



# Introduction to Estonian Studies/ Introduction to Estonian Culture

Professor Piret Viires

# Outline of the Lecture

- Estonian Studies – new field in area studies
- What is Estonia – name, territory, people, language etc
- How to define Estonian culture?
- Contemporary self-notions of Estonia, nation branding of Estonia
- Practicalities: general structure of the course, topics, assignments, requirements

# What is Area Studies?

- Area studies are interdisciplinary fields of research and scholarship pertaining to particular geographical, national or cultural regions. The term exists primarily as a general description for what are, in the practice of scholarship, many heterogeneous fields of research, encompassing both the social sciences and the humanities.
- Typical area study programs involve history, political science, sociology, cultural studies, languages, geography, literature, and related disciplines.
- Great variety of area studies: French Studies, Russian Studies, Jewish Studies, Asian Studies, Middle East Studies, Black American Studies etc.

# What is/are Estonian Studies?

- Estonian Studies – a field in progress.
- Estonian Studies – a new label with old history.
- Chair of Estonian Studies at the University of Toronto (since 1986) (see <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/futurestudents/programs/progs/estonian> ).  
1999–2017: Jüri Kivimäe as the first permanent holder of the chair;  
Andres Kasekamp as the new holder of the chair (since Fall 2017).
- The Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies in Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu (2016–2023), see [https://www.folklore.ee/CEES/index\\_eng.php](https://www.folklore.ee/CEES/index_eng.php)

# The Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies

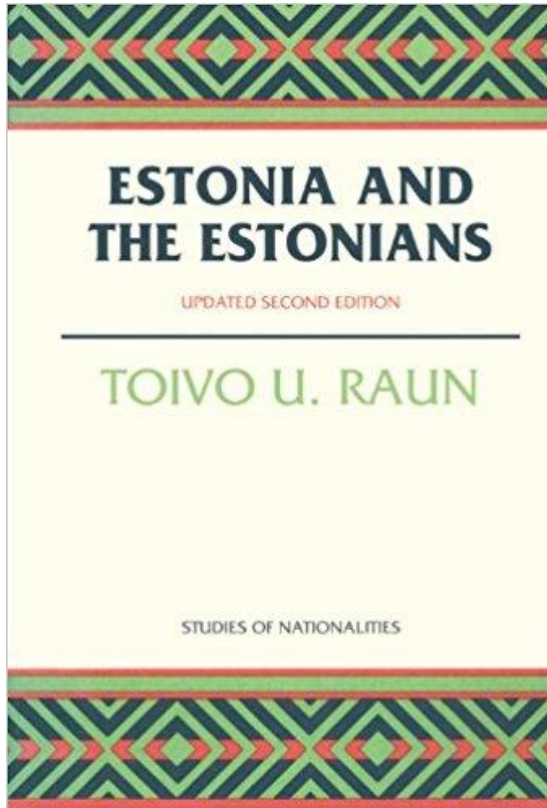
The CEES research was connected with focal phenomena of:

- a) the Estonian society and culture - the Estonian language itself and its wide array of sublanguages and dialects, unique regilaul-verse, song festivals and the choir movement, original poetic culture, sacred sites;
- b) the Estonian diasporas and ethnic groups (primarily Estonian Russians, Old Believers, Finno-Ugric minorities, neighboring and contact groups).
- c) global cultural trends and local variations of global cultural phenomena (epic(s), humour, mythology, etc.), reinvented and modernized forms (e.g. punk song festivals),
- d) contemporary culture, incl transmedia texts and behaviour.

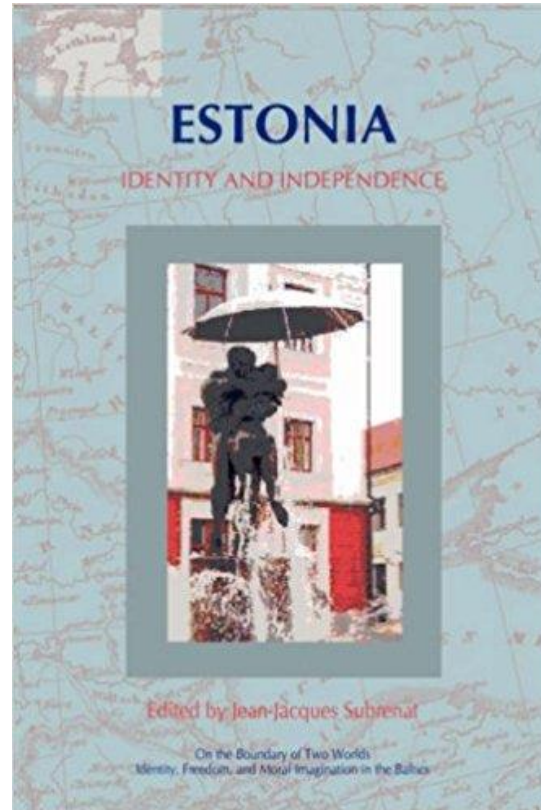
# Estonian Studies in Tallinn University

- A rather broad approach, combining various aspects of Estonia in the past, present and future: language, identity, culture, history, literature, society, politics, technology etc.
- However, the focus of the Estonian Studies programme is on Estonian language, history and culture as the main building blocks of Estonian identity.
- While the contemporary situation of Estonia is important, the historical background (development of Estonian language, culture and identity) is also strongly emphasized.
- Estonian Historical-Cultural Studies.

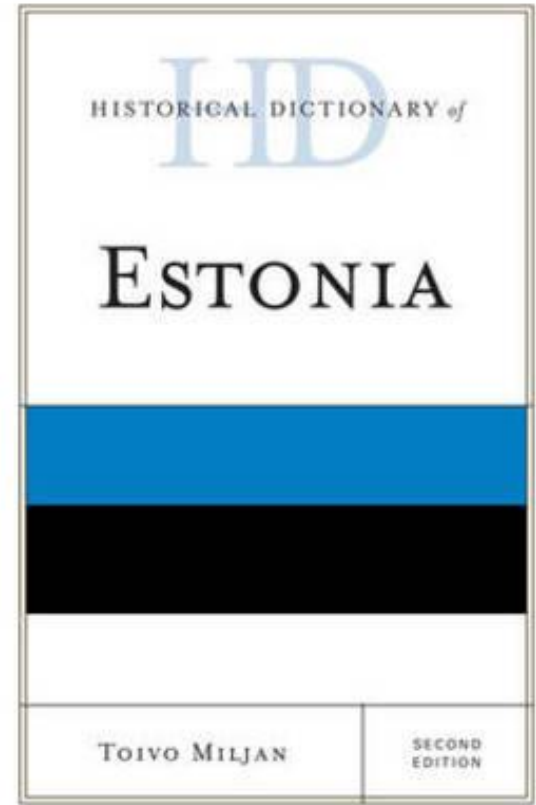
# Books in English about Estonia (historical perspective):



2001



2004



2015

# What is Estonia?

- We don't know with certainty from where the name "Eesti" comes from and when it was born. Probably from the Old Scandinavian languages and about 1000 years ago.
- We don't know what the name "Eesti" means, but it might come from the word referring to "east" (cf. Icelandic *austr*, Danish *öst*, Swedish *öster*).
- The name "Eestimaa" was first mentioned in written Estonian in the 17th c (*Esthimah* 1638) and the name "Eesti" only in early 1850s (Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald).



# What is Estonian language?

- Genetic relations: Uralic family > Finno-Ugric branch > Finnic (closely related to Finnish, Karelian, Vepsian, Votic, Livonian and others)
- Impact (neighbours, conquerors etc): Germanic, Baltic, varieties of Slavic, Low German, High German, Swedish, Russian, Latvian, Finnish, English
- Estonian **language** is **the basis** of Estonian **identity**
- The importance of Estonian language and culture for Estonian state

# Estonian language and culture in the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia

... the state which embodies the inextinguishable right of the people of Estonia to national self-determination and which was proclaimed on 24 February 1918, which is founded on liberty, justice and the rule of law, which is created to protect the peace and defend the people against aggression from the outside ... **which must guarantee the preservation of the Estonian people, the Estonian language and the Estonian culture through the ages ...**

Source: <https://www.president.ee/en/republic-of-estonia/the-constitution/index.html>

# How to define Estonian culture?

- Two possibilities
- **Territorial approach**

**Eesti** (with capital E) - 1) the name of the country, 2) genitive case 'of Estonia', i.e., referring to the whole country, Estonian territory

- **Ethnolinguistic approach**

**eesti** 'Estonian' in the narrow sense: eesti keel 'Estonian language'.

## **Example:**

Compare *eesti kirjandus* 'Estonian literature' (i.e. written in Estonian language) and *Eesti kirjandus* 'literature written in Estonia' – does not depend in which language it is written (German, Russian), but is written in Estonian territory

# How to define identity?

- State/political identity - citizenship
- Ethnic (ethnolinguistic identity) identity
- There are no pure ethnicities and no ethnicity is homogenous
- Yet ethnicity is an important construct: to share same language, same core-texts, etc

## *Kodueesti* and *väliseesti*

- *Kodueesti* ‘home Estonian’ - Estonian language, culture etc in Estonian homeland
- *Väliseesti* ‘abroad Estonian’ - outside Estonian territory, either historical Estonian minorities (in Latvia for instance) or exile Estonians – Estonian diaspora
- Language maintenance outside homeland is a difficult task

# Contemporary self-notions of Estonia

- European (Union) country
- Western country
- Baltic country
- Post-Soviet country/ East-European country
- Nordic country (?)
- e-Estonia
- Small country
- Smallness and history of occupations and wars creates a discourse of endangerment: shall we survive?

# How Estonia is self-branding itself?

- State-funded project of Brand Estonia (public presentation in January 2017).
- Basic values, slogans, visual identity, digital tools (fonts, presentations, photos etc) for public use. Two websites: [estonia.ee](http://estonia.ee) and [brand.estonia.ee](http://brand.estonia.ee)
- *“Brand Estonia helps you introduce Estonia in a way that attracts attention, creates trust and makes you proud. It can be used by anyone who wants to talk about Estonia: businesses, government institutions, universities, organisations, events and people. Together we will create the image of Estonia.”* (brand.estonia.ee)

# Brand Estonia



Boulder/rock



Kristjan Raud. "Kalevipoeeg  
Throwing a Stone" (1935)



tere!



This is an overview of Estonia

# location



- in Northern Europe
- area 45,339 km<sup>2</sup>
- average 5.2 °C



# history

A satellite image of Estonia, showing the country's coastline, islands, and surrounding waters. The land is a mix of brown and green, indicating forests and some urban areas. The water is dark blue. The word 'history' is written in white text in the top left corner.

- settlements from around 8500 BC
- ruled by Germans, Danes, Swedes, Russians, Poles
- Republic of Estonia established in 1918
- independence regained in 1991

language

- no gender
- future tense = present tense
- 3 degrees of phonemic length

ööttöö

jäääär

ölleköht

# independent minds

- straight-forward and sceptical
- used to constant change
- always gets things done



91% of adults have completed  
upper secondary education.

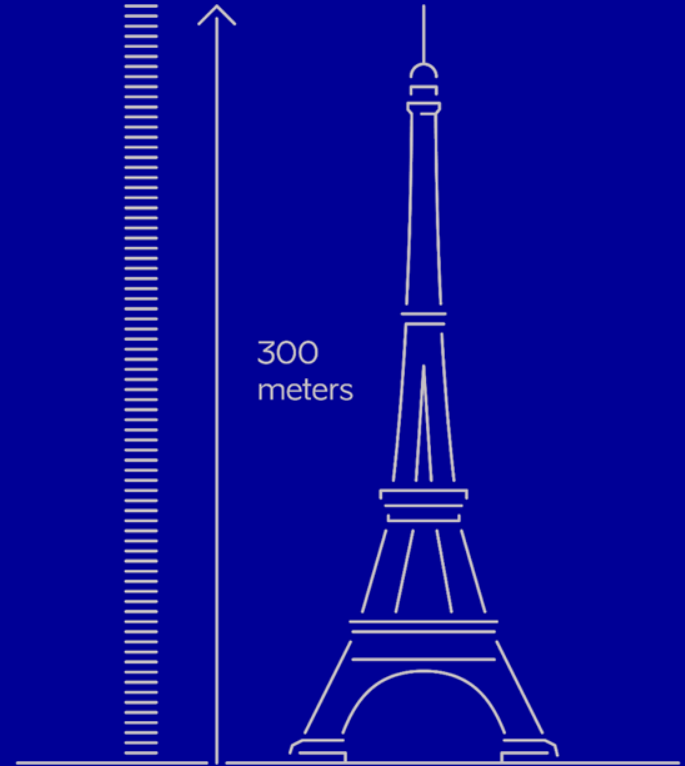


meet the most  
optimistic people



# we are a digital society

- digital signature saves 5 days a year
- 99% of prescriptions are digital
- 99% state services are online



A stack of paper saved each month





sing together with  
40,000 people



smartest, cleanest,  
bravest, strongest,  
coolest, clearest, busiest,  
weirdest, simplest, fastest,  
deepest, happiest  
facts.

# Eesti



# Introduction to Estonian Studies: Schedule & Topics

On Thursdays, 10:15 - 11:45 check ASIO for rooms

## **1. Lecture 04.09.2025**

Introductory lecture. What are “Estonian Studies”? Information about the course (prof. Piret Viires)

## **2. Lecture 11.09.2025**

Language and identity in Estonia (prof. Anna Verschik)

## **3. Lecture 18.09.2025**

Estonian culture and identity. Estonian self-representations (prof. Piret Viires). Estonian identity in diaspora. Personal story (Erik Kõvamees)

## **4. Lecture 25.09.2025**

Estonian state, politics and society (ass. prof. Tõnis Saarts)

# Introduction to Estonian Studies: Schedule & Topics

## **5. Lecture 02.10.2025**

Introduction to Estonian folklore and traditional culture (ass. prof. Marju Kõivupuu)

## **6. Lecture 09.10.2025**

Ethnic minorities in Estonia (prof. Anna Verschik)

## **7. Lecture 16.10.2025**

Baltic German culture and Estonia (ass. prof. Maris Saagpakk)

*Reading week. No lectures*

## **8. Lecture 30.10.2025**

Estonian education system (lect. Merje Kuusk)

# Introduction to Estonian Studies: Schedule & Topics

## 9. **Lecture 06.11.2025**

Some key issues of Estonian history and cultural memory (prof. Marek Tamm)

## 10. **Lecture 13.11.2025**

Intoduction to Estonian literature (prof Piret Viires)

## 11. **Fieldwork 20.11.2025**

Study trip to Estonian Literature Centre (Sulevimägi 2–5, prof Piret Viires: Ms Ilvi Liive, director of ELIC) **NB! for Estonian Studies and Liberal Arts students only! Independent work for the others.**

# Introduction to Estonian Studies: Schedule & Topics

## **12. Seminar 27.11.2025**

SEMINAR on “Estonianness” (discussion on literary texts describing „Estonianness“) (prof Piret Viires)

## **13. Fieldwork 04.12.2025 13.00-14.30**

E-Estonia. Study trip to e-Estonia Briefing Centre (Valukoja 8, Ernst Öpik Building)

## **14. Seminar 11.12.2025**

FINAL SEMINAR. Presentation of group works. The challenges of Estonian studies (prof. Anna Verschik, prof. Piret Viires)

# Moodle <https://moodle.tlu.ee/>

- All course materials are in Moodle e-learning environment
- Create a Moodle account!
- Search for the course: EKK7401.HT Introduction to Estonian Studies  
2025/EKY6105.HT Introduction to Estonian Culture  
<https://moodle.tlu.ee/course/view.php?id=5224>
- Enroll to the course. No enrolment key needed.
- If you encounter any issues, please write for assistance [moodle@tlu.ee](mailto:moodle@tlu.ee)



## Compulsory reading

- Ago Pajur, Tõnu Tannberg. *History of Estonia 1918–2017: a brief overview*. Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2017. (Copy in Moodle)
- Hilary Bird, Lembit Öpik, Ulvi Mustmaa. *Xenophobe's Guide to the Estonians*. Xenophobe's Guides Limited, 2010. (Copy in Moodle)
- Selected articles about Estonian language and Estonian culture for the final seminar and group work (In Moodle)
- Literary texts describing “Estonianness” by Jaan Kaplinski, Andrus Kivirähk, Valdur Mikita, Justin Petrone. The texts are in Moodle.

## Subscription to the course and exam

- Participation in the lectures and seminars, active participation in discussions.
- Participation in seminars is required 100%. In case of absence the instructor gives the student a replacement assignment.
- The prerequisites to the exam:
  - 1) one short essay on the topic „What is Estonia for me“;
  - 2) reading the literary texts describing „Estonianness“, and discussing them in the seminar;
  - 3) presenting the results of the group work in the final seminar.
  - 4) participation in the study trips or submitting independent assignment (no independent assignment is necessary in the case of e-Estonia briefing centre)

# Requirements for individual work

1) A student has to write one **short essay** on the topic „What is Estonia for me“- 800 words.

**Deadline for the essay: 30 October 2025.**

The essay should be uploaded to Moodle.

2) A student has to read the **literary texts describing “Estonianness”**, prepare for the seminar and discuss them in the seminar on 27 November 2025.

3) The **group work** on selected texts on Estonian language and Culture and some fieldwork - results to be presented **in the seminar on 11 December 2025**. The slides of the presentation should be uploaded to Moodle after the seminar.

More detailed instructions about the group work will be explained during the classes and available in Moodle.

## Assessment criteria

The exam consists of the following components:

- 1) One short essay on the topic „What is Estonia for me“. **Grading: pass-fail assessment.**
  - 2) Reading literary texts and discussion in the seminar (or submitting replacement assignment). **Grading: pass-fail assessment.**
  - 3) Participation in the study trips (or submitting independent assignment). **Grading: pass-fail assessment.**
  - 3) Results of the group work presented in the seminar on 11 December 2025. **Grading: differentiated assessment. 30% of the final grade.**
  - 4) Written test on the topics discussed in the lectures and seminars. **Grading: differentiated assessment. 70% of the final grade.**
- You will get questions for revision and exam preparation before.  
Examination times will be in December 2025 and January 2026.

# First assignment: an essay

Write a short essay (800 words) on the topic "What is Estonia for me"?

Try to answer the questions why are you studying in Estonia, what had you heard of Estonia before, what are your personal impressions and experiences in Estonia. What surprises you and what not? What do you like and what you do not like?

**Deadline 30 October 2025.**

Upload the essay to the course Moodle-website

<https://moodle.tlu.ee/course/view.php?id=5224>

Next lecture on next Thursday 11.09.2025

Language and identity in Estonia  
(prof. Anna Verschik)



Aitäh!  
Questions? /Küsimusi?