



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Estonia social briefing:**

**‘My Fatherland is My Love’: dancing, singing, and being together.**

**Regardless**

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## **‘My Fatherland is My Love’: dancing, singing, and being together.**

### **Regardless**

From a pure societal perspective, it was a long-awaited July (even though it could have been any other month to remind the Republic of Estonia’s population that they are and can be a cohesive nation). Nevertheless, July it was, because the first two weeks of the month were literally all about XXVII Song and XX Dance Festival ‘My Fatherland is My Love’. These two events are of monumental historic as well as nation-building significance for the country – especially, when it comes to the Song Festival (in Estonian – the *Laulupidu*). The tradition has been kept for 150 years (!), since June 1869, when the inaugural song celebration was organised by Johann Voldemar Jannsen, acting together with the *Vanemuine* society – one and a half century ago, 51 male choirs and brass bands with 845 singers and musicians gathered in Tartu to perform for the public<sup>1</sup>. On the practical side, from 1928, the modern Song Festival is held in Tallinn, at the designated area that is now called Song Festival Grounds or *Lauluväljak*, which can comfortably host up to 100,000 people<sup>2</sup>. Considering the country’s population of about 1.3 million, the *Lauluväljak* can become a ‘home’ for about 8% of Estonia’s inhabitants.

Intriguingly, the concept of *Laulupidu* has survived all possible political regimes existing on the territory of the modern Estonian state, and this fact is nothing short from being described as remarkable. Having been initiated in the Governorate of Livonia, which was then one of the Baltic governorates of the Russian Empire covering significant parts of modern Estonia and Latvia, the *Laulupidu* got through the most turbulent century in human history. The event was naturally embraced on the national level during the first two decades of Estonian independence, between the two World Wars and before the consecutive occupations by the Soviets, Nazis, and then again the Soviets.

The post-World War II period saw Estonia getting forcefully ‘converted’ by the Kremlin into the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of then sixteen titular republics of the USSR. For the *Laulupidu*, with necessity, it meant that the event would carry plenty of ideological

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Song Celebration’ in *Eesti Laulu- ja Tantsupeo SA*. Available from [<https://2019.laulupidu.ee/en/song-celebration/>].

<sup>2</sup> ‘Song Celebration’. See also *Tallinna Lauluväljak*. Available from [<https://lauluvaljak.ee/et>].

connotation, but still the Gustav Ernesaks' 'My Fatherland is My Love'<sup>3</sup> was performed for the first time during the 1947 *Laulupidu*<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps, the most propaganda-driven event was in 1950, less than 3 years before the death of Soviet dictator Stalin – these days, it is considered the darkest chapter in the *Laulupidu*'s history, when "Soviet propaganda songs dominated the repertoire [and] choirs of Soviet miners and army were among the participants"<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, on historic notes, the Nikita Khrushchev's 'thaw' indirectly allowed for a number of positive developments in regards of the event – in 1960, for the XV *Laulupidu*, the new Song Festival Stage<sup>6</sup> was installed, immediately becoming one of the most iconic images of Tallinn and the whole Estonia. During the same event, as reported, 'My Fatherland is My Love' was initially removed from the programme of performances, but the choirs standing on the stage started singing the song in a spontaneous manner, and it had literally pushed Gustav Ernesaks himself to claim up to the conductor's stand and lead the performance<sup>7</sup>. From then on, the song has become compulsory to finalise a *Laulupidu*, and this year it has given the title for the event, which, in combination with the XX Dance Festival, was taking place from 4 until 7 July, mostly in Tallinn.

At the same time, in a unique way of bringing the whole country under one single 'cultural umbrella' of celebrating the very special anniversary, on 1 June, the *Laulupidu* flame began its way to reach the capital city on 3 July; it started moving across the country from Tartu, 'visiting' all major regions of Estonia – from Valga, Narva, and Setumaa to the islands in the west<sup>8</sup>. In few days into the *Laulupidu*, the historic significance of the event was underscored by the Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid who became the first Estonian Head of State herself performing in the Festival:

Song brings Estonians joy. Song gives Estonians courage. Song makes Estonians free. Even when we largely only hummed along with our mouths closed, then the Song and Dance Festivals still made us feel a bit more Estonian. We were all thinking the same when we sang — there was happiness, there was joy, there was laughter, [and] there was tears. True, the festivals held under Soviet occupation were scarred with foreign

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<sup>3</sup> 'Mu isamaa on minu arm' ('My Fatherland is My Love') is a poem written by Lydia Koidula, a national Estonian poet and the daughter of Johann Voldemar Jannsen.

<sup>4</sup> 'History' in *Eesti Laulu- ja Tantsupeo SA*.

<sup>5</sup> 'History'.

<sup>6</sup> This landmark structure was designed by prominent Estonian architects H. Sepmann, A. Kotli, and E. Paalmann.

<sup>7</sup> 'History'.

<sup>8</sup> 'Galleries: Song Festival Flame arrives in Tallinn' in *ERR*. 3 July 2019. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/957999/galleries-song-festival-flame-arrives-in-tallinn>].

songs. But we also sang ‘Koit’ and ‘Isamaa’. We danced the Viru Waltz, and the sun sank below the horizon. We understood without saying a word. And we survived. May it sing with us here today, our past, and, of course, our present and our future as well!<sup>9</sup>

What are the plain digits on the 2019 event? They are impressive to say the least. **Firstly**, the *Laulupidu* flame “reached Tallinn Song Festival Grounds together with the parade of 47,000 performers”<sup>10</sup>. **Secondly**, about 60,000 tickets were sold in advance to the second and final concert of the XXVII *Laulupidu*, and 35,000 people were performing<sup>11</sup>. Knowing about such a high-level interest, the organisers decided to limit the allowed total capacity of the Song Festival Grounds to 95,000 people, for safety and security reasons, otherwise the figures would have been much higher. The organisers ensured that many people could also watch the event from the big screen installed in the Tallinn’s Old Town<sup>12</sup>. **Thirdly**, as a part of the programme for 7 July, 340 dancers from the Estonian global diaspora (*väliseesti*) performed together at the Freedom Square in Tallinn, calling their performance ‘The Uniting Country is Estonia’ – they represented 25 folk dance troupes from 14 countries, including Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the Netherlands, the USA, and the UK<sup>13</sup>.

There is no better personality, from whom one could ask for a professional commentary on the event, than Peeter Perens, the *Laulupidu*’s Artistic Director. During the short period when the event is on, his position in the country is as important as the post of the President or the Prime Minister. Right after the *Laulupidu*’s finale, Perens spoke on TV to deliver his verbal message (in administrative terms, his message had already been successfully delivered to the people of his country by then, and not must could be added): “[T]he Song Festival is the birth certificate of the people of Estonia”<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, it is.

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<sup>9</sup> Kersti Kaljulaid in ‘President Kaljulaid: Fellow Estonians, it is time to sing’. *ERR*. 6 July 2019. Available from [https://news.err.ee/959240/president-kaljulaid-fellow-estonians-it-is-time-to-sing].

<sup>10</sup> ‘Gallery, video: XXVII Song Festival concert ‘To the Teacher’ in *ERR*. 7 July 2019. Available from [https://news.err.ee/959337/gallery-video-xxvii-song-festival-concert-to-the-teacher].

<sup>11</sup> ‘Song Festival ticket sales halted, capacity capped at 95,000’ in *ERR*. 7 July 2019. Available from [https://news.err.ee/959347/song-festival-ticket-sales-halted-capacity-capped-at-95-000].

<sup>12</sup> Georgi Beltadze, ‘Song Festival Grounds sold out’ in *Postimees*. 8 July 2019. Available from [https://news.postimees.ee/6724944/song-festival-grounds-sold-out].

<sup>13</sup> ‘Gallery, video: Diaspora Estonians dance at Freedom Square’ in *ERR*. 8 July 2019. Available from [https://news.err.ee/959553/gallery-video-diaspora-estonians-dance-at-freedom-square].

<sup>14</sup> Peeter Perens in ‘Peeter Perens: Song Festival the birth certificate of the Estonian people’. *ERR*. 8 July 2019. Available from [https://news.err.ee/959614/peeter-perens-song-festival-the-birth-certificate-of-the-estonian-people].