morality and justice involved, and thanks to this recognition the initial idealism was gradually replaced by a much more practical attitude.

Printsman, Nugin and Palang (2022) finish their paper with the following statement: “The reform was painful, maybe not always just, but indeed badly needed for revising the feelings of justice and morality linked with land. The new landscape that the reform created indeed reflects new moral categories and ideologies. As these two are interdependent, the landscape can, in turn, mould moral ideals in certain ways.”

So, in the 1990s land was portrayed as a unique and invaluable asset, reserved for those committed to cultivating it for the benefit of the Estonian people and state, rather than personal profit. This ideology tied land ownership to national identity, portraying farming as a patriotic act and essential for rebuilding the state. Despite challenges like delays in land reform, shortages of surveyors, and financial barriers, many farmers embraced this narrative. For example, in a 1992 TV interview, a farmer described their work as a continuation of ancestral traditions and an investment in their children's future. In summary, Estonia's rural reorganisation was deeply entwined with nationalistic ideals, presenting farming as a vital link to the past and a foundation for the nation's future (Nugin, Trell-Zuidema, Pöder, forthcoming).

3. The 20 Years of European Union: What Has Changed?

The restitution process of 1990 showed that cultivating the land was something rural people should do, and everything else was considered marginal. There were voices that even wanted to ban the possibility of selling land for other uses than agriculture. This has all changed since the turn of the century.

3.1. Agriculture: Concentration and Professionalisation

For agriculture, the keyword for the last two decades or so has been concentration. During the restitution, many people had the idealistic dream to return to the countryside and continue the farming practices of their forefathers. Soon they discovered that they do not have neither skill nor knowledge to do that. “You can have a cow as a pet, pat her and scratch and talk to her, or you can have a cow as a resource, milk it and sell it eventually, when it does not give milk anymore,” one farmer commented in a private conversation. This recognition has led to what I'd call the professionalisation of the whole agricultural sector.

With the European Union (EU), farmers got access to new markets and financial instruments, but it also meant that they had now to compete with other producers in other countries that had more experience in these conditions. The new possibilities came however with stricter rules and tighter bureaucracy. The first reaction was that the number of small farmers started to decrease rather rapidly. The outcome: of the 174,500 people employed in the primary sector in 1989, only 39,200 remained in 2000, and that number decreased further to 17,800 by 2022 (Nugin, Trell-Zuidema, Pöder, forthcoming). Of the whole rural population, more than half worked in the primary sector in 1989, and only 6.4% in 2017 (Nugin, Trell-Zuidema, Pöder, forthcoming). Similarly, the number of households active in agriculture has decreased. According to Marii Rasva and Evelin Jürgenson (2022), the number of agricultural producers reached 55748 in 2001, dropped to 36,589 just before joining the EU in 2003, and continued to decrease ever since, down to 11,369 in 2020. Logically, the average size of the household is increasing, having risen from 16 ha in 2001 to 86 ha in 2020. The agricultural land is increasingly owned by large enterprises.

This concentration has the same outcomes as everywhere else. Land as a resource is getting expensive, which makes it extremely difficult for those willing to start their businesses or even expand their production. In many cases, the farmers who started their businesses back in 1990s are handing the matters over to the next generation, and this usually means further specialisation, mostly on either dairy production or cereals. This has been also supported by national policies that had to be aligned with the European ones. Again, the farmers first struggled with this, but those who were able to comply have benefitted, which has resulted in improved productivity, product quality and (economic) sustainability. As an illustration of this, at the time of writing this piece Estonian media reported that Estonian cows have the highest milk production in Europe with 10,728 kg per cow per year (Denmark comes second with 10 400 kg, EU average 7791 kg).

3.2. Rural Depopulation

The professionalisation meant that not that many people find jobs in the agricultural sector any more. What do people do then in the countryside? Many have left. Rural depopulation goes hand in hand with austerity measures, one driving the other. Until there is no regional policy with the clear aim of trying to keep people in the countryside, it is always a rural school or rural bureau that is shut first when another budget cut is needed. Before 2010, the main source of migration was the countryside, after that it was the turn of small towns.

On the one hand, this turn resulted in abandonment. The most visible witnesses of this are the numerous decaying buildings, mostly those of the former collective farms. They are often too big to be used nowadays, be it a farm, a clubhouse or a block of flats. The non-existing real estate market also supports this abandonment. Unused agricultural lands – a site rather common still in around 2010 – are gradually taken over by forests or solar panels. People feel that they are not part of the success the country is having, they are left behind, and this in turn creates ground for support for populist political parties and being against any development plans.

However, this process is not that unidirectional. There is a small number of people who have moved in the other direction, settled in the countryside, and now often act as the leaders of local life.

The other side of the abandonment is that people have had to find other activities to generate income and keep things going. In this, I'm afraid, most of the countries that joined the EU in 2004 are going in the same direction. Two of the most visible changes here are the increase of all sorts of tourism and recreational activities and the rise of communities.

3.3. Environmental issues

The concentration and professionalisation of agriculture have again brought forward the environmental issues. The impact of Soviet-style agriculture on nature was rather great, mostly due to the unlimited and uncontrolled use of fertilisers and agrochemicals. The low years in the 1990s meant the use of these chemicals dropped significantly, and the landscape had some time to recover. Since the start of concentration, environmental issues have emerged again. Aveliina Helm (2022) writes that the use of pesticides in Estonian fields has increased over the last decade from 461 tons of active substances in 2011 to 752 tons in 2019. An increasing share of the pesticides and fertilisers used also reaches groundwater and remains in the soil as residues. These issues are increasingly addressed in Estonia's agricultural environmental policy focusing on sustainable farming, nature conservation,

and reducing environmental impacts. The goal is to balance food production with the preservation of natural resources while aligning with the European Union's environmental and climate policies. There is an action plan in place to promote organic agriculture and several farmers are taking on this path.

This topic in turn is closely linked with nature conservation and forestry. Rural depopulation means there is increasingly more space for nature. The professionalisation of agriculture also means that many areas that were formerly used for extensive grazing and hay-making, thereby creating record-breaking biodiversity, are not in use any more. There are no people in the forests, so former paths and trails are not used every day and tend to grow over. Which again creates more space for wildlife. The backside of all this is that we have to solve with policy measures many issues that formerly were part of everyday life, and most of these policy measures have been implemented during the last 20 years. There are measures to decrease the environmental footprint of agriculture, as Helm (2022) wrote above. There is financial support available to manage the species-rich seminatural grasslands that would grow over without regular mowing and/or grazing. Natura 2000 network these days covers about 14,500 km² of the Estonian territory – 18% of land area and 27% of territorial sea area. Unfortunately, the relatively large amount of protected areas has fired back by leading to more polarised understandings of the need for nature conservation: once the areas in need of protection are determined, the rest is free for more intensive use and there is much less need to be engaged in nature conservation activities outside the protected areas. The discussion about what is the right amount of timber clear-cuts in the country is never-ending. Land and landscape are increasingly seen as a resource and less than a home or dwelling.

4. Commodification and the Rise of the Rural Playground

It was Paul Claval (2005) who noticed that the rural landscape has changed from an arena of hard work into a playground – instead of being worked landscape is more and more used for all sorts of amenities. Urbanisation transformed this understanding. Machines took over work, and all sorts of new people started moving from cities to the countryside. For them, rural work was considered dirty; they valued low population density and open space much more. “Authentic” nature and new communities were secondary preferences. However, space is primarily needed for recreation: hiking, running, rafting, or playing golf or tennis on meticulously maintained grounds. The countryside and landscapes offer the best opportunities for this.

What has led to this? Marc Antrop (1998) identifies four factors as causes of landscape changes: urbanisation, globalisation, accessibility, and natural disasters. For now, we will set aside natural disasters. Urbanisation is not only reflected in the spread of urban landscape patterns – such as urban sprawl – but primarily in the dissemination of urban lifestyles and values. Keywords here include abundant leisure time, increased recreational needs, and, simultaneously, alienation from nature.

Globalisation primarily signifies homogenisation, again in terms of lifestyles, culture, and landscape patterns. Accessibility results from the interaction of tourism economies and infrastructure development. It has been suggested that it is increasingly difficult to entice urbanised individuals to venture more than a hundred meters from a parking lot (think museums and other tourist sites!). However, boardwalks and prepared hiking trails now grant access to bogs and high mountains, which were previously considered inaccessible to the average person (with a few exceptions, of course) (see Laviolette 2011; Eiter 2006).

At the turn of the century, numerous conferences and books (e.g. Brandt, Vejre [eds.] 2003a; 2003b; Mander, Antrop [eds.] 2003; among others) focused on the topic of landscape multifunctionality. Multifunctional landscapes were understood as areas with diverse uses and complex structures, attracting competing interests from various stakeholder groups. The idea of multifunctionality was based on the understanding that the more diverse (both monetary and non-monetary) opportunities a landscape offers, the greater the environmental, social, and economic benefits.

These days tourism and recreation are sometimes seen as saviours of rural life – perhaps more so some years ago and less nowadays. People see that they have to work to get tourists here and it is not the situation one person described years ago: this area has an enormous tourism potential because no tourist has been here yet.

So, for example, the county of Ida-Virumaa advertises itself as Seiklusmaa – the land of adventures. Since it is a former mining area, now largely abandoned, it offers all sorts of possibilities for adventures, be it a jeep safari on the ash heaps or an exploration of ruins of the former mines and other outdoor activities. The smoke sauna tradition of the southeastern corner of Estonia has been included in the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage. This provides rather good grounds for both boosting the local identity and studying this change. A documentary, *Savusanna sõsarad*, depicting the smoke sauna traditions, won several awards in European film festivals in 2023, and this helps promote the area. The coast of Lake Peipsi in the east promotes food tourism. Largely based on the culture of the Staroveri (old-style Russian Orthodox church, persecuted in Russia since the 17th century, people fled the Russian empire and settled here, no language barriers) this culture is based on

the fish caught from the lake and onions and garlic grown in the backyards. All this culture has created a specific landscape that is celebrated in August during the onion and garlic festivals. Also, winter (ice) fishing and the culture connected to this activity are getting increasing attention. Tourism here is small-scale, community-based, and directed towards exposing the heritage.

Communities seem to have a double role in the rural theory. On the one hand, they seem to signify the link to the romantic past, when everything in the countryside was done together and rural communities were the romantic ideal. On the other, seems that more and more government policies tell communities to solve some problems. Indeed, with or without the help of the LEADER project communities have been at the helm with many changes in the countryside. Before WWII, then president Päts initiated a home decoration campaign, aiming at turning ugly everyday farmsteads into something more adorable, demonstrating a sense of beauty and national pride and identity. This idea was again picked up in the 1990s, to help counter the post-soviet abandonment. Communities have taken a clear lead in this. There are (or have been) several support schemes available aimed at landscape maintenance and thereby strengthening the sense of place.

The image of the countryside has changed. At about the turn of the century, a prime minister allowed himself a remark along the lines that it is impossible to find a sober person in a village at 11 a.m. This image is still partly there but is being out-competed by another one that tells a story of a romantic nature where urbanites can visit. Nature where cows eat grass in cultivated fields... This is also a hint that third urbanites are losing the link with the past and tend to handle the countryside as a foreign country. A couple of decades ago the first task of schoolchildren at the beginning of a school year was to write an essay on how they spent their summer holidays with their grandparents in the countryside – these days the grandparents mostly live in towns and children no longer that direct experience of rural lifestyles...

5. Instead of Conclusions: Looking Back

In 2018, many countries in the long belt stretching from Finland to almost Greece celebrated their centenary anniversaries (Printsmann et al. 2019). In Estonia (as in at least Finland and Latvia), landscape and countryside were also part of the celebrations. For Estonia, the celebrations brought forward two foci: collaboration and cultural heritage. The visual landscape plays a crucial role in linking the past and present, highlighting the layered, palimpsests structure shaped by socio-economic changes over time. Urbanisation has altered our connection to landscapes, shifting them from lived spaces to distant, nostalgic backdrops. Initiatives like the ELKS-curated picture book and calls for collaborative

contributions aim to foster collective memory and identity, reflecting a contemporary need to revisit and redefine ties to the past. Estonia's innovative use of national flag colours seeks to broaden identity discussions beyond ethnicity and language, encouraging inclusivity while acknowledging the risk of misinterpretation. From Soviet-era collectivism to restored private property, the evolution of land ownership has instilled a sense of stewardship, allowing Estonians to engage more thoughtfully with stable landscapes and deliberate on future practices.

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Od kolektywizacji do komodyfikacji. Przemiany estońskiego krajobrazu wiejskiego i tożsamości

Streszczenie: Krajobraz wiejski Estonii przeszedł znaczącą transformację – od okresu sowieckiej kolektywizacji po proces restytucji ziemi po odzyskaniu niepodległości oraz członkostwo w Unii Europejskiej. Po kolektywizacji i wyludnieniu obszarów wiejskich w czasach sowieckich restytucja ziemi w latach 90. XX w. była napędzana przez nacjonalistyczne ideały łączące własność ziemi z tożsamością i sprawiedliwością. Jednak początkowy idealizm został osłabiony przez wyzwania ekonomiczne i logistyczne. Integracja Estonii z UE przyspieszyła profesjonalizację zawodu rolnika i koncentrację rolnictwa – liczba gospodarstw rolnych zmalała, lecz te, które się utrzymały, stały się większe, bardziej wyspecjalizowane i wydajniejsze. Jednocześnie wyludnianie wsi i urbanizacja doprowadziły do porzucenia infrastruktury rolniczej i zaniku tradycyjnych źródeł utrzymania, choć turystyka małoskalowa i inicjatywy społeczne przyczyniły się do rewitalizacji niektórych obszarów. Wieś, coraz częściej postrzegana jako skomercjalizowana „przestrzeń rekreacyjna”, pełni obecnie różnorodne funkcje, łącząc ochronę dziedzictwa z nowoczesną turystyką. Zmiany te podkreślają przejście od użytkowego krajobrazu wiejskiego do wielofunkcyjnej przestrzeni odzwierciedlającej wartości miejskie, co wymaga ponownej analizy tożsamości narodowej i społeczno-gospodarczej przyszłości estońskiej wsi.

Słowa kluczowe: restytucja ziemi, profesjonalizacja rolnictwa, wyludnienie wsi, komodyfikacja krajobrazu, tożsamość narodowa.