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INTENTIONAL HOMICIDES IN BALTIC AND NORDIC STATES 1990–2021

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of the article was to analyse data on homicides in Estonia and the other Baltic states in the years 1990–2021 and to conceptualize these changes. The level and dynamics of intentional homicides committed in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania during the last three decades were assessed to highlight their similarities and differences. The situation in the field of homicides in the Baltic states was put next to the three Nordic countries: Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Evaluating the number of intentional homicides in the three Nordic countries, we see that the picture is radically different. The homicides committed in the Nordic countries during the last thirty years are characterised by a persistently low rate, without substantial changes. A hypothesis was set and controlled according to which the dynamics of intentional homicides committed in the Baltic states largely coincide with the mirror image of the j curve.

1. PURPOSE AND METHODS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to analyse data from six European countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, and Norway) on the homicides in the years 1990 to 2021 and to conceptualize the level and dynamics of this crime. The study takes the definition of intentional homicides outlined by the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) as a basis. According to the ICCS, intentional homicide is defined as “unlawful death inflicted upon a person with the intent to cause death or serious injury” (UNODC, 2015, p. 102). This classification encompasses various forms of intentional homicides, including murder, honour killings, fatal serious assaults, deaths resulting from terrorist activities, femicide, infanticide, and extrajudicial killings.

Intentional homicide as a specific crime type is characterised by a high detection rate, i.e. a low degree of latency, relatively low dependence on the will of a specific legislator, and statistical manipulations (Saar, 2010). The study of intentional homicides is important not only because of the seriousness of this type of crime but also because intentional homicide is a well-measured and comparable indicator of violence in general. Due to the lethal outcome, intentional homicide is particularly suitable for carrying out longitudinal studies and cross-national comparative studies since such specificity ensures good comparability (Eisner 2008, 2014; Johnson et al., 2010; Aebi, Linde, 2014; Lappi-Seppälä, 2014).

Research in criminology has repeatedly proven that there is a strong link between a country’s homicide rate and its level of socio-economic development (Fowles, Merva, 1996; Weatherburn, 2001). These two elements form part of a so-called *vicious circle*, with a low level of development likely to push the homicide rate up, which in turn further hampers development. Countries with pronounced income inequality are likely to have a higher homicide rate than those with narrower income gaps (Nivette, 2011; Santos, 2021). Although some recent studies have questioned the existence of a direct relationship between a country’s homicide rate and the proportion of young people (normally taken to refer to those aged between 15 and 29) in its population, the latest available data do point to a positive and statistically significant correlation (Santos, 2018).

It has also been repeatedly identified that the easy availability and spread of firearms in the population correlates with high levels of homicide (Aguirre, Muggah, 2020; De Schutter, Duquet, 2023, Smirano, 2023). The widespread presence of organised crime groups and high levels of lethal violence are strongly correlated (Kamprad, Liem, 2021). At the same time, the presence of organised crime groups does not always translate into a high rate of homicide. Indeed, the dominance of a hegemonic organised crime group can have a restrained impact on violent crime, particularly when it successfully exerts control over territory and criminal markets. Moreover, criminal organisations may also enter ‘gentlemen’s agreements’, precisely to avoid violent confrontations. Usually, this leads to the authorities inevitably ceding control of some local jurisdictions. Such informal pacts of non-interference can result in a ‘*pax mafi-osa*’, a relatively low level of violence in territories dominated by criminal groups (Finckenauer, Chin, 2006; Zabyelina, 2009).

At the same time, it is not known exactly how social changes and the level of intentional homicides are related in the long term, that is, whether society quickly transitions from a strict, even overcontrolled totalitarian way of life to a democratic society that allows people great personal freedom. It would be simplistic to assume that after these kinds of changes, things will start immediately to progress better than before. All kinds of sudden changes in the living environment, regardless of the direction of changes in society, have reason to be considered a source of stress and frustration. New circumstances present new challenges to people when previously used adaptation mechanisms no longer function (Durkheim, 1982). It is not excluded that the stress accompanied by rapid changes will be fatal and that democratic reorganisations will therefore run into the sand.

The large-scale socio-political change in Europe that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 can be regarded as a wide-ranging social experiment that allows for the closer examination of the impact of different development paths on violent crime, especially intentional homicides. One clear group is formed by the Baltic states that have regained their independence and have been able to decide their own affairs for more than three decades now. Their developmental path can be compared with the geographically and culturally relatively close

Nordic countries, which had a much more stable situation during the same period.

This study was based on a longitudinal time series approach, where the variables were the level of intentional homicides per year in the sampled countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, and Norway). The study used cause-of-death statistics from the UNODC/UN-CTS and Eurostat databases. The raw data were obtained from international databases, which are compiled based on the official crime statistics of countries. The number of victims of intentional homicide or assault per 100,000 inhabitants was used as a statistical indicator. In addition, a more qualitative approach, namely cross-country observational data, was used in the analysis to compare specific countries in terms of socio-economic development.

A hypothesis was set and controlled according to which the dynamics of intentional homicides committed in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania largely coincide with the j curve (Bremmer, 2006).

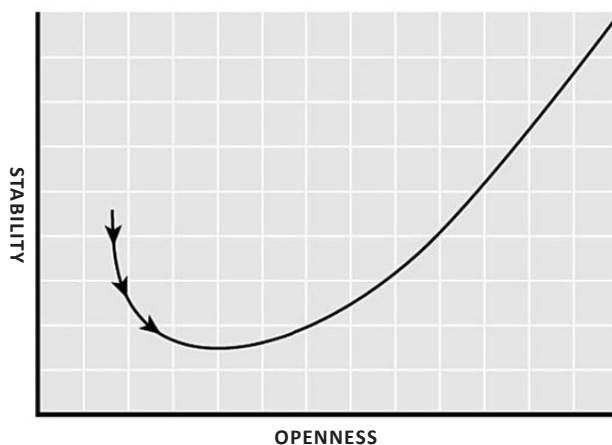


Figure 1. A j curve demonstrating the relationship between societal stability and openness (Bremmer, 2006, p. 7)

More precisely, it coincides with the mirror image of the j curve, where instability instead of stability is placed on the ordinate axis.

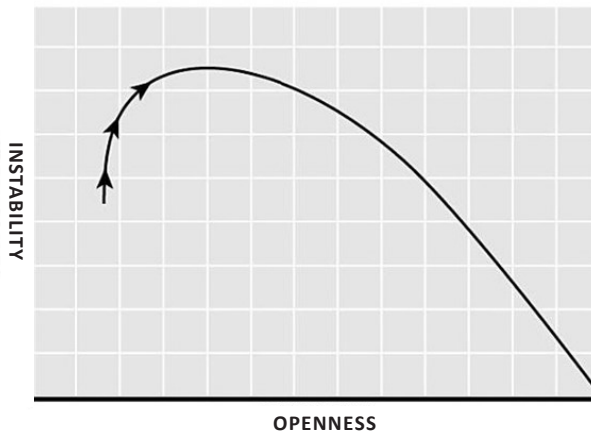


Figure 2. A mirror j curve demonstrating the relationship between societal instability and openness

Ian Bremmer used the j curve image to describe the social processes taking place in transitional societies when they develop from authoritarian to free types of society. Interest in the processes of changing societies had already grown in the social sciences (Huntington, 1968). The j curve describes the changes that take place in stability when society opens both in terms of political processes and the movement of people, goods, and information across national borders. First, with the opening of society, a sudden decrease in stability occurs in all previously closed societies—a shock that puts people and state institutions in front of serious trials. Every state that changes from authoritarian to democratic rule, from a closed, overcontrolled society to an open, free one, must inevitably go through a stage of instability, social disorganisation, and anomie (Durkheim 1982) before reaching the next stage, i.e. the new growth of stability. When the crisis caused by instability is overcome, a period of increasing stability is reached, which also marks the successful economic and social development. The changes that take place in open, democratic societies and the accompanying increase in stability are not sudden but smooth and lasting, while temporary setbacks are also possible.

According to the hypothesis, similar dynamics in terms of intentional homicides do not occur in the three Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway), which did not undergo equally fundamental changes at the

beginning of the nineties during the 20th-century transitions and have been stable welfare societies for the last thirty years. The level of homicides there should also be stable; therefore, the levels of intentional homicides in these countries should increasingly resemble the levels of the Baltic countries.

2. INTENTIONAL HOMICIDES IN ESTONIA, LATVIA, AND LITHUANIA SINCE REGAINING INDEPENDENCE

In the early 1990s, a rapid increase in violent crime was recorded in all three Baltic countries, but the increase was particularly sharp in Estonia. The international homicides committed in Estonia at the beginning of the 1990s, due to their high numbers, attracted a lot of international attention. Based on the data of intentional homicides, in the 1990s, Estonia was next to the countries known for the highest level of violence in the world. For example, the United Nations Statistical Yearbook, which looked at general trends in Europe and North America, highlighted the levels of intentional homicides in the two European countries as exceptionally high. These were Russia and Estonia, where the corresponding indicator exceeded 20 cases per 100,000 inhabitants and more than doubled from 1990–1994 (UNO, 1999). The 1999 United Nations Human Development Report provided 1994 data on intentional homicides from all over the world. Estonia's position was the seventh worst, with the country surpassing even Russia by two places, and the homicide rate was higher only in third world countries such as São Tomé and Príncipe, the Bahamas, Colombia, Lesotho, Guatemala, and Jamaica (UNDP, 1999).

The general socio-economic situation in Estonia at that time was difficult. The state's opportunities to improve people's livelihoods were very limited because, in the first half of the 1990s, Estonia's gross domestic product (GDP) decreased, while at the same time, the average life expectancy of people was at a low point. Life expectancy at birth in Estonia was 60.5 for men and 72.8 for women in 1994 (Statistics Estonia). The number of suicides, alcohol poisoning incidents, traffic deaths, and other violent deaths was also at its peak (Ahven, 2000). The high level of violence in this period, in addition to the rapid increase in intentional homicides, was also evident in the suicides committed in Estonia, the

number of which began to increase in the early 1990s and peaked in 1994 when more than 40 suicides were committed in Estonia per 100,000 inhabitants (Värnik et al., 2021).

The peak of homicide victims among men aged 20–49 in the 1990s was partly associated with crimes committed in the criminal milieu (Salla et al., 2012) as one result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the growth of social insecurity (Lappi-Seppälä, Lehti, 2014; Stamatel, 2012). The conditions at that time in Estonia were favourable for the rapid growth of various types of illegal behaviour, too, including the increasing activity of organised criminal groups. This kind of connection between the changes in the country's political and socio-economic conditions and crime has been repeatedly presented in international scientific literature (Kim, Pridemore, 2005; Messner, Rosenfeld, 1997).

In the first period after the restoration of independence, i.e. until the mid-1990s, Estonian society rapidly became more and more open, and the previous social order disappeared. Political, legal, and economic reforms, including the radical restructuring of the criminal justice system, were carried out at a rapid pace, which left a large part of the population facing serious difficulties. The cardinal loss of control led to a phase of social disorganisation when previous control mechanisms were no longer effective but new control mechanisms had not yet begun to function effectively. The creation of a new criminal justice system in Estonia required a radical overhaul and often the liquidation of the previous crime control institutions (Saar, 1999). Public order deteriorated, and crime, including organised crime and corruption, became increasingly apparent.

At this point, it is interesting to note that together with the peak of violent crime, the total number of registered crimes in Estonia decreased in the period 1992–1994 (Saar et al., 2002). Indeed, the simultaneous increase in the number of serious, violent crimes and the decrease in the number of recorded crimes points to the reduced capacity of law enforcement services to capture and prosecute relatively minor crimes. Figuratively speaking, when the house is burning with an open flame, no one has time to deal with cleaning around the house and decorating the home because all the energy goes to putting out the fire in the house.

However, after reaching the maximum level, we then see a continuous and smooth decrease in the frequency of intentional homicides, which has lasted until today. The dangerous period of instability in Estonia was overcome by the mid-1990s; thereafter, the indicators of social stability began to grow smoothly. Since then, the level of homicides and other forms of social pathology has steadily declined. The level of suicides in Estonia has also decreased significantly from its peak in 1994. In 2019, there were registered a little more than 12 cases of suicides per 100,000 inhabitants (WHO, 2019).

From the peak in 1994, a continuous decrease in intentional homicides in Estonia began. In 2022, 27 intentional homicide cases were registered in Estonia, at a rate of 2.0 per 100,000 inhabitants (Ministry of Justice, Crime Statistics Estonia, 2023). This trend therefore has continued for almost three decades now.

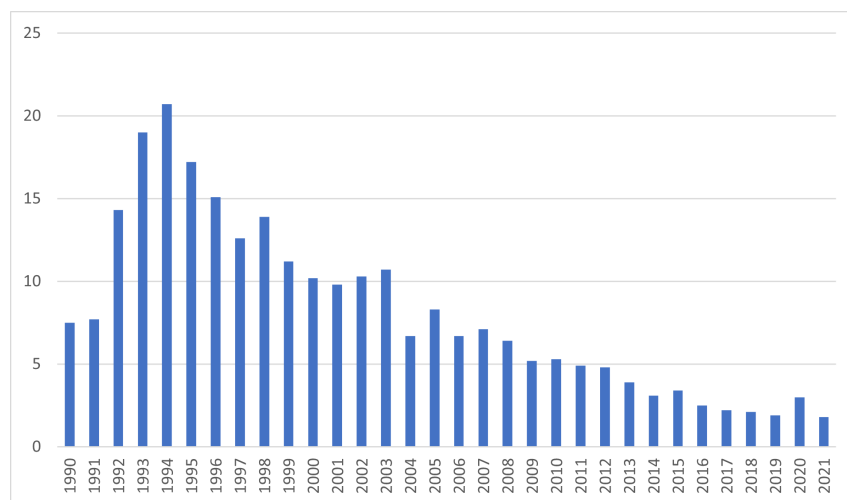


Figure 3. Homicide rate (victims of intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants) in Estonia 1990–2021. Data for 1990–2018 (UNODC, UN-CTS), data for 2019–2021 (Statistics Estonia Database)

As mentioned, the exceptionally high level and rapid growth of Estonian homicides in the 1990s was noticed at the international level. This phenomenon has been studied repeatedly and the corresponding conceptual interpretations have been proposed as explanations (Lehti, 2001; Ceccato, Haining, 2008). The fact that the number of homicides has decreased in Estonia for nearly thirty years has not received adequate attention in scientific literature. Even in the most recent international approaches, this empirical fact has remained largely unnoticed. For example, a study looked at the reduced level of homicides in Estonia in the context of the general decrease in violent deaths in Europe and highlighted only the change in homicides in Estonia: a decrease in the proportion of homicides related to the criminal milieu and an increase in the proportion of domestic homicides (related to alcohol consumption) (Suonpää et al., 2022). Since the significant decrease in intentional homicides in Estonia has remained relatively unnoticed by experts, the question of explaining this phenomenon has not been raised.

The situation regarding violent crime in two other Baltic countries – Lithuania and Latvia – has been similar to Estonia. The initial level of homicides in Lithuania in the early 1990s was approximately one-third

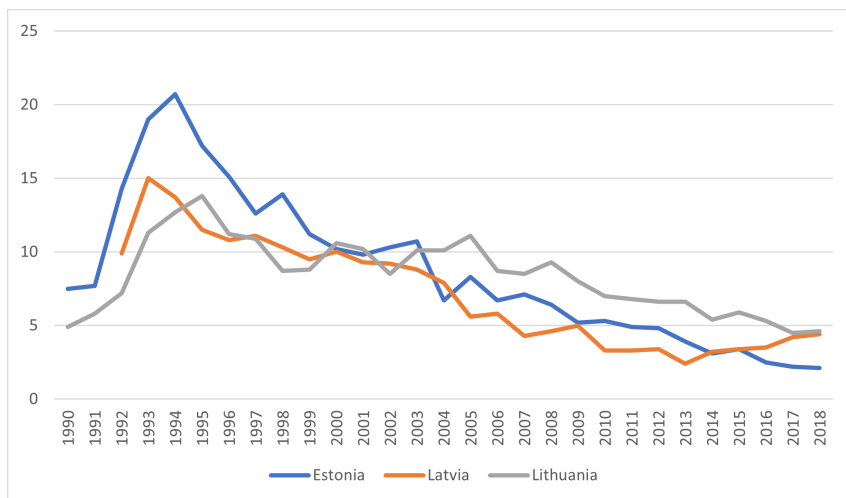


Figure 4. Homicide rate (victims of intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants) in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania 1990–2018

lower than the initial level of homicides in Estonia (4.9 vs. 7.5). Like Estonia, homicide rates in Lithuania began to grow rapidly and reached their peak (13.8) in 1995, i.e. a year later than the peak in Estonia. Here, it is worth noting that the growth of homicides in Lithuania by the mid-1990s was not as sharp as in Estonia, and the peak in Lithuania remained significantly lower than Estonia's (20.7).

From then on, the homicides in Lithuania began to decrease, as in Estonia; however, the decrease was not as obvious as in Estonia but alternated with years of stability. The level of homicides in Estonia remained higher than the indicators of Lithuania until 2002–2003, then the levels were essentially equal (in the years 2005–2006). Since then, the level of homicides committed in Estonia has been lower than in Lithuania. The dynamics of homicides in Lithuania are also described by the j curve; although it is in a somewhat lower position, the increase was not as sharp as in Estonia, and the further decrease has not been as consistent as in Estonia.

The level and dynamics of homicides in Latvia are like both Estonia and Lithuania. The maximum level of homicides in Latvia occurred in 1993 (15.0), i.e. a year earlier than in Estonia and two years earlier than in Lithuania. The maximum levels of homicides in Latvia were higher than in Lithuania but remained lower than in Estonia. The level of homicides in Latvia decreased until 2013. Since then, there has been a moderate increase in the level of homicides. The general dynamics are also in the form of a j curve for Latvia, although the decline of the curve is even flatter than for Lithuania.

3. PROCESS OF INTEGRATION OF THE BALTIC STATES INTO THE WESTERN WORLD

It can be stated that the level and dynamics of homicides in all three Baltic states are basically the same, as is the general pattern of development of these countries in the 20th century. All of them gained independence for the first time after the First World War and functioned as small independent states in the years the 1920s and 1930s and lost their

independence at the outbreak of the Second World War. Their fortunes after the collapse of the USSR also followed the same path.

All three Baltic states regained their independence essentially at the same time, joined the organisational structures of the Western world at the same time, and faced the same socio-economic and political problems. Estonia and the other Baltic countries quickly, after regaining independence, became members of a great variety of international economic, financial, and political organisations. All three Baltic countries were admitted to the UN immediately in 1991. Estonia joined the European Council in 1993, Lithuania became a member of this organisation the same year (1993), and the adoption of Latvia was postponed for two years (1995) due to concerns about the Russian-speaking minority there. Estonia and Latvia became members of the World Trade Organization in the same year (1999), and Lithuania followed in 2001.

Although the IMF and the World Bank recommended that all Baltic states remain in the rouble zone, the Estonian government made a bold decision and introduced its own currency as early as June 1992 – the Estonian kroon. Unlike Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania temporarily adopted a parallel monetary unit alongside the rouble (Rubelis in Latvia and Talonas in Lithuania) before switching to their own currency in 1993. After some time, all three national currencies were pegged to the euro.

Due to the rapidly implemented economic reforms, Estonia was the only one among the Baltic states invited to start accession talks with the European Union in 1997. Although this kind of differentiation raised some doubts about the sustainability of Baltic solidarity, Estonia's example encouraged Latvia and Lithuania, with whom accession talks began two years later. In the end, all the Baltic countries were so-called diligent students and deservedly became members of the European Union on 1 May 2004 (Kasekamp, 2010, pp. 236-240).

In parallel with the integration into the European Union, the Baltic states also started the process of joining NATO. The Baltic countries were included in NATO's new Partnership for Peace programme in 1994. In addition to implementing the necessary military reforms, the Baltic countries had to put a lot of effort into disproving the misconception

introduced by Russia that the former external borders of the USSR represented a 'red line' that NATO must not cross (Asmus, 2002, pp. 252-255). The Baltic countries became NATO members on 29 March 2004.

Today, the integration of the Baltic countries into economic and social life as the security structures of the Western world is so diverse and wide-ranging that highlighting one area would undeservedly overshadow others. At the same time, some minor differences between the three countries in terms of socio-economic indicators can still be highlighted, where, according to the general pattern, Estonia's development has been somewhat faster. For example, evaluated based on the Human Development Index in 2021, Estonia was in 31st position (score 0.890), Lithuania in 35th position (score 0.875), and Latvia in 39th position (score 0.863) (UNDP, 2022). According to the 2022 data from the International Monetary Fund, the gross domestic product per inhabitant was USD 29,344 in Estonia, USD 24,032 in Lithuania, and USD 21,482 in Latvia. According to the data of the World Bank in 2021, the GDP per capita in Estonia was USD 27,944, in Lithuania, USD 23,723, and in Latvia, USD 21,148 (World Bank, 2021).

According to the corruption perception index, Estonia ranked 13th in 2021 (score 74), Lithuania 34th (score 61), and Latvia 36th (score 59) (Transparency International, 2021). Studies by the European Council on Foreign Relations rate Estonia's influence in the EU higher than that of Latvia or Lithuania; at the same time, they lag behind Nordic countries (Busse et al., 2020). Although Estonia's indicators have improved somewhat faster than those of the other two Baltic countries, the general picture of the socio-economic development of the three Baltic states remains unchanged.

The conceptual question is whether the decrease in the level of homicides in the Baltic states is a manifestation of a general civilizing process that has led to a decrease in violence and an increase in the value of human life on a global scale. The deepening opposition to violence and the fundamental denial of violence as a means of achieving goals is one of the 'landmarks' of human development that has taken place. According to several authors, the decrease in the level of intentional homicides also characterises the process of civilization globally (e.g. Elias, 2000; Pinker, 2011). Logically, this kind of process is ongoing at different speeds in

different parts of the world. The rapid rise in the standard of living and the emergence of welfare states are associated, among other things, with the “three famous decades of the Western World – 1945-1975” (Fourastie, 1979). The centuries-long civilization process includes more and more countries alongside the core countries of the Western world.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, all countries that were previously forced to be part of the totalitarian empire went their own way. Many of them tried to move from a region where, according to Englehart (2018), “survival issues are dealt with” to one where “survival is self-evident, and self-realisation is at the fore”. Perhaps due to the relatively small size, for some historical¹ and cultural reasons, and due to the geopolitical location of the Baltic states, these processes have been faster and more noticeable here. Today, it can be stated that the processes have not been the same in all former parts of the Soviet Union, and it is not wrong to say that the Baltic states are exceptional among the former Soviet republics.

The direct opposite example to the Baltics is Russia’s path, where, at the end of the decade of transformation (1990s), Vladimir Putin became the leader of a big country with no effective economic or military power. His famous comment in 2005 calling the end of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century (NBC News, 2005) is indicative of the huge gulf in understanding between Russia and the West. He set the goal of restoring in Russia not only economic and military potential but also status and international respect as a superpower using the centralisation of power and resources as a method. However, the real democratisation of society and the growth of people’s freedoms did not take place in Russia. On the contrary, it was during this period that the systematic strengthening of Putin’s power vertically took place when the power authorities established increasingly strict control over the population.

To assess the developments in crime in Russia, let’s look at the level of intentional homicides in the country. The dynamics of intentional homicides in the Russian Federation have differed from that of the Baltic countries. Homicide rates continued to rise from the early 1990s to the late 1990s and were exceptionally high over a longer period compared to

¹ The Baltic states had an earlier experience of independent statehood in the 20th century.

the Baltic states. According to research conducted by UNO, this trend in homicidal violence in the Russian Federation has been attributed to various drivers, including changes in alcohol consumption patterns, the availability of firearms, and the socio-economic upheaval resulting from the country's transition from a communist to a capitalist society (UNODC, 2019). Furthermore, since 2002, the number of victims of intentional homicides has decreased from 30.5 to 8.2 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018 in Russia (UNODC, 2023).

As we can see today, such an approach on Moscow's part was not effective in overcoming the difficulties in the long term, and Russia's socio-economic development is taking a deep step back. In other words, this country gradually returned to an overcontrolled society, which in this case is represented by a "criminal state, kleptocratic authoritarianism" (Dawisha, 2015, pp. 313-350), where, like the *'pax mafiosa'*, a relatively low level of violence could be observed for a while. Here, it is noteworthy that since 2018, Russia has no longer forwarded data on intentional homicides to the UNO. However, the large-scale military action against Ukraine since February 2022 has brought Russia onto the list of socially unstable countries where homicide statistics in their peacetime sense have lost their usual meaning.

It must not be forgotten that intentional homicide as an indicator of social development is only applicable in a stable state of society, and in the event of war or other total social cataclysms, this indicator loses its usual meaning. The intentional taking of life in such situations does or does not belong to intentional homicides because its classification depends on many contextual circumstances that must be considered. For example, mass killings committed by groups of up to a few hundred members during armed conflicts do not fall under the definition of intentional homicides (UNODC, 2015).

In summary, it can be said that the path chosen by the Baltic states after the collapse of the Soviet Union was a fully justified decision. All-round integration with all kinds of institutions of the Western world ensured a maximally quick transition from the previous totalitarian society to a liberal-democratic market economy. In addition, the effective work of the police and other law enforcement agencies in controlling crime, especially organised crime, must be mentioned. The central question of

crime prevention and criminal justice policy has also been resolved as well as how quickly the principles, strategies, and practices of crime control used in the Western world will take root, become normal, and prove effective in the Baltic states.

4. HOMICIDES COMMITTED IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES AND THE J CURVE

Next, we look at the situation in the Nordic countries in terms of intentional homicides. The fact that the Nordic countries are so-called welfare states is evident in the levels and dynamics of violent crime too. The homicide rate there is exceptionally low, so all, even relatively small, changes in absolute numbers lead to fluctuations in the homicide rate. This is how the rapid growth of Norway in 2011, which was directly related to the mass murder committed by Anders Breivik (Leonard et al., 2014), became noticeable in statistics.

The Nordic countries are characterised by a persistently low homicide rate, averaging about 1.0 case per 100,000 inhabitants (Lehti et al., 2019). Finland's homicide rate was more than 3 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the early 1990s – more than three times higher than the other two Nordic countries (Lappi-Seppälä, 2001). Since then, Finland's homicide rate has steadily decreased and is approaching that of the other Nordic countries, amounting to 1.6 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019. In general, however, we can say with certainty that there is no dynamic of violent crime like the Baltic countries, and we cannot find anything resembling a j curve when evaluating the homicides of the three Nordic countries.

Norway, Sweden, and Finland did not go through dramatic changes comparable to those of Estonia and the other Baltic states in the early 1990s. These three countries permanently belong to the top of the world as democratic welfare states, where socio-economic livelihood significantly surpasses that of other countries. For example, based on the Human Development Index in 2021, Norway ranked 2nd (score 0.961), Sweden 7th (score 0.947), and Finland 11th (score 0.940) (UNDP, 2022). According to the 2023 data from the International Monetary Fund,

the GDP per capita in US dollars is USD 101,103 in Norway (3rd), USD 55,395 in Sweden (14th), and USD 54,351 in Finland (15th) (International Monetary Fund, 2022). Based on the Corruption Perception Index, Finland's position was 2–3 (score 87), Norway's 4 (84), and Sweden's 5–6 (score 83) (Transparency International, 2022).

The entire 20th century passed quite differently in the three Nordic countries than in the Baltic countries. In Norway, the personal union with Sweden was abolished after a referendum in 1905, resulting in Norway becoming an independent state. In the First World War, Norway remained neutral, but in the Second World War, Germany occupied Norway despite declaration of neutrality. Norway has been a member of NATO since 1949 but voted against joining the European Union in 1994. Norway's prosperity is ensured by the development of the oil industry, which began in the 1970s.

Finland's separation from Russia and its gaining national independence took place in 1918, as with the Baltic states. Finland, like the Baltic states, came under pressure from the Stalinist Soviet Union, but despite Finland's military defeat in World War II, country's national independence was preserved. Throughout the post-war period until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland was formally neutral but had to consider the prescriptions of its aggressive neighbour to a very important extent. As a result of a wise and flexible policy, Finland succeeded in integrating into the Nordic community and creating a very capable economic environment. Finland joined the European Union in 1995.

The neutrality chosen by Sweden as early as after the Great Northern War (1700–1721) essentially allowed this country to stay out of the cataclysms of the two world wars that took place in the 20th century. After World War Two, Sweden was able to fully focus on building a welfare society. Like Finland, Sweden joined the European Union in 1995. The Russian-Ukrainian war that started on 24 February 2022 significantly changed the security prospects of the Nordic countries. On 18 May 2022, Sweden and Finland submitted applications to join NATO, which meant the end of the neutral status of both countries. Finland joined NATO in 2023 and Sweden in 2024.

The curve characterising homicides in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, where a rapid increase in the level of homicides was followed by a continuous decrease in the level of homicides, which essentially continues to this day, is unique compared to the Nordic countries and led to a new situation by the beginning of the 2020s. As a result of such development, by 2019, the level of homicides in the Baltic states and the Nordic countries had essentially equalised, which shows the depth and speed of the positive changes that have taken place in the Baltic countries. These states reaching the consistently low levels of the Nordic countries in terms of homicides is no longer a utopia or wishful thinking and may become a reality within the next decade.

It should be added that in one of the Nordic countries (Sweden), the situation regarding intentional homicides has worsened in the last fifteen years or so. Sweden was traditionally considered among the European countries with exceptionally low levels of homicide. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, the homicide rate has increased in Sweden and is now higher than that of many other countries. In 2022, a total of 116 cases of lethal violence were registered there, which equals a homicide rate of 1.2 per 100,000 inhabitants. Since 2010, the use of firearms to commit intentional homicide has increased fourfold in Sweden (from 15 cases in 2010 to 63 cases in 2022). In Sweden, the number of firearm homicides doubled between 2000 and 2019 (UNODC, 2023).

Patterns of gun violence exhibit strong near-repeating patterns in Sweden, with a fourfold increase in the risk of a shooting nearby after an initial shooting (Gerell et al., 2021). Significant patterns were found for all three major cities in Sweden (Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö) (Sturup et al., 2018). The near-repeating patterns are due to conflicts within or between criminal networks, which results in increasing intensity of gun violence as conflicts flare up. Gun violence has also been spatial-temporally linked to hand grenade attacks, with each detonated hand grenade in an area being associated with 1.7 more shooting incidents (Sturup, Gerell & Rostami, 2020).

Sweden has experienced unprecedented levels of gang violence in recent years. This increase in the number of firearm and bomb homicides is related to criminal milieux in socially disadvantaged areas in the country. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention reported that

Sweden had one of the highest levels of firearms-related deaths in a study of over 20 European countries (Selin, 2021). Violence taking place in Swedish cities in recent years is related to the settling of scores among criminal gangs of foreign origin (Ganpat et al., 2011; Gerell et al., 2021). In Sweden, there are areas in big cities where immigrants make up most of the residents. Gangs battle there over drug-trafficking territories and settle their disputes with guns and bombs. By now, however, the violence has moved out of the suburbs and into the heart of the city (Helsinki Times, 2022).

If these problems are not dealt with, we might soon be talking about a certain process of disorganisation in some regions, or even schismogenesis (Bateson, 2000). Of course, these hypotheses need to be checked more precisely in the future, but the new democracies in the form of the Baltic states should be particularly attentive to such phenomena, so as not to face the same difficulties in the future by uncritically copying the experience of other countries.

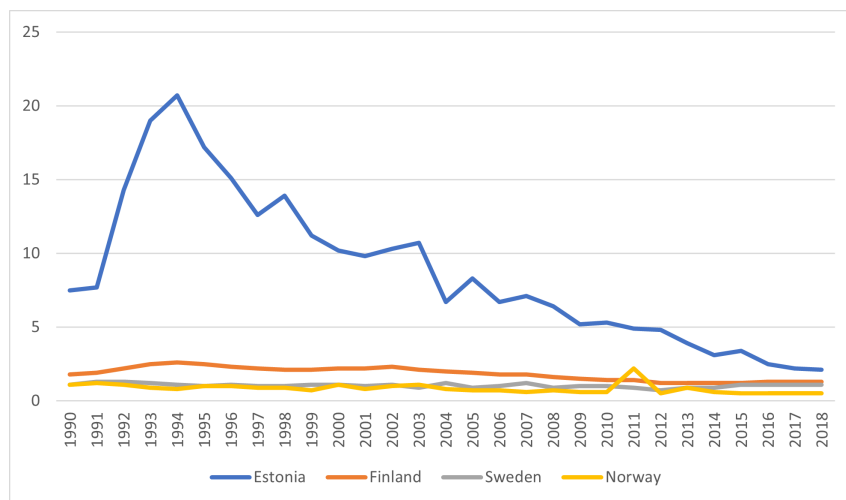


Figure 5. Homicide rate (victims of intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants) in Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Estonia 1990–2018

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the crime situation in the Baltic states before and after the political breakthrough shows very fast and sudden changes. Since the restoration of independence in 1991, the level of intentional homicides in the Baltic states has undergone a definite, empirically detectable increase. The first period, which culminated in 1994, placed for example Estonia in the same company as Russia and third world countries where the value of human life tends to be evaluated as lower than is generally accepted in the Western world. This situation was evidently caused by the coincidence of several factors, the most crucial of which are highlighted below.

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the Baltic countries, the process characterised as the formation of new societies began. This meant the total disorganisation of the former society concerning all spheres of life, bringing along the cessation of many well-established values and norms of the past. Societies growing out of an overcontrolled totalitarian system will inevitably collide with human activity both positively and negatively. During such periods, social pathology, especially violence in people's conduct, appears more frequently.

The first stage of development in the Baltic states can be described as the first phase of capital accumulation. This means the highly unequal distribution of material wealth among the population, i.e. the rapid enrichment of some and life on the verge of poverty for others. There is a clear and well-established link between homicide rates and income inequality. This situation could not have been foreseen by people who used to live under conditions of shared poverty during the Soviet period. As the experience of the Baltic states shows, inequality can be overcome only through the better distribution of profits by the state when a certain level of development has been reached.

The former criminal justice systems collapsed, impairing the crime control function of the state. The establishment of the new enforcement institutions of the state was met with difficulties, wrestling in market competition with the private sector offering security services. At the same time, a rapid increase in the activity of organised criminal groups in all Baltic countries was observed, with many of them arriving from other former

Soviet Union republics. The ineffective functioning of law enforcement institutions increased the sense of impunity on the one hand and the pessimism of the law-abiding population on the other.

The drastic and long-lasting decrease in the level of intentional homicides that has taken place in the Baltic states since the mid-nineties reflects a more general civilizational comeback to their 'right place'. The content of this process is the positioning of the Baltic states beside the Western countries. The dynamics of the level of homicides are good evidence of how fundamental the change was from a closed to an open society (Popper, 1995), which has taken place in the Baltic states since the restoration of independence.

On the one hand, we consider this as a good empirical confirmation of the general theory of civilization and the process of pacification when people had to increasingly control their aggressions and instincts (Elias, 2000; Pinker, 2011); on the other hand, we cannot neglect yet another aspect. The Baltic states are grudging regions situated between civilizations where, according to Huntington, Western Christianity ends, and (Russian) Orthodox Christianity begins (Huntington, 1996, pp. 158-163). In the last thirty years, the Baltic states have had to deal with a phenomenon that Huntington described as a clash of civilizations.

More than half a century of occupation and annexation damaged their socio-economic environment and distorted human development but did not force them onto alternative paths of development. As soon as there was an opportunity to bring life back to normal, it was done. Since the restoration of independence, to ensure their legal system and public order, the Baltic states have relied on the model of the rule of law, which characterises the Western European and Nordic countries, and have consistently moved away from the authoritarian governance model. Encouraging the market economy and people's entrepreneurship led to rapid economic progress, which has made it possible to consistently reduce people's economic inequality and increase the GDP in the Baltic countries. This is why the respective indicators of the Baltic and Nordic countries have become increasingly similar during the last 30-year period.

In conclusion, we can state that intentional homicides are indeed a type of crime that deserves special attention for at least three reasons. First, the criminal justice systems of countries have a direct duty to deal primarily with the prevention and detection of serious crimes against the person, among which controlling homicide is the most important task. Second, the level and dynamics of intentional homicides are an adequate indicator of both public safety and the capacity of law enforcement agencies. Third, the use of the level of intentional homicides as an indicator of the general social situation is a valuable and adequate tool.

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Appendix 1. Victims of intentional homicides in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia per 100,000 inhabitants 1990–2018 (UNDP, UN-CTS), 2019–2021 (Eurostat, crude death rate)

YEAR	FINLAND	SWEDEN	NORWAY	LATVIA	LITHUANIA	ESTONIA
1990	1.8	1.1	1.1	na	4.9	7.5
1991	1.9	1.3	1.2	na	5.8	7.7
1992	2.2	1.3	1.1	9.9	7.2	14.3
1993	2.5	1.2	0.9	15	11.3	19
1994	2.6	1.1	0.8	13.7	12.7	20.7
1995	2.5	1	1	11.5	13.8	17.2
1996	2.3	1.1	1	10.8	11.2	15.1
1997	2.2	1	0.9	11.1	10.9	12.6
1998	2.1	1	0.9	10.3	8.7	13.9
1999	2.1	1.1	0.7	9.5	8.8	11.2
2000	2.2	1.1	1.1	10	10.6	10.2
2001	2.2	1	0.8	9.3	10.2	9.8
2002	2.3	1.1	1	9.2	8.5	10.3
2003	2.1	0.9	1.1	8.8	10.1	10.7
2004	2	1.2	0.8	7.9	10.1	6.7
2005	1.9	0.9	0.7	5.6	11.1	8.3
2006	1.8	1	0.7	5.8	8.7	6.7
2007	1.8	1.2	0.6	4.3	8.5	7.1
2008	1.6	0.9	0.7	4.6	9.3	6.4
2009	1.5	1	0.6	5	8	5.2
2010	1.4	1	0.6	3.3	7	5.3
2011	1.4	0.9	2.2	3.3	6.8	4.9
2012	1.2	0.7	0.5	3.4	6.6	4.8
2013	1.2	0.9	0.9	2.4	6.6	3.9
2014	1.2	0.9	0.6	3.2	5.4	3.1
2015	1.2	1.1	0.5	3.4	5.9	3.4
2016	1.3	1.1	0.5	3.5	5.3	2.5
2017	1.3	1.1	0.5	4.2	4.5	2.2
2018	1.3	1.1	0.5	4.4	4.6	2.1
2019	1.1	1.0	0.5	3.3	2.2	2.0
2020	1.3	1.3	0.6	3.5	2.5	3.2
2021	1.2	0.9	0.5	3.2	2.7	1.9

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