



Identity, Integration, and Loyalty in Estonia: A Relational Comparative Analysis of Immigrant Integration

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Abstract

This article presents a relational comparative analysis of Estonian integration, building directly on Marju Lauristin's cluster analysis and national defense index in the Estonian Integration Monitoring 2023. Drawing on relational integration theory and John W. Berry's acculturation framework, it maps Lauristin's clusters onto Berry's four strategies and traces ethnic differences in trust, belonging, support for NATO, and military aid to Ukraine. The analysis identifies important limitations in Lauristin's symmetric design: even when integration is framed as a two-sided process, asymmetrical power relations persist, and acculturation strategies continue to collapse into assimilation, separation, or marginalization. The post-2022 security context amplified these pre-existing cleavages. Vetik's national unity-versus-equal-rights imperatives remain central, yet the majority has claimed the moral high ground by framing strong support for Ukraine as a loyalty test. And the relational lens shows that this securitization of integration has proved counterproductive, widening trust gaps across the whole society.

Keywords

relational integration, immigrant integration, loyalty, Estonia, Russian-speaking minority, securitization

1 Introduction

This study is a practical attempt to resolve a challenge faced by every researcher at a certain stage of their career: the transition from theory to empirical analysis. For some areas of the social sciences, this transition is more difficult than for others; one such area is research on immigrant integration, which is also sometimes called migrant integration or ethnic minority integration. The language behind the phrase "immigrant integration" already implies a single direction to the process, or some invisible force that takes migrants and inserts them into a larger society (Favell, 2019). For that reason, some scholars, including myself, have reservations about using the term but prefer to adhere to it due to the lack of a better alternative. For example, the notion of "social integration" excessively stretches the concept, making it too broad for a meaningful comparison (Polynin, 2024).

In contrast, postcolonial scholars tend to resolve the problem of the term “immigrant integration” in a more drastic fashion, namely by calling for its complete repeal (Schinkel, 2018; Favell, 2019). They argue that research on integration should not be reduced to finding better methods for turning migrants into non-migrants, as this reinforces racism and prejudice and places migrants at the bottom of an imaginary social hierarchy (Schinkel, 2018; Favell, 2019). Despite the radical nature of the postcolonial critique, it raises highly important questions, such as, how can integration be studied in a non-reductionist way? How can it be reflected as a two-way process? Or what is there to integration besides a pathway for ethnic minorities losing themselves in the majority?

I address these questions in a relational way by analyzing the case of immigrant integration in Estonia. This article proceeds in three main parts. First, it outlines the theoretical departure from Alba’s mainstream approach toward Klarenbeek’s relational integration framework and introduces the key analytical concepts employed in the study: the distinction between assimilation and integration, Berry’s acculturation strategies, and Vetik’s loyalty-versus-equal-rights imperatives. Second, the empirical analysis is divided into two steps. It first examines Marju Lauristin’s integration clusters in the Estonian Integration Monitoring 2023 and maps them onto Berry’s acculturation strategies. It then conducts a relational comparative analysis of the 2023 Integration Monitoring and the 2025 Public Opinion Monitoring Survey, evaluating the components of Lauristin’s national defense index, such as trust, belonging, support for NATO, and military aid to Ukraine against the loyalty-versus-equal-rights imperatives. The article concludes with a discussion of the unreflected shift toward a loyalty paradigm in Estonian integration research and policy and its broader implications for Estonian society.

2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology of Relational Integration

2.1 Critique of Mainstream Approaches: Assimilation versus Integration

Notwithstanding my previous critique of the mainstream approach to the theory of immigrant integration (Polynin, 2024), particularly represented by Alba (2024) and Statham and Foner (2024), I emphasize that it also makes an important theoretical statement by picturing integration as a two-way process (Polynin, 2024, 9). However, the key problem of Alba’s stance reveals itself when moving from the theoretical to the empirical level and requires deeper consideration. Alba and others conflate assimilation and integration by using them interchangeably. Thereby, assimilation is defined as “the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences” (Alba & Nee, 2003), while integration is “approximately equivalent” (Alba, 2024, 28) to it. Moreover, Alba emphasizes that assimilation does not require the total loss of ethnic identity. Cultural practices and ethnic markers can remain intact, even as their significance in shaping social interactions diminishes over time (Alba, 2020, 146). In other words, under the lens of this approach, the ethnic differences do not disappear; they simply stop mattering.

As I have already argued, using integration and assimilation interchangeably completely misrepresents what these processes mean (Polynin, 2024, 2). But why is this problematic both empirically and normatively? The answer is quite straightforward: when one appeals to dictionaries¹ or to alternative influential sources, assimilation means forcing a migrant to give up their heritage,

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/integration>

culture, and identity, while integration is defined by the opposite: an attempt to retain them and to use them as the basis for participation in the larger society (Berry, 1970). These are not the same processes, and without drawing a clear line between them, researchers lose any effective way to explain the real-life problems that migrants and the larger society are going through.

To illustrate this point, let us assume that we take Alba's conceptualization of assimilation for granted. If assimilation means "entry into the societal mainstream" (Alba, 2024, 28) where the latter is defined as "a part of the society where the influence of ethnoracial origins on social interaction and position is greatly reduced" (Alba, 2024, 28; Alba & Nee, 2003, 12), then the entire logic of integration as a two-way process is completely lost. In this scenario, researchers focus exclusively on how migrants enter the societal mainstream, bearing the full burden of change. Moreover, the analytical need to distinguish assimilation from integration arises as soon as we introduce discrimination and prejudice into the equation. For example, Alba's (2024) focus on individual outcomes (e.g., intermarriage, job access) might overlook cases where migrants adopt mainstream behaviors but still face discrimination due to unchangeable traits such as an accent or race, which suggests incomplete assimilation rather than failed integration.

From a normative point of view, the equalization of integration and assimilation on the premise that they lead to a similar result is inherently cynical. If assimilation is reduced to the mere erasure of ethnic differences, as Alba's framework suggests, it dismisses the questions of why the change occurs and at what cost – whether it stems from coercion, cultural suppression, or voluntary adaptation. As a result, even when tackling the decline of ethnic distinctions, Alba's framework overlooks essential questions, such as: how do these differences vanish? What role do government policies, e.g., immigration laws or citizenship requirements, play in driving this process? Or to what degree is change imposed rather than chosen?

By sidestepping these issues, Alba treats assimilation as an inevitable, almost natural phenomenon, stripped of its political context, which is often manifested in negative forms such as discriminatory rhetoric, legalized segregation, or structural inequalities that shape migrant experiences. I must emphasize that while Alba's contribution is clearly not cynical in intention, his focus on outcomes glosses over the real struggles and trade-offs involved in the relationship between migrants and the majority. So, the question evidently arises: what can be done about it?

2.2 Relational Methodology: From Theory to Data

This article is much more than an argument in favor of the difference between integration and assimilation, as this particular goal may be achieved while pursuing a solution to a larger problem. As I have demonstrated (Polynin, 2024), the postcolonial and relational critiques of the mainstream approach to immigrant integration agree that the mainstream reduces integration to the study of migrants becoming non-migrants, thereby placing them by default in a subordinate position. Similarly, both postcolonial and relational approaches highlight the nation-state-centered logic of the mainstream, calling it methodological nationalism or civic integrationism, respectively (Klarenbeek, 2024; Favell, 2019).

The term "civic integrationism" describes one of the two ways in which this logic is expressed in mainstream scholarship. On the one hand, it means producing policy-oriented research that shapes official government integration discourse. Postcolonial researchers such as Favell call this particular form of knowledge production "thinking-for-the-state", which is separated from an autonomous sociology that remains unaffected by the government's influence (Favell, 2019, 4). On the other hand, the research questions posed within the civic-integrationist discourse traditionally revolve around protecting the values of the majority, national security, and the

survival of the nation (Klarenbeek, 2024, 235), which makes the entire approach politically loaded and provokes objections from opposing scholars.

I have already presented a detailed review of the postcolonial and relational critiques of the mainstream approach (Polynin, 2024), but in both respects, my analysis was mostly theoretical. In this article, I would like to draw on real empirical material and studies from the case of Estonia, one of the most economically successful post-Soviet states, having an uneven integration history with its large Russian-speaking minority that accounts for roughly one-quarter of its 1.3 million population.² Nonetheless, I aim to go beyond presenting a single case study of a unique regional experience and instead offer a deeper and more broadly comparable insight into how theoretical concepts affect the way we study integration. In other words, this article aims to present a transparent, traceable, and replicable way of translating theory into practice, something with which even established scholars often struggle.

I would like to call the methodological approach adopted in this study a relational comparative analysis, grounded in Klarenbeek's relational integration theory (Klarenbeek, 2019; 2024). This framework shifts the focus from traditional one-way integration models, studying how migrants lose the salience of their identity, to a new approach focusing instead on how the majority and minorities negotiate the social boundaries affected by migration.

Relational scholars in general conceptualize societal relations as hierarchical and contested, emphasizing asymmetries in power, recognition, and social standing (Emirbayer, 1997; Tilly, 2005; Vetik, 2019; Klarenbeek, 2024) rather than individual migrant outcomes alone (e.g., language proficiency, economic welfare, etc.). Klarenbeek's approach builds on this by advancing a strong normative dimension: it acknowledges that migrants might end up in a subordinate position in society, but clearly states that imposing such inferiority is morally wrong (Klarenbeek, 2024, 234). She urges that integration problems be treated as part of a larger picture of relational inequality expressed in the relations through which society distributes material goods, freedoms, and opportunities (Klarenbeek, 2024, 238).

Klarenbeek (2024, 238) claims that, in its current form, relational integration theory lacks a sociological component and therefore offers no empirical explanation of how integration really happens. I connect the methodological struggles of her approach to the evasive notion of relations. It is not impossible, but it is highly difficult, to rely on relations as a unit of analysis, because they are always dynamic and therefore difficult to capture, measure, or express in any empirical form, leaving us with no on-the-ground understanding of the integration process. The mainstream approach offers an easy solution for measuring benchmarks, the most popular being language skills, family ties, or socio-economic positions. Even though these indicators are important, they do not constitute the notion of integration in its entirety.

As I have argued before (Polynin, 2024, 4), achieving adaptation or the skills needed to survive and function in a certain society does not necessarily mean being integrated. Migrants may suffer exclusion from the host society due to racial, ethnic, religious, or any other form of prejudice, preventing them from developing a sense of belonging and a common identity with the majority. That is why I argue that, in order to capture relations, we need to look at what is happening with collective identities and the integration strategies associated with them.

That being said, I must emphasize that relational integration should not repeat the postcolonial dismissal of the mainstream approach. While Favell's (2019; 2022) idea of "planetary integration", understood as total equality and diversity, is an interesting theoretical exercise, nation-states

² <https://www.stat.ee>

remain the primary entities where integration takes place. Migration and integration policies form and are being formed by an ever-moving discourse that includes public polls, election results, media narratives, and, among other things, sociological research: research that in some cases is produced independently and in others is commissioned by the government itself.

To dismiss any research on the grounds of its association with the government as completely non-autonomous is as much of a mistake as to entirely ignore educational and economic achievements as a component of integration. Therefore, in my interpretation, the task of the relational approach is to acknowledge the potential influences and power relations that shape both the integration process and our perception of it.

In order to bridge the gap between relational theory and its practical application, I apply comparative analysis, but not in the traditional form of Mill's methods of agreement or difference. Instead of variables, I look for relations, juxtaposing indicators and conceptualizations of integration across ethnic groups, primarily Estonians and Estonian Russophones (the Russian-speaking population of Estonia). The analysis also incorporates a reflective dimension, as I argue that examining how integration is studied can yield as much insight as the data from quantitative surveys themselves.

Through this approach, I seek to uncover unreflected shifts in how Estonian authorities and the associated research conceptualize integration, particularly the increasing emphasis on loyalty and the use of attitudes toward the war in Ukraine as a proxy. An important part of this analysis is to check the results of the comparison against Berry's acculturation strategies – assimilation (adopting the host culture while abandoning one's own), integration (maintaining heritage while engaging with the host culture), separation (preserving heritage while avoiding the host culture), and marginalization (detaching from both) – within the relational lens. This enables an examination of how these individual and group-level strategies intersect with societal expectations of loyalty, security, and boundary negotiation, particularly in Estonia's unique post-Soviet context (Berry, 1997; 2019; Grigoryev et al., 2023; Vetik, 2019).

3 Integration Clusters and Acculturation Strategies

3.1 Data Sources and Lauristin's Symmetric Cluster Design

For the purpose of this article, I draw on two sources of survey data. First, the Estonian Integration Monitoring 2023 (hereinafter: EIM 2023), a comprehensive, theoretically grounded study conducted by Kantar Emor for the Ministry of Culture of Estonia. With a representative sample of just over 1,500 respondents (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 6), EIM covers a variety of topics ranging from integration typologies, language proficiency, citizenship shifts, trust in institutions, economic well-being, security, and loyalty. Second, the Public Opinion Monitoring Survey's 25th wave, commissioned by the State Chancellery, is a representative quarterly poll of 1,418 respondents (Riigikantselei, 2025a, 4) that reveals broad societal attitudes on economic coping, feelings of security, support for Ukraine, institutional trust, and media habits.

Where relevant, the article also draws on the results of the September wave of the same survey for supplementary longitudinal comparisons (Riigikantselei, 2025b). Both surveys are longitudinal and have relatively comparable sample demographics (by gender, age, income, regional variation, etc.) and include representatives of all primary ethnic groups living in Estonia, including Estonians, Russian speakers, and other nationalities. The primary difference, however, lies in their scope and focus. EIM 2023 belongs to a series of analyses of ethnic integration processes and features normative and empirical innovations such as comparing integration

clusters across groups and addressing post-Soviet challenges like segregation and polarization. In contrast, the Public Opinion Monitoring Survey (henceforth: Monitoring Survey) has little to no theoretical foundation and offers cross-sectional snapshots of general public sentiments across diverse topics, which enables useful comparisons but lacks EIM's specialized emphasis on integration morphologies.

My reasoning for this choice is multi-layered and is largely dictated by the scope of this article. Both EIM and the Monitoring Survey contain overlapping sections that address trust in government institutions, feelings of security in Estonia, and attitudes toward supporting Ukraine. By comparing the responses and the reasoning behind the questions, it becomes easier to understand not only the dynamics between integration and security but also the relationship between more fundamental theoretical research, such as EIM, and more narrowly focused empirical surveys such as the Monitoring Survey.

It must also be noted that EIM is a massive multi-section study conducted by multiple researchers, so the discussion of each segment may warrant a separate article. That is why, guided by the aforementioned theoretical and methodological choices, I pay closer attention to the relevant sections of chapters 2 (Lõimumisprotsessi edukus ja Eesti identiteet) and 3 (Lõimumise klasteranalüüs) of EIM, written by Marju Lauristin (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 16–47). Her theoretical approach, as formulated in these sections of EIM, and specifically the ties between the integration clusters and the national defense index, is of particular interest to this study.

The cluster analysis in EIM 2023 represented an evolved methodological tool first introduced in 2011 by Lauristin and Vihalemm (Kultuuriministeerium, 2011) to characterize integration processes through typologies. These typologies combined key metrics such as language proficiency, citizenship, and societal participation into five distinct clusters that captured diverse integration patterns beyond isolated indicators. Although the 2023 version was built on refinements introduced in 2015 (Kultuuriministeerium, 2015), it abandoned the previously introduced rigid criteria in order to implement a new logic for forming the clusters. Lauristin emphasized that before EIM 2023, Estonians and Russian-speaking respondents had been treated asymmetrically. In her words, Estonians used to be framed as the dominant party initiating integration policy, while the Russian-speaking population of Estonia was left with the role of the target of this policy rather than one of the actors (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 29). Through EIM 2023, Lauristin pursued the goal of correcting these former asymmetries by treating Estonians and non-Estonians as equal partners rather than automatically assigning the former a position of power.

She also justified that choice by noting that, over the course of the past thirty years, one of the consequences of the integration of Russophones has been the growth in the number of Estonian citizens who speak Russian as their mother tongue. This development has led to the internal differentiation of the Russian-speaking minority through economic stratification and in terms of professional and political activity. Therefore, the new symmetrical approach would better reflect the new equilibrium (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 29).

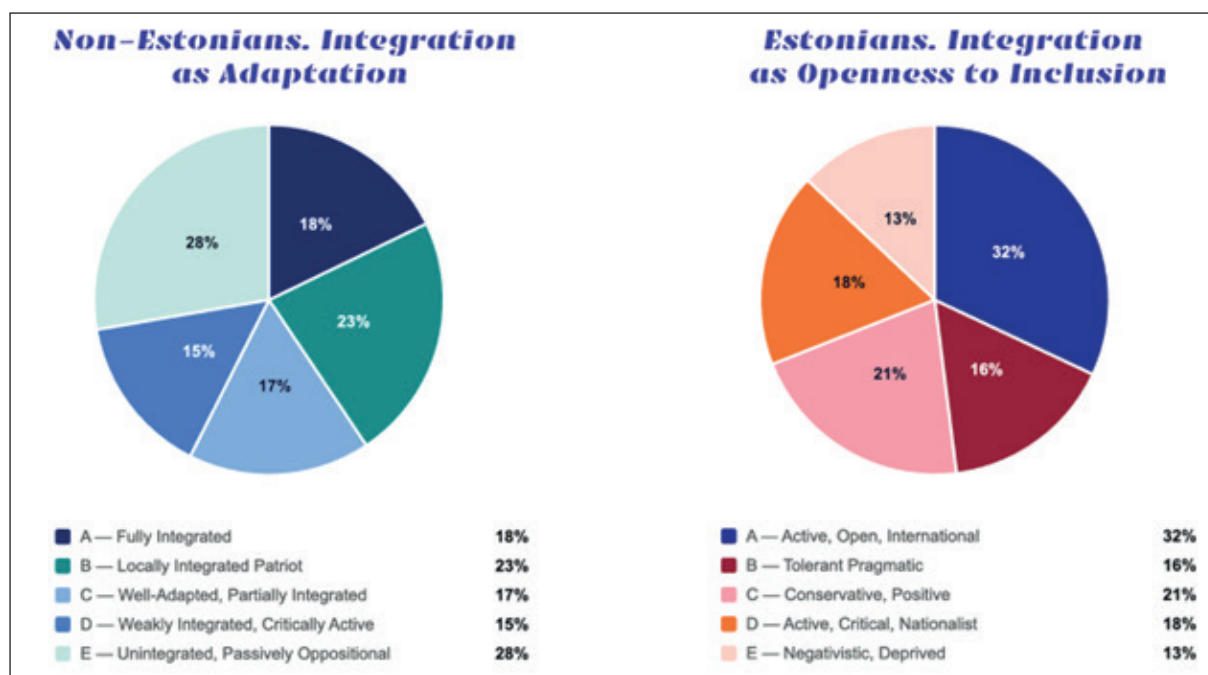
Even though I deeply share the sentiment and direction of striving for relational equality in integration research, I reckon that Lauristin's methodology achieved slightly different goals than initially intended. First and foremost, treating Estonians and non-Estonians symmetrically blurs the goal of relational equality. I definitely agree with framing everyone engaged in integration as equal partners, whether in research or policy, but bypassing the dominant position of the majority and the structural barriers faced by the minority hinders the analysis rather than helps it. By accounting for the asymmetrical power relations between the majority and the minority in any country, we give meaning to existing problems and provide crucial context for why respondents choose particular answers.

For the Estonian case, in his previous works, Vetik (2019) presented a valuable example of Russian-speaking and Estonian respondents giving an affirmative answer to the question of whether everyone should have equal opportunities in the nationwide labor market. He noted that for an Estonian, answering “yes” means giving something up from their group’s dominant position, while for a Russophone, it means laying claim to something not yet achieved, striving for truly equal rights. Consequently, the same answers led to quite distinct integration strategies (Vetik, 2019, 411–412). For Lauristin’s analysis, this meant that the chosen symmetrical approach would still reveal the same asymmetries but without reflecting on why they came about.

3.2 Cluster Profiles for Non-Estonians and Estonians

Upon comparing the logic behind the cluster formation and the results it yielded, I concluded that the clusters remained rather asymmetrical despite efforts to the contrary. Lauristin grouped respondents into five distinct typologies using a mix of shared and group-specific measurements. The common indicators applied to both Estonians and non-Estonians (primarily Russian speakers) included economic and social capital (e.g., life satisfaction, income adequacy, societal influence), Estonian identity and state relations (e.g., institutional trust, voting activity), integration-related changes and attitudes (e.g., discrimination perception, cultural participation, tolerance toward diversity), and stances on reforms (e.g., openness to change, protest involvement, defense attitudes) (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 30).

Figure 1. Integration clusters for Non-Estonians and Estonians³



Source: Kultuuriministeerium (2023, 30–39)

³ The percentages for non-Estonians round to 101% as in the original report.

The description of the clusters “Integration as adaptation” and “Integration as Openness to Inclusion” are the interpretations introduced in this study, not the original analysis.

For non-Estonians, the additional unique factor measuring integration was Estonian language proficiency, while Estonian citizenship was treated more as a demographic criterion that added no integration scores by itself – a rather thoughtful choice that goes against the mainstream paradigm automatically assuming Estonian citizens are more integrated. For ethnic Estonians, the “inclusion clusters” (kaasamisklastrid) focused even more on readiness to facilitate non-Estonians’ inclusion and recognition as co-participants in societal decision-making (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 38–39). Thus, as promised, Lauristin’s approach sought to highlight relational dynamics by treating both groups as active agents rather than positioning Estonians solely as initiators and non-Estonians as passive targets.

While, in contrast to mainstream top-down models, Lauristin’s cluster analysis genuinely represents integration as a two-sided process (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 29), I argue that it could not have achieved full symmetry in its approach to both groups, and, moreover, that it did not need to. The key asymmetry in the cluster division is that, for non-Estonians, integration was framed as adaptation, relying on indicators such as skills and achievements, while for Estonians, integration was formulated as openness to inclusion (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 30). The non-Estonian clusters, though not openly stated by Lauristin in such terms, may be separated into three “well-adapted” and two “disengaged” ones (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 31).

The three well-adapted clusters account for 58% overall: the fully integrated cluster A (18%) was marked by high language use, strong Estonian identity, institutional trust, political/cultural activity, and a young, highly educated demographic that predominantly consumes Estonian media (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 31). The second cluster of well-adapted individuals, locally integrated patriots (cluster B, 23%), featured strong state loyalty and local ties but lower political participation and consisted of older respondents with mixed citizenship and a larger number from the Ida-Virumaa region (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 31). Finally, the partially integrated cluster C (17%) was characterized by pragmatic multilingualism, positive life satisfaction, and moderate political caution (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 31).

The remaining 42% of the survey respondents fell into the “disengaged” groups: the weakly integrated, critically active cluster D (15%) primarily consisted of individuals with Estonian citizenship (60%) who nevertheless displayed low trust in state institutions and higher-than-average discrimination sensitivity (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 32). Lauristin also emphasized that, despite being small in number, this group had an elevated presence on social media (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 32). The largest unintegrated, passively oppositional cluster E (28%) was defined by Soviet-era mindsets, minimal participation, low identity, and heavy reliance on Russian media among older, lower-educated pensioners (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 32).

Estonians received different treatment, as their clusters were grouped based on openness to inclusion, that is, attitudes such as the readiness to facilitate minority participation in the life of society and to guarantee equal access to goods and services (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 38). This approach yielded a more favorable division, with 69% of respondents comprising three groups that expressed a certain degree of support for integration (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 38). The dominant active, open, international cluster A (32%) was formed by younger, educated city dwellers who actively engage with diversity, multilingual contacts, and cultural richness while maintaining a strong Estonian identity (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 39). This was followed by the tolerant pragmatic cluster B (16%), which showed moderate indicators on most issues; however, because this cluster included multiple Russian speakers, it demonstrated a notable uncertainty regarding Estonian identity (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 39). Overall, this cluster expressed a positive pragmatic attitude toward the inclusion of other nationalities, hence its name. The last pro-integration cluster was the conservative positive cluster C (21%), with the

majority being older rural respondents who trust the Estonian state, value language and traditions, and support inclusion primarily in non-political spheres (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 39).

The remaining 31% of Estonian respondents, or two groups, demonstrated that they were somewhat or decisively against integration (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 38). The active, critical nationalist cluster D (18%) consisted mostly of urbanites who, in contrast to their counterparts in cluster A, demonstrated nationalist beliefs, primarily emphasizing language skills and loyalty (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 39). This group, which had a predominantly middle-aged public-sector employee demographic, was critical of state national policies, including education and integration reforms, with the sole exception of defense policy and military support for Ukraine (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 39). Interestingly, the critical nationalists indicated the same low level of trust in Estonian state institutions as cluster D in the non-Estonian section (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 41). The smallest negativistic deprived cluster E (13%), composed of residents of small towns and rural areas, reflected strong economic pessimism, as 20% of them reported difficulties coping. They also emerged as the most dissatisfied group of respondents, expressing the opinion that Estonians, in comparison with other nationalities, are treated unfairly when it comes to the distribution of public goods and opportunities (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 39). This group showed extremely high levels of distrust toward all public institutions, demonstrating that a negative attitude toward integration is part of a larger negative predisposition.

3.3 Discussion and Mapping onto Berry's Acculturation Strategies

The integration cluster approach helps to process a large volume of accumulated data, and it is important to stress that in this particular article, I analyzed only a small portion of the available empirical material from EIM 2023. Nevertheless, this specific portion is of utmost importance. From the normative point of view, although Lauristin's cluster analysis offers a two-way perspective on integration and thus avoids the one-sided burden on minorities, the unreflected asymmetrical power relations present several problems. Non-Estonians are judged on personal adaptation metrics, while Estonians are evaluated on attitudinal openness, which highlights relational hierarchies because intention unsupported by action will always yield more favorable results.

Another important conclusion, which reflects problems with both Estonian integration policy and the way we analyze it, is that the current framework leaves little room for new migrants. The integration clusters reflect a *status quo* of more than thirty years, in which Russophones are still perceived as a migrant population even after multiple generations since Estonia regained its independence. In their current form, the clusters render long-term residents as migrants and render new migrants almost invisible, since the profile descriptions make it difficult to place recent arrivals into the same categories as long-term residents.

Concerning other metrics, despite the nuanced insights into intra-group variations, such as critical citizens among non-Estonians or skeptical nationalists among Estonians, the method risks bias and stereotyping. When reading descriptions such as “unintegrated,” “negativistic,” or “critical nationalist,” one may easily divide the clusters into “good” and “bad” ones. For minorities, this occurs by conflating financial struggles with integration failure and ignoring structural barriers and regional disparities. For the majority, it potentially stigmatizes the “deprived” clusters of Estonians by associating them exclusively with being poor and conservative. The cluster analysis translates their struggles into an assumed barrier to integration, while in reality, this is not always necessarily the case.

For example, arguably the biggest integration-related scandal of recent years ended with the President blocking an unlawful bill from the Riigikogu aimed at closing the Orthodox

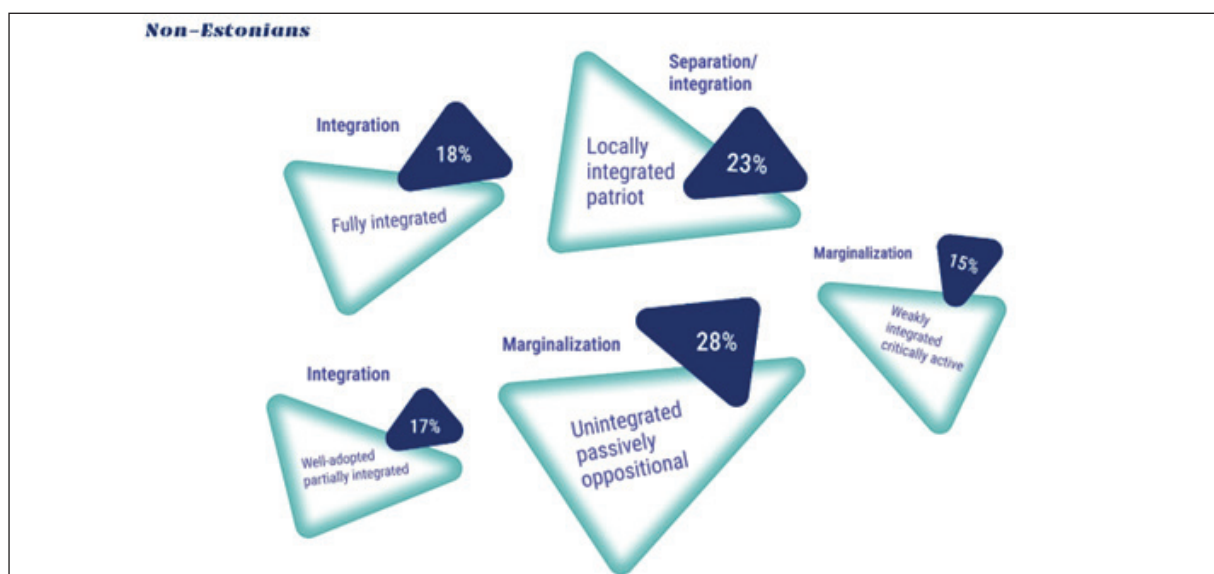
Church, a move connected to the liberal political parties that formed the government coalition (Wright & Kook, 2025). This particular example also illustrates a further implication: the use of distrust toward the government as a measure of failed integration should be treated with certain reservations, because government decisions may not necessarily affect all demographics equally, and a policy that causes resentment in one group may not provoke it in the other.

The final aspect that could be improved by adding the relational component to the cluster analysis is dynamics. Lauristin described the variability in identities in much finer detail than the scope and scale of this article would have allowed. She also framed the discussion of relational hierarchy in terms that allowed us to go further and easily build on these ideas. However, the integration clusters by themselves are static and offer only a snapshot of the integration process in 2023. Moreover, they present a somewhat more idealistic picture than the situation really is.

To illustrate this, let us map the EIM 2023 clusters onto Berry's acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997; 2017). Berry's integration hypothesis remains one of the most widely validated frameworks for distinguishing how individuals and groups balance heritage-culture maintenance with host-society engagement. Let us therefore try to map out what kind of acculturation strategies each cluster is undertaking, based on its description. Also, as we have data on the attitudes of the majority as well, it is possible to infer which type of acculturation strategy they support.

For non-Estonians, Cluster A (Fully Integrated, 18%) aligns with integration: high Estonian language use, identity, trust, and participation coexist with multilingualism and retained features of minority identity. At the same time, Cluster B (Locally Integrated Patriots, 23%), even in its name, reflects separation much more than integration: strong local loyalty and identity are maintained within geographically and linguistically segregated spaces (especially Ida-Virumaa), with minimal broader societal engagement. Cluster C (Well-Adapted Partially Integrated, 17%) also approximates integration through pragmatic multilingualism and life satisfaction, but falls short in trust and political participation. Clusters D and E fall into marginalization: D (Weakly Integrated Critically Active, 15%) via attempted self-driven assimilation that has not brought the desired reception from the wider society (high citizenship and language proficiency yet low trust and elevated discrimination sensitivity), and E (Unintegrated Passively Oppositional, 28%) via complete detachment from both host institutions and active heritage networks.

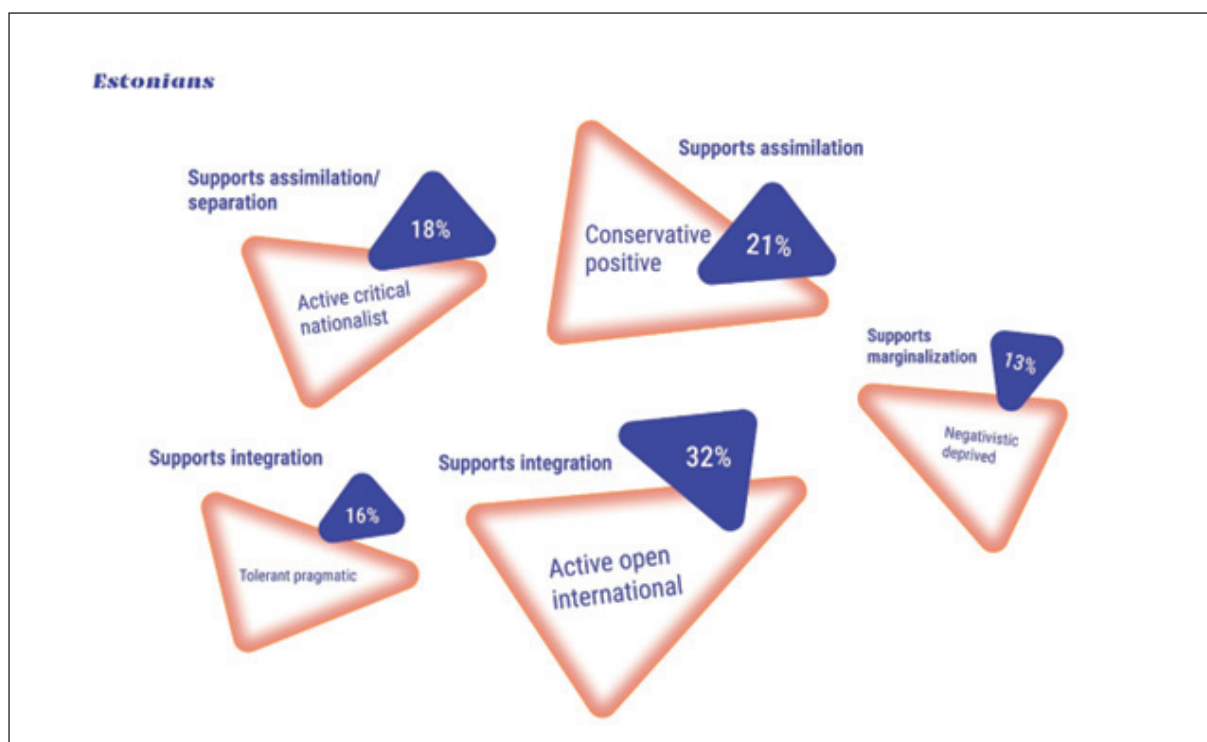
Figure 2. Lauristin's Integration clusters alongside Berry's acculturation strategies for Non-Estonians



Source: adapted from Kultuuriministerium (2023); Berry (1997; 2019)

For Estonians, the mapping shifts to their openness to inclusion: Clusters A (Active Open International, 32%) and B (Tolerant Pragmatic, 16%) support minority integration. Cluster C (Conservative Positive, 21%), however, rather tilts toward assimilation rather than integration by prioritizing language and traditions over other parameters. Cluster D (Active Critical Nationalist, 18%) combines assimilationist demands with separationism, expressed in the distrust toward government policies and its declared course on bringing the majority and minorities together. The final cluster E (Negativistic Deprived, 13%), itself marginalized, declares support for the marginalization of other groups. On the whole, this mapping of acculturation strategies for both groups demonstrates that what is presented as integration often collapses into assimilation (for the ethnic nationalism-inspired Estonians) or separation (among non-Estonians who remain locally anchored and among Estonians who resist cultural mixing) when rendered from static into dynamic. In other words, integration clusters in their current form need considerable revision should they move further in the relational direction.

Figure 3. Lauristin’s Integration clusters alongside Berry’s acculturation strategies for Estonians



Source: adapted from Kultuuriministeerium (2023); Berry (1997; 2019)

4. Loyalty, Trust, and Security Attitudes

4.1 Loyalty vs Demand for Equal Rights

Loyalty is a difficult concept to capture, but it boils down to supporting something regardless of whether the terms for that support are favorable or not. For a country, the question of loyalty becomes especially pressing when it feels threatened and concerned about its security, which is definitely true for Estonia. Since the day Russia attacked Ukraine, Estonian authorities, driven

by security concerns, have taken multiple actions to increase unity and security. Within the field of integration, Vetik (2019) described that most relations and subject positions are formed between the two imperatives.

From the majority's side, this takes the form of a demand for loyalty expressed as national unity based on ethnic roots and the need to protect the Estonian language and culture. The minority, however, has contraposed to this the demand for equal rights and integration on equal footing, instead of forced assimilation. That demand, as Vetik (2019, 410–413) noted, used to give the minority the “moral high ground”. Therefore, I argue that there are two major tendencies in the field of integration. First, the war in Ukraine did not create a new, unique situation within the Estonian integration field, but rather amplified all the cleavages and added a security context. Second, even though the loyalty-versus-equal-rights imperatives have remained, support for military aid to Ukraine has become a way for the majority to change the balance and secure the new moral high ground.

Lauristin, in EIM 2023, introduced a new measure, the national defense index, which she created to reflect the increased security threats and societal divisions caused in Estonian society by the war in Ukraine. The index included the following indicators: defense readiness, trust in the Estonian state and law enforcement structures, support for military aid to Ukraine, and support for NATO. The resulting combined index divided the respondents into five almost equal categories (18–22%), ranging from 1 to 5 points on readiness to defend Estonia (Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, 26). However, for the purposes of this article and for the sake of comparison between EIM 2023 and the Monitoring Survey (Riigikantselei, 2025a), I will use the actual indicators rather than the aggregated index number. Let us compare these indicators and draw insights into how the national defense index is formed and what its components allow us to see.

4.2 Trust in State Institutions

Table 1. Side by side comparison of the trust towards Estonian institutions in the Estonian Integration Monitoring (2023) and the Monitoring Survey (AAS, Dec. 2025)

Institution	Group	EIM 2023 (%)	AAS, Dec. 2025 (%)	Change (%)
Riigikogu (Legislature)	Estonians	42	41	-1
	Non-Estonians	36	25	-11
Government	Estonians	52	43	-9
	Non-Estonians	37	24	-13
President	Estonians	80	76	-4
	Non-Estonians	50	58	8
Police	Estonians	88	86	-2
	Non-Estonians	84	76	-8
Defense Forces	Estonians	89	87	-2
	Non-Estonians	64	54	-10

Source: Kultuuriministeerium (2023); Riigikantselei (2025a)

Trust in Estonian state institutions is sharply divided along ethnic lines, and these divisions have either considerably deteriorated since EIM 2023 or reflect differences in sampling methods. Trust in both the Riigikogu and the Government stands at low levels, with only 33% of Estonians and 22% of non-Estonians expressing confidence in 2025. This marks a steep decline for the Government compared with EIM 2023 (from 52% to 33% among Estonians and from 37% to 22% among non-Estonians), while the drop is more moderate for the Riigikogu (from 42% to 33% and from 36% to 22%, respectively). Estonians continue to show relatively high confidence in the President (76%, down slightly from 80% in EIM 2023) and especially in the Police (84%, down from 88% in EIM 2023). Non-Estonians trust these institutions more than the Government and the Riigikogu, with the figures standing at 44% for the President (down from 50%) and 76% for the Police (down from 84%). The Estonian Defense Forces remain highly trusted by Estonians, showing a confident 85% result in the latest September survey (a modest decline from 89% in EIM 2023). Non-Estonians (primarily Russophones) show markedly lower confidence, with only 49% expressing trust in the army (down substantially from 64% in EIM 2023), revealing a persistent and widening 36-percentage-point ethnic gap (Riigikantselei, 2025a, 7–8; Lauristin, 2023, raw crosstables).

When it comes to drawing conclusions, trust is highly important in evaluating integration. However, a researcher must be careful not to overemphasize its components. As integration ultimately happens between people, interpersonal or inter-community trust – which forms the foundation of social capital – should take priority over trust in the state. Another issue is that trust in politicians, particularly in the government and legislature (currently low across all ethnic groups), is often temporary and heavily dependent on the prevailing political situation. In this particular case, the decline likely signals dissatisfaction with recent reforms as much as deepening polarization between the coalition and the opposition. Nonetheless, the ethnic gap remains pronounced, showing that the pre-existing loyalty versus equal-rights imperatives are still at work. The high trust in the police shows that non-Estonians are confident that law enforcement is ready to defend their rights. In contrast, the more than 30-percentage-point difference in trust in the Defense Forces – with Estonians rallying around the army while Russophones show markedly lower confidence – may signify not a lack of loyalty (which may be implicitly inferred from the combined national defense index in EIM 2023), but rather a lack of belief that the army would be motivated or capable of defending the border regions should a war with Russia ever take place. Therefore, I argue that integration research and policy could treat non-Estonians’ lower trust in the Defense Forces not as a loyalty deficit but as a signal for targeted confidence-building measures.

4.3 Sense of Belonging and Societal Inclusion

Table 2. Percentage of positive reactions to the “I feel I belong to Estonian society” in the Estonian Integration Monitoring (2023) and the Monitoring Survey (AAS, Dec. 2025)

Metric	Group	EIM 2023 (%)	AAS, Dec. 2025 (%)	Change (%)
Belonging	Estonians	89	85	-4
	Non-Estonians	76	59	-17

Source: Kultuuriministeerium (2023); Riigikantselei (2025a)

Even relying solely on the results of the Monitoring Survey collected between 2022 and 2025, the sense of belonging to Estonian society has declined noticeably for everyone over the three-year period. Among all respondents, the proportion who fully or rather agree with the statement “I feel I belong to Estonian society” dropped from 86% in March 2022 to 76% in December 2025. The three-year (2022–2025) decline is especially pronounced among non-Estonians, falling from 73% to 59%, while Estonians experienced a milder decrease from around 93% to 85% (Riigikantselei, 2025b, 48; Riigikantselei, 2025a, 30).

The comparison of the Monitoring Survey of December 2025 with the Integration Monitoring 2023 only reinforced these results, showing a 4% drop in the feeling of belonging for Estonians (from 89% in EIM 2023 to 85% in AAS, Dec. 2025) and a considerable 17% fall for non-Estonians (from 76% in EIM 2023 to 59% in AAS, Dec. 2025). This follows an even deeper drop observed in September 2025 (to 81% for Estonians and 45% for non-Estonians), showing that the sense of belonging may occasionally fall even lower than the latest Monitoring Survey reports (Riigikantselei, 2025b, 48; Riigikantselei, 2025a, 29; Kultuuriministeerium, 2023, raw crosstabes). That allows us to conclude that the erosion of belonging is not merely a short-term fluctuation but a definite trend captured by the Monitoring Survey series and EIM alike, which has been accelerating since 2022 and affecting the minority the most.

Such problems with belonging are usually the result of exclusionary policies, securitization, structural barriers, or polarized rhetoric dominating public discourse. In turn, it is safe to infer that belonging affects all other relevant results, from public trust to narrower integration parameters. This decline in belonging among both Estonians and non-Estonians demonstrates that securitizing integration has been counterproductive. Rather than building greater unity under the post-2022 security pressures, pressing harder for loyalty in policy and research has actively eroded the sense of inclusion across ethnic lines, hitting the minority hardest but also pulling the majority down.

4.4 Support for NATO and military aid to Ukraine

Table 3. Trust in NATO and Support for NATO membership in the Estonian Integration Monitoring (2023) and the Monitoring Survey (AAS, Dec. 2025)

Metric	Group	EIM 2023 (%) Trust	AAS, Dec. 2025 (%) Trust	Change (%)	AAS, Dec. 2025 (%) Support for membership in NATO
Support for NATO	Estonians	81	74	-13	91
	Non-Estonians	41	30	-11	48

Source: Kultuuriministeerium (2023); Riigikantselei (2025a)

In contrast to the Monitoring Survey, measuring both trust in NATO and support for membership in the organization, EIM measures only trust, making it the sole basis for comparison. For both groups, Estonians and non-Estonians alike, trust in NATO has declined: it dropped 13 percentage points among Estonians (from 81% in EIM 2023 to 74% in AAS, Dec. 2025) and 11

percentage points among non-Estonians (falling to a record-low 30% in AAS, Dec. 2025 from 41% in EIM 2023). At the same time, longitudinal analysis of the Monitoring Survey alone shows that support for NATO membership has remained consistently high among Estonians throughout 2022–2025, fluctuating between 86% and 94 % (with the December 2025 figure at 91 %). In stark contrast, support among non-Estonians started at only 26 % in January 2022, rose to a peak of 53 %% in September 2023, and has since stabilized around 48–50% in 2025 (Riigikantselei, 2025a, 35).

Such a difference between trust in NATO and support for its membership may be situational and influenced by external factors, specifically tensions between the US and its allies over Greenland. On the one hand, the profound 43-percentage-point gap in support for NATO membership between Estonians and non-Estonians is an alarming sign of fundamental perception differences between the communities. On the other hand, earlier iterations of the Monitoring Survey reveal that since 2022, support for NATO membership among non-Estonians has almost doubled, rising from 26% to 48–50% in 2025 (Riigikantselei, 2025b, 35; Riigikantselei, 2025a, 13; Lauristin, 2023, raw crosstables). It also shows that security can serve as a point of convergence of interests, but under the conditions of an intensive loyalty-demanding model, its potential remains limited.

Table 4. Support for continued military aid to Ukraine in the Estonian Integration Monitoring (2023) and the Monitoring Survey (AAS, Sep. 2025)

Metric	Group	EIM 2023 (%)	AAS Sept, 2025 (%)	Change (%)
Support for continued military aid to Ukraine	Estonians	83	78	-5
	Non-Estonians	45	24	-21

Source: Kultuuriministeerium (2023); Riigikantselei (2025b)

Support for continued military aid to Ukraine reveals one of the deepest and most persistent divides in Estonian society. It is also important to note that, because the December version of the Monitoring Survey does not present an ethnic breakdown for these figures, the table above relies on the September 2025 survey.

Among Estonians, backing has remained consistently high and stable, never dropping below 68% across all survey waves since 2022 and reaching 78% in September 2025. Still, this represents a 5-percentage-point drop compared with 83% in EIM 2023. In sharp contrast, non-Estonians show markedly lower support that has hovered around 17–24% from mid-2023 through September 2025. Accordingly, opposition to military aid is high among non-Estonians (often 40–50%), while for Estonians it rarely rises above 15–20%. It is important to note that this enduring gap reported by the Monitoring Survey demonstrates a serious cleavage in security attitudes between the two communities.

Nonetheless, the EIM 2023 data painted a more optimistic picture, with 83% of Estonians and 45% of non-Estonians supporting continued military aid to Ukraine; figures for non-Estonians that were twice as high as those recorded in the Monitoring Survey of September 2025 (Riigikantselei, 2025b, 34–35; Lauristin, 2023, raw crosstables). This sharp ethnic divide on military aid to Ukraine has allowed the majority to establish a new test for loyalty in the current security environment. By framing strong support for Ukraine as a moral and security

imperative, Estonians have effectively claimed the moral high ground that the minority once held through demands for equal rights. As a result, the loyalty imperative has gained significant strength, shifting the balance in the integration field in favor of the majority's position, altering the previously achieved balance in interethnic relations, and sidelining the minority's quest for equal rights.

5 Conclusion: Unreflected Shift Toward the Loyalty Paradigm and Its Limits

Due to the horrors of the war in Ukraine, Russia's proximity, and the existential threat it poses, the demand for loyalty, already embedded in Estonia's integration field, has gained fresh moral justification and political urgency. The current mainstream framing in both research and public policy rests on the necessity of supporting Ukraine in its just struggle against subjugation and tyranny. While this imperative itself is not in question, closer scrutiny of the loyalty discourse reveals important analytical shortcomings.

First, the loyalty paradigm places the primary burden of proof on the Russophone minority, creating a vicious circle in which members of that community must constantly signal their allegiance in the public sphere. Those who are already the most marginalized are thereby further ostracized rather than persuaded or assisted to integrate. Integration researchers often treat this paradigm as self-evident and fail to reflect on its implications. Someone unfamiliar with the Estonian context might therefore be surprised to read Lauristin's conclusion on the national defense index in EIM 2023 that the responses of non-Estonians show no clear link between citizenship and loyalty, and that readiness to defend Estonia does not depend on whether a person holds Estonian, Russian, or undetermined citizenship (Kultuuriministerium, 2023, 26). The unspoken question is: before whom, exactly, is Professor Lauristin defending the loyalty of Russian passport holders?

Second, this unreflected shift toward the loyalty paradigm has encouraged researchers and policymakers to define integration, categories, and even people in largely negative terms. It is easier to identify what loyalty is not (lack of support for military aid to Ukraine, lower trust in the Defense Forces, or a declining sense of belonging) than to articulate what positive loyalty to the Estonian state actually entails. The same tendency appears in the integration cluster analysis, where clusters are implicitly divided into "good" and "bad" on the basis of political attitudes. Conservative nationalists facing economic hardship, for example, are framed as obstacles to integration, even though the empirical reality is more complex. As the mapping onto Berry's acculturation strategies demonstrated, many of the behaviors observed in both majority and minority clusters collapse into assimilation (on the Estonian side) or separation and marginalization (on the non-Estonian side) rather than genuine integration.

Third, the loyalty approach is accompanied by a striking absence of any practical account of how loyalty is supposed to be cultivated. Integration research simultaneously renders Russophones both hyper-visible (as the primary object of loyalty tests) and invisible (by lumping long-term, multi-generational residents together with recent migrants under the single label "non-Estonians"). The empirical material examined here – the sharp drop in the sense of belonging among non-Estonians, the persistent ethnic gaps in trust in the Defense Forces, and the deep divide in support for military aid to Ukraine – shows that loyalty expectations are being directed precisely at those Russian-speaking residents who have lived in Estonia for generations.

Yet these residents occupy exactly the same position in the imaginary relational hierarchy as recent migrants. This raises several questions: should all newcomers be subjected to identical loyalty demands? At what point does loyalty become a realistic expectation, for instance, for a Brazilian arriving to Estonia? Are EU migrants granted long-term residence also expected to bear arms and defend Estonia? And should integration programs designed to facilitate the return of Estonian emigrants from abroad be re-evaluated through the lens of loyalty?

The relational promise made at the beginning of this article, i.e., that integration needs to be studied as a contested negotiation of social boundaries rather than as a one-way adaptation of minorities, finds clear empirical grounding here. Equalizing assimilation and integration blinds us to how these processes actually unfold in practice. The same goes for ignoring the asymmetrical power relations between majority and minority.

Moreover, the mixing of integration, assimilation, marginalization, and separation can occur even when a researcher conducts normatively proper work that genuinely treats integration as a two-sided process, as Lauristin did in EIM 2023. A scholar need not be thinking for the state when producing research commissioned by the government, yet the aims and logic of the nation-state still shape, and are shaped by, its key assumptions. In Estonia, and I suspect in many other contexts, this has produced a clear shift toward the loyalty paradigm. The relational comparative analysis developed in this article, however, allows us to recognize that the shift has taken place instead of following it blindly. One does not necessarily have to support the resulting change in the moral high ground of the Estonian integration field, but examining it through a relational lens certainly helps us see it.

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