

## Hard Study for Future: the Cases of Estonia and South Korea

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### Abstract:

*The aim of this article is to find out the price of success: what is beyond high achievements in the PISA context? In 2022, Estonia had the 4. Places in the world in the PISA, right after Japan, Singapore and South Korea. In previous PISA (2018), Estonia was a bit better, but still the neighbour of South Korea. In 2014's PISA (in the field of science), Estonia had the 6. Places, and South Korea was nr. 7 – the neighbours once again. This has been quite interesting evidence, as one country locates in Asia, the other in Europe. What kind of aspects put us together in the PISA list? As the culture (in general) shapes the statistics, the question is: how? To be the neighbours in this list is not a problem, but students both in Estonia and South Korea are exhausted and depressed. The youth works hard for better future. Is this the price of success or something else? The research method is the secondary data analysis of published materials, found from the Internet. The theoretical background comes from Hofstede.*

**Keywords**— general education, culture, PISA.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Estonia is a small country in East Europe, with a low population density and completely distinctive culture that combines pagan beliefs, Scandinavian ideals, Germanic pragmatism, and a bend towards technological innovation. When all this comes together, it means the life in Estonian way. [1]. An East Asian country, South Korea, is about twice bigger than Estonia, with 40 times more inhabitants. The GDP per capita in South Korea is equivalent to 270 percent of the world's average, but in recent history the situation was different. Huntington wrote that in the 1960s in South Korea and – for example - in Ghana, the GDP was almost equal; in both countries, the export of raw materials dominated, and they got a significant, almost equal help from outside. But 30 years later, in the 1990s, the economy of South Korea reached the 14.th place in the world; Ghana's story was not so successful – in the 1990s the GDP in Ghana was only 1/15 of the GDP of South Korea. Huntington explained these statistics with the cultural background. He wrote that people in South Korea value investment, sustainability, hard work, education, discipline, order, economy and efficiency. [2]. The same words can be used for Estonians, too. No doubt – culture matters. The aim of this article is to find out the price of success: what is beyond high achievements in the PISA context? In the PISA, about 690 000 students took the assessment in 2022, representing about 29 million 15-year-olds in the schools of the 81 participating countries and economies. [3]. In this Estonia has the 4. Places, right after Japan, Singapore and South Korea. In 2018, Estonia was a bit better than Japan and South Korea. Now in Mathematics, in functional reading, and also in the whole PISA, Estonia is right after South Korea. Even in 2014's PISA (in the field of science), Estonia had the 6. Places, and South Korea was nr. 7 – so, neighbours again. What kind of aspects put us together for such a long time? Being neighbours is not a problem, but despite the high academic position, students both in South Korea and in Estonia are exhausted and depressed: only 25% of students of basic schools in Estonia are pleased with their educational institution [4]. The success seems to have a price. In 2021, the Ministry of Education and Research of Estonia organized an electronic survey for 4th, 8th, and 11th grade students, teachers, and parents all over the country (on the *Lime Survey* platform), to find out the attitude about general education. In results, two aspects are important: high level of exhaustion (because of academic pressure and tasks, which are too difficult); and cynicism (because of pressure of time, overload, and lack of resources). Both aspects strongly hinder the study. The cynicism here means boredom, lack of study eagerness and doubts about the meaning of education. Also, the contentment with the feedback from teachers (which could support the development of students) is not as high as it was in previous PISA: students in Estonia need more recognition than they get. [5]. Compared to other countries, Estonia's decline in wellbeing ratings (according to the PISA) is one of the largest: nearly 20%. Estonia also has more bullying among 15-year-olds than OECD countries on average. [6]. The life of students in South Korea is not easy, either: competition comes at the cost of reduced individual life satisfaction. According to statistics, the competition is stronger at schools with a higher proportion of male and single children, and where mothers of students have higher education. [7]. South Korea is the most suicidal country in the world: this number is growing fast in the age group of 10-19. [8]. A 2024 report by the National Assembly Research Service painted a grim picture about South Korea: the percentage of elementary students getting sufficient sleep dropped from 56.7 percent in 2019 to 52 percent in 2023, indicating chronic fatigue as a norm. The proportion of first-year middle school students identified as at risk for suicide increased from 2.1 percent to 2.4 percent, and suicide attempts among all middle schoolers surged from 3.7 percent to 6 percent in three years. They are clear indicators that South Korea's education system is inflicting real harm on children's mental health. The OECD average for age-standardized suicide rates is 10.7 per 100,000, but the South Korea's rate is 24.8. [9]. **J. Yoon has stressed that for South Korea, the intense pressure to succeed in education (often called 'education fever') isn't a new trend. It has deep roots in the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) and its infamous Gwageo civil services examination system.** [10]. No doubt – the history and culture matter. In Estonia the situation is complicated in many ways, too: the teachers are frustrated because of small salaries – in January 2024, there was a teachers strike all over the country (without significant results). This is an interesting paradox: how unhappy students, taught by unhappy teachers, get so good study results in the PISA? The situation in this context is better in South Korea, where teachers are highly respected [11]: education there is valued at all levels, and being a teacher can be considered a dream. In Estonia, on the contrary, teachers often feel themselves as customer service representatives [12]. So – despite being neighbours on the PISA list, the background differs.

### II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter the background-information will be analysed through aspects of history, emotions, religion, education, economy and neoliberalism. It helps to understand the reasons, why younger generation is ready to work so hard for their future.

#### 1. Historical Background

The history of two countries is different, but some aspects and attitudes are still similar. According to the South Korean professor Kab-Nyun Kim: *Western democracy was very much a new concept in Korea. Many of the reasons relate to the prevalence in Korea of a feudal Confucian society. In the wake of the revolution in 1968, young people were born, who thought, felt, desired and acted differently from the older generation. The youth of this "68 generation" were radical in their search for a new life: they rebelled against the values of that time, experimented with new forms of living and acted them out in their daily life. The people learnt that an "indigenous" democracy inevitably requires hard work and*

struggle. It was not before the latter half of the 20th century that Asia experienced democracy. In view of this particular trajectory, South Korea is the most democratic country in Asia." [13]. A concept of *national awakening* can be used for Estonia, too. After 800 years of foreign governance by Denmark, Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Russia, Estonia proclaimed its independence in 1918. The Soviet occupation of 1940 and the subsequent war disrupted the development of civil society for 50 years. In August 1991, after a failed coup in the Kremlin, Estonia regained its independence. The new period of independence in the Baltic States has now lasted over 30 years, and during this time, the ideology in the post-Soviet countries has changed substantially. This can be characterized as a development from socialism to capitalism, from modernism to postmodernism, and from collectivism to individualism and neo-liberalism. Both South Korea and Estonia value democracy, as they have had to fight for it for a long time. Readiness for hard work and patience is in our genes. The Soviet time in Estonia was autocrat and patriarchal, too, because there was only one 'right opinion', and no democracy at all. It seems like both in South Korea and in Estonia a metaphor 'cave' can be used: coming out from feudalism or socialism was a turn to 180 degrees. When suddenly everything was possible (= out of 'cave'), education was/is the best ticket to the paradise.

## 2. Emotional Context of the 'Cave'-Metaphor

Evason wrote that Koreans have come to understand the longstanding agony, hardship and oppression they have experienced as 'hahn', which is the collective feeling of frustration that has built up in the Korean psyche from suffering so much. The release of this energy is seen in the rise of extreme nationalism, an incredible work ethic and an intense focus on Korean prosperity. The Korean sense of national belonging and pride remains strong: the country is ethnically homogenous with over 96% of all South Koreans sharing the same Korean ethnicity. [14]. Estonia, on the contrary, is not ethnically homogeneous, as representatives of the 211 nationalities live there. The largest ethnic groups are Estonians (919,693 inhabitants), Russians (315,242), Ukrainians (approximately 60,000 in 2023), Belarusians (11,605), Finns (8543) and Latvians (3827). [15]. Which means that the collectivist orientation of the culture is not possible in Estonia: the nationality-groups are different, and one of them represents the complicated past. The memory of Soviet time is depressing (among Estonians). A small fragment about 1940s describes that: *'National and social life was quickly restructured to fit into a Soviet norm. Property was extensively nationalized. Initially professional and educated circles were principally affected. Within a year the targets had become indiscriminate. Beginning on the night of June 13-14, 1941, mass deportations, including women and children, to Arctic or desert regions of the U.S.S.R. were carried out. Estonia lost about 60,000 people, while other Baltic states Latvia and Lithuania lost about 35,000, each.'* [16].

The 20.th Century was complicated both for South Korea and Estonia, as they turned to capitalism: one from feudalism, other from socialism. After long time of being 'nobody', it was/is good to become 'some body'. In this process, the education is important: as the whole world is open, youth is ready to put energy into self-development, to rise the quality of life. According to the statistics: in Estonia in 2020, people with higher education earned 37% more money than people without the diploma [17]. No doubt, the education matters. Different generations in both countries remember (if not personally, then through stories of relatives) hard times and suffering in 20.th century, also 'out-of-cave'-emotions. Parents support and motivate youngsters to study hard, to avoid painful life (new 'caves') in future. As this narrative is supported by the general attitude of local culture, a high position in the PISA-list is a logical result in both countries.

## 2. Aspect of Religion

According to Britannica, the Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are the background of modern Korean culture. Especially after the Korean War, globalization and rapid political and economic development have had a marked effect on the country's culture. Traditional thought, however, still plays an important role under the surface. Korea belongs historically to the Chinese cultural realm. [18]. Kalton adds that Confucianism is inevitably in everyday life: people don't exist only for themselves, they must live with and for the community. There are many little rituals, which are important because they indicate goodwill, respect, and/or friendship. Also, the age is an important yardstick of hierarchy: the elder has precedence over the younger. [19]. In Estonia, the age is not a benefit in the labour market: people over 50 are considered 'older', and they meet difficulties in finding a new job. But in the context of small rituals, Estonians have experiences, too. For example, people spit (in symbolic way) three times over the shoulder when a black cat crosses the road or walks around themselves. If two people are walking and there is an electric post or a trash can between them, they should greet each other again or it will foster bad luck. [1]. According to a survey, only 14% of Estonians believe that a religion has some influence on their lives. There is a proverb in Estonia: *God helps you only after you have helped yourself*. Obviously - even our religion seems to be individualistic.

However, we have always respected traditions: there are only a few villages without churches, while towns have several. As most churches were originally built by Baltic Germans, the Evangelical Lutheranism (Protestantism) became the officially main religion in Estonia for a long time. [20]. But - according to the statistics, Estonia is one of the least religious countries in Europe. [21]. This does not mean that Estonians respect nothing at all: over 50% believe in spirits and/or life force. Besides the 'standard' religion, there are others, such as nature worshippers, who consider nature to be their God. Estonians can be described as tree-huggers who believe that if you actually hug a tree, you will get some energy from it. The forest is said to be full of guardian spirits, which is a sign from the pre-Christian beliefs (for example - one shouldn't shout or yell while you're in the woods, since it's a sacred place). [20]. Here it is important to add that over half of Estonian land is covered with forest. However, besides of guardian spirits from forest, in 2003, six people from Estonia, Sweden and Denmark launched the Skype in Tallinn. On its first day, 10,000 people downloaded it. Few months later, it had a million users already. Twelve years later, it is used by 300 million connected users around the world. Estonia's startup success started with Skype in 2003. [22]. Obviously, Estonia is the country of contrasts, where everything is possible.

## 4. Role of Education

According to Kalton, education is numbered among the highest South Korean values, because it is the key to good life. Korea's success has largely been supported by their educational system that produces an incredibly diligent and competent workforce. Perhaps as a result of this early introduction to pressure and high standards, being busy throughout one's life is strongly valued. In Korea, a person in stressful circumstances is viewed positively as someone who is industrious and tenacious. [19]. In Estonia the attitude is similar as we have a proverb: *who suffers, lives long*. The society tends to put extreme emphasis on the importance of one's schooling to their quality of life. The history of Estonian schools starts in the 13th century; the first book was published in 1470 [23]. Education has always been important in Estonia, because it is kind of a lifebelt for a small nation. Historically the school has had several functions in addition to sharing knowledge. When the power of the church decreased in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in many countries, the school had to overtake the task of socializing the new generation. In some languages (for example in Estonian), the same word (teacher) is in use for the school teacher and for the vicar: the pedagogue was as important as God. This was a sign of high expectations of society for both professions - especially in the context of discipline, guarding and socialization. After child labour was forbidden in many countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, parents had to work harder to compensate for the income they lost because their children had stopped working. Parents were working longer hours, which meant that the children were unsupervised for longer hours. Establishing a network of schools helped to solve the unwanted by-product of the industrial revolution: the possible criminal activity of underage tramping youth. So, the effect of school education in those times was manifold: the new educated generation with academic knowledge also proved to be better factory workers than the one without education. Study eagerness is kind of insurance for the future, as it is hard to find a place in the world

without education, and even with the diploma it is complicated. H. Park wrote about South Korea that “the early 2010s saw the emergence of the “N-po generation” discourse. This concept, derived from the Korean word “po” meaning “to give up,” reflected a growing reality where young people were relinquishing various elements traditionally associated with social advancement and middle-class stability. These include employment, marriage, family formation, and homeownership. As the number of factors being abandoned increased from three to five to seven, Korean media coined the term “N-po” to encapsulate this phenomenon” [24]. In Estonia, the situation is problematic, too. The unemployment of youth is 25,4%, while in general in Estonia it is 7,7%. [25]. Hard study seems to be an insurance for the future, then.

### 5. Economical Background

As education and the economy are connected in many ways, one of my hypotheses has been: students in Estonia study hard, because they don’t trust the social security system in the country - being educated seems to be a life-saver in the labour market, at least in theory. The GDP per capita in Estonia is equivalent only to 86% of the world's average, which is worse, for example, than in Spain and Portugal. A small salary means even smaller unemployment money. The situation is different in South Korea, which is one of the world largest economies. As the financial situation in both countries is different, the reasons for hard study seem to be complicated. My hypothesis may be valid in Estonia, but not in South Korea, as the financial situation there is better, incl. the average salary is higher: approximately USD 2,700 [26]; in Estonia, in 2024 it was 1,986 EUR (and the median-salary was 1501.- EUR) [27]. In this context the comparison with some other country gives an additional explanation: in Norway, for example, the GDP per capita is 625 percent of the world. The economy of Norway is ranked the 12th largest in Europe. [28]. But in the PISA-list Norway is only nr 32, which is even below the international average level. The performance of Norwegian students has dropped significantly since 2018. [29]. At the same time, Norway is one of the happiest countries in the world. [30]. It supports my hypothesis about connection of study eagerness and financial security: in a rich state people can cope anyway, even academically not successful. This statement needs additional analysis, of course, but it sounds logical: relaxed and secure attitude, in general, creates an analogical atmosphere at schools.

In the context of finances, also the income of teachers is significant. In 2023, the minimum salary of a pedagogue in Estonia was 1749 EUR per month [31], which does not compensate for the huge responsibility and multi-social aspects of pedagogy [32]. As was told - the teachers’ strike in Estonia in January 2024 was a clear sign of unhappy pedagogues. This is a mystery how underpaid teachers enabled us to get in PISA first place in Europe. According to the international statistics, the best academic results for the smallest salary can be found only in the East Europe: in Estonia and in Poland. [33]. Obviously, this kind of anomalies needs further research.

In South Korea, the financial situation of pedagogues is better: teachers get about 2,7 average salaries [11]. And given the relatively low cost of living outside the major metropolitan areas, combined with the benefits provided, many teachers can save a significant portion of their salary (from USD 500 to USD 1,000 per month), depending on their lifestyle and spending habits, of course.[34]. In Estonia this is not possible: we even have a saying that working as a teacher is possible only if a rich partner supports this kind of hobby.

### 6. Neoliberal Point of View

If education is a tool for something, not a value itself, it can be considered as neoliberal evidence. Apple summarizes: democracy and education are reduced to the simple notion of choice in the educational marketplace, in which parents and children make decisions about where they will get the best return on their investment. [35]. The 21. century seems to be a calculative period - we discuss about this in Estonia for some years already. According to Marling and Pöldsam, Estonia is strongly a neoliberal country: in policy, the pure market economy is idealized, also free competition, thin state, and achievements measured in money. [36]. As W. Brown has stressed, neoliberalism is not only a theory of economy - it has been percolating to all fields of life, also into education, or even to private life: for example, investments in self by going to the gym, taking educational training, etc. People may name it as a quality time, but when neoliberalism enters into the person, s/he starts to consider herself/himself as human capital, the value of which needs to be improved all the time. The problem is not in those practices, but in the idea that people consider themselves insufficient - they feel like they must be better/nicer all the time to raise their value. [37]. Instead, people should ask whether society around them needs to be changed. **The eagerness to study hard and to be the best in that has some neoliberal accent. As the quality of schools differs, there is a competition even before entering into the educational system, both in Estonia and South Korea. Lee wrote that the advent of neoliberalism in South Korea began in the 1980s, before democratization, as the state’s response to the changing global political economy. Characteristics of Korea’s economic policy shifted from authoritarian developmentalism to neoliberal developmentalism. [38]. Cultural, historical and religion-based background of Estonia and South Korea supports both the hard work and strong orientation to financial security in the future. The neoliberal desire explains the constant wish to be better tomorrow than today, in every aspect.**

## III. EMPIRICAL STUDY

In this chapter the focus is on the culture factor analysis, based on the Hofstede’s methodology [39]. I made a secondary data analysis in the context of Estonia and South Korea, found from the Internet. In Table 1., the statistics from the culture comparison of G. Hofstede are presented, and after the Table, the concepts are analyzed and commented additionally.

**Table 1.** The comparison of two cultures according to Hofstede’s methodology [39], in %. The letters next to the numbers indicate explanations after the table.

	ESTONIA	SOUTH KOREA
1. Power distance	40 (a)	60 (b)
2. Individualism	62 (c)	58 (d)
3. Motivation towards Achievement and Success	30 (e)	39 (f)
4. Uncertainty Avoidance	60 (g)	85 (h)
5. Long term orientation	71 (i)	86 (j)
6. Indulgence / Restrained	16 (k)	29 (l)

The message of this dimension is that individuals are not equal in society. Power Distance is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.

(a) The difference between Estonia and South Korea is high. It means that Estonians don’t respect bosses based only on their rank and status as power-holders. People in Estonia prefer managers that give them the opportunity to express disagreements and opinions; people also want to be included in the decision-making processes.

(b) In South Korea the situation is different – it is rather a hierarchical society. People accept that every person has a place, which does not need any further justification. A vertical hierarchy in institutions is normal, the ideal boss is rather an autocrat. The subordinates expect to be told what to do, and the centralization is popular. Hierarchy in organizations is seen as reflecting inherent inequalities.

In education it means that teachers as power holders are more respected in South Korea: even if they behave as autocrats, it is considered to be normal. In Estonia, teachers must make compromises, sometimes with high prices: the pedagogues feel themselves often as client servicers. But

the reality is not so black and white: Estonia has passed the transition period in the 1990s (from Socialism to Capitalism) - the older generation may still demonstrate some higher power distance tendencies. Generally speaking: the older Soviet ways of thinking remain somewhere, and – according to Hofstede’s opinion, the boss-subordinate relationship among Estonians is sometimes still more hierarchical than the score suggests. In schools some older pedagogues may practice Soviet-type teaching style, which is not accepted by the younger generation.

## 2. *Individualism*

This dimension explains whether people’s self-image is defined in terms of ‘I’ or ‘We’. In individualist societies people are supposed to look after themselves and their direct family only, but in collectivist societies people belong to ‘in groups’ that take care of them in exchange for loyalty. So, the fundamental issue in context of this dimension is the level of the interdependence a society maintains among its members. In individualist countries progress in life does not depend on how well connected you are - honesty and transparency rather than loyalty or harmony are valued.

(c) Estonia is an individualist country: among people, there is a solid conviction about personal responsibility and everybody’s achievement and contribution to be self-fulfilled. Work situations are driven more by task orientation than by relationship orientation, which means that for Estonians, work relations serve a functional purpose.

A common cultural stereotype of Asian people is that they are collectivists: they regard themselves as part of a “we” rather than an “I,” - they see themselves as parts of bigger groups. But Moriarti [40] stresses that this stereotype about collectivist Asian people is widely disseminated in the cross-cultural psychology and business management literature, also in the work of G. Hofstede. At a score of 58, South Korea has almost as individualist culture as Estonia (score 62): in the business, employees should be self-reliant and full of initiative. Also, in the exchange-based world of work, hiring and promotion decisions are usually based on evidence or merit of results, or – at least on professional potential, not on being a relative or friend. Though Confucian and traditional values constitute the roots of societal expectations, their influence is weakening in the age of technology. In fact, the younger generations of South Koreans are extremely Westernised and individualistic. According to a study, more than half of Korea’s youths consider the judgement and opinion of peers from their age and status group more important than the views of those older and superior to them. Bolder communication patterns are also becoming more prevalent, as shyness is now considered less of a virtue and more of a limitation. The majority of young Koreans also reject the traditional notions of gender roles (a heavy tenet of Confucianism) and consider all genders and sexual orientations equal. [40]. The neoliberalist aspect, in general, supports individualism: Riddle wrote that democracy is now reduced to the possessive individualism of the citizen as consumer, which has implications for de-racing, de-classing and de-gendering issues of injustice and inequality. Education is reframed in a neoliberal way as “human capital formation”, through which students learn the skills and attitudes to be productive members of a globalized workforce, which produces increasing profits for the market economy. [41].

## 3. *Motivation towards Achievements and Success*

This dimension indicates that society will be driven by competition and achievements, with success being defined by the winners. This kind of value system starts in school and continues throughout institutional life after the school. The fundamental issue here is what motivates people, wanting to be the best or linking what you do. A low score of this means that the dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life. It means that standing out from the crowd is not admirable.

(d) At a score of 30, Estonia is quite low on motivation towards achievement and success. It means that society is driven by a certain amount of modesty and fairness, decisions in companies are ideally made by gaining support through participation. The Estonians do not boast about their achievements. Instead, they enhance their character through hard work and diligence and show their competitiveness by letting the results speak for themselves. Passive silence and listening are very much part of the communication style of Estonians; they speak in a direct way – small talk is not popular. Estonians tend to avoid conflicts: they are reluctant to raise problems for this reason and are quick to take constructive criticism personally.

South Korea scores of 39 is not much different from that of Estonians. Hofstede considers South Korea to be a consensus society. In those countries the focus is on “working in order to live”. It means that managers strive for consensus, and people value solidarity, quality and equality in their professional activities. Usually, conflicts are solved by compromise and negotiation. An ideal manager is a supportive one, and decisions in the company are achieved through involvement. [39]. Consensus is opposite of Confucian patriarch-style – obviously the ‘out-of-cave’ metaphor has influenced the culture in a practical way. So - students in both countries study hard, probably in order to ‘live later’. In this score, Estonia and South Korea are quite equal: hard work and diligence are similar to both countries - we let the results speak for themselves. A South Korean student of the best state school in Seoul, Kim Seo Hyeong, wrote that in Korea everybody works hard, and for people it is important to work as hard as people around you. [8]. Being as eager as everybody seems to be a norm – as a hidden knowledge between the lines. According to researchers, Koreans use less direct and more indirect communication. Koreans were also more communicatively apprehensive and less nonverbally immediate than their US American counterparts, for example. [42]. In the context of PISA, it means that some norms are kind of common knowledge: the young generation studies hard, because learning is their job, and people in society must work hard. Hofstede also wrote that Estonia has a low-context communication culture: people usually say what they mean, and mean what they say; for a small talk, there is only a limited time. [39]. Sometimes the communication style in Estonia is even too strict: according to my own ethnographical study, for example, in an Estonian school a teacher barked at an 11 y. boy: ‘If you don’t study, you will end up as a cashier of the local super-market.’

Obviously, in South Korea and in Estonia the styles of communication differ, but the aim and results are similar: when the norm in society is hard work, then working hard is synonymous with being normal - especially when standing out from the crowd is not admirable. And results speak for themselves already (at least in PISA).

## 4. *Uncertainty Avoidance*

How to deal with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? This question creates anxiety, and different cultures have learnt to deal with it in different ways.

(e) With a score of 60, Estonia has rather a high preference for avoiding uncertainty. In this kind of cultures, there is an emotional need for rules (even if they never seem to work), people have an inner urge to be busy and work hard, time is money, precision and punctuality are norms, innovation may be resisted, and security is an important element in individual motivation.

(f) At the score of 85, South Korea is one of the most uncertainty-avoiding state in the world. Countries like this maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour, they are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas. Other aspects, mentioned about Estonia in the previous chapter (g), are valid for South Korea as well, but in a more intensive way. In the context of education, this score fits the high PISA results. Study helps to avoid uncertainty in many ways: information broadens thinking, and diplomas help to move on in the career. Educated people don’t have to wait for charities; they choose the way themselves. But the paradox is that wiser people recognise more risks: one hopes to avoid uncertainty by hard study, but discovers more hidden dangers. The optimism and education seem to be inversely proportional. Which probable (partly) explains the unhappiness of students in both countries.

#### 5. *Long-Term Orientation*

This dimension describes how societies maintain the links with the past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future. Usually, societies prioritise these two existential goals differently. For example, the normative societies with low scores on this dimension prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. And the cultures which score high take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future.

(g) According to a high score of 71, Estonian culture is shown to be pragmatic. In this kind of society, people believe that truth depends mostly on the situation, context and time. People are ready to adapt traditions easily to the changed conditions; there is a strong readiness to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results.

(h) The score of South Korea (86) is even higher, making it a highly pragmatic and long-term orientation culture. Countries oriented like this show an ability to adapt tradition to a modern context. Also, pragmatism and everything that was written about Estonia in the previous chapter (i) are valid here in a stronger way. In South Korea, an overriding concern for respecting the demands of Virtue should be mentioned. Hofstede summarises that the countries of Southeast Asia and Far East are typically found at the long-term end of this dimension. According to researchers, the South Korean youth are more likely to have dreams for the long-term future when they believe that those wishes can be realized: for them the dreams are rationalized fantasies [43]. One more metaphor could be mentioned here: a 'tiger'. It was valid both for Estonia (as an IT-tiger) and for South Korea (as a technology-tiger) some time ago, but not anymore [44],[45]. The study eagerness of youth may partly be connected to this issue, too: if there might be a dream about new 'tigerness', for example. But the problem is that the long-term orientation sometimes hinders the ability to be happy here and now. As a result, rather a depression arrives, instead of nirvana. In Estonia, the anxiety and depression of youth are twice as high as among adults; and 22% of students have been thinking of suicide. [46]. A similar tendency is actual in South Korea, too – as was mentioned in a previous chapter.

#### 6. *Indulgence or Restrained*

The process of socialisation is significant, as without it we do not become 'human'. One challenge that confronts humanity is the degree to which children are socialised. This dimension is defined as the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses, based on the way they were raised. Relatively weak control is called 'Indulgence', and a strong control is 'Restraint'. Therefore, cultures can be described as Indulgent or Restrained.

(i) Estonia's very low score of 16 indicates that its culture is restrained in nature. For societies like this, it means a tendency to cynicism and pessimism. Also, in contrast to Indulgent societies, Restrained cultures do not put much emphasis on leisure time and control the gratification of their desires. People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms - they feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong.

(j) South Korea has rather a low score, too: 29, but higher than Estonia. According to Hofstede, the South Korean society is shown to be one of Restraint, which means that everything which was written about Estonia in the previous chapter (k), is mostly valid for South Korea, too. For the PISA-list this dimension is significant, because it explains masochistic tendencies in the context of hard study. Before I wondered how underpaid teachers and unhappy students get such good results, but the restrained culture of Estonia helps to solve this secret, at least partly.

### IV. The COMPARISON of two COUNTRIES

#### 1. *Differences between Estonia and South Korea:*

- The size of the country and population-density.
- The GDP per capita.
- The income and prestige of teachers.
- The power distance is bigger in South Korea. In Estonia official hierarchies are not so much respected.
- Elderly people are more respected in Asia, on the contrary of East Europe.
- In Estonia the low context of communication dominates; in South Korea the context is high.
- High level of exhaustion of pedagogues in Estonia: there was a teachers strike in 2024.
- South Korea is ethnically homogeneous, on the contrary of Estonia.

#### 2. *Similarities between Estonia and South Korea:*

- A concept of *national awakening* can be used for both countries.
- Both societies developed fast and intensively in the 1990s.
- Both countries are rather individualistic, despite their collectivist background in the near history.
- Both countries value democracy, as they have had to fight for it for a long time.
- A flexible plurality in the context of religion.
- Many little rituals are significant.
- In recent history in both countries the dominant values were autocrat and patriarchal.
- 'Out-of-cave' - metaphor suits both societies.
- Cultures in both countries are rather pragmatic.
- Consensus-societies: in both countries, the results of work must speak for themselves.
- Both are neoliberal countries.
- Both cultures are restrained.
- Readiness to hard work and patience are in genes.
- Education has always been highly valuable throughout history. Children enter from very early on into their education in order to prepare a good future for themselves.
- High level of exhaustion of students. High rate of depression.
- The neighbourhood of an aggressive state supports the mentality: 'take care of yourself'.
- A person in stressful circumstances is viewed positively as someone who is industrious and tenacious.
- Both countries were *IT-tigers* some time ago, but not anymore.
- People in both countries control the gratification of their desires.
- Both countries try to avoid the uncertainty in the context of the future.
- Youth in both countries have limited perspective in labour market.

Despite of geographical distance, there are significant similarities, especially in the context of values – accordingly, the neighbourhood in the PISA list seems logical.

### V. DISCUSSION

The aim of this article was to find out the background information of being neighbours on the PISA list. The life of youth in both countries is hard: problematic perspectives in the labour market, difficulties to reach a secure position in life in general, etc. Maybe the study-eagerness is rather a kind of replacement activity: instead of worry or panic, it is wiser to be active – why not to study. As

learning is mostly a private activity, it supports individualism, even if in the past there were other styles in the country. Despite historical traditions, in both state neoliberalism has been a trend some decades already. It all explains the high position in the PISA list. Riddle adds that the neoliberalism works to ensure a thin, marketized and commodified version of democracy, which promotes possessive individualism and competition, rather than a fuller democracy, which enables collective participation and critical engagement with society's institutions and public decision-making apparatuses. [41]. **In neoliberalism, education is rather a tool for a better future, not the aim/value in itself.** Dewey believed that things cannot be judged to be *good in themselves*; they must always be understood in the context of means-ends relations [47]. Rokeach separates two kinds of values: instrumental and terminal values. There also are two kinds of terminal values: personal and social; and two kinds of instrumental values: moral and competence values [48]. Being on top of the PISA-list suits this theory: if hard work is a norm in society – it is kind of a social value; as a diploma enables a better career in the future, it can be considered a personal value. Morality and competence are included in both cases. According to Max Weber, modern societies have developed a new system of rationalisation in which the practical application of knowledge is used to achieve specific desired ends. The term 'technical rationality' is often used interchangeably with 'instrumental rationality' and linked to the concept of calculative reason. [49]. According to Rokeach, one terminal value might be instrumental to another terminal value, or one instrumental value can be instrumental to another instrumental value [48]. But, as Rønnow-Rasmussen wrote: as 'quicksilver' does not refer to a kind of silver, 'instrumental value' may not refer to a kind of value [50]. This metaphor fits to the research problem of this article: despite being good in PISA, students are exhausted and depressed. Here the question arises: is the value of a high mark really valuable? The identity and future of young people depends on school marks. With bad results, it is not possible to enter the gymnasium or university. It indicates the problematic society, as every person should be valuable – with or without good marks and/or higher education. How to help/protect youngsters who study too hard? Despite the place in the PISA list, there are depressive students everywhere, because total success is not possible. And here comes the social pedagogy in the picture. According to Böhnhish and Schröder, the social pedagogical concept of 'coping with life' presents itself as a two-circle model, consisting of an inner circle of psycho-dynamically motivated and socially directed personal coping behaviour, and an outer circle of socio-structural contextualization of society's 'coping demands', social room to manoeuvre, opportunities and possibilities in tension with societal parameters. Here three 'coping stimuli' converge: the need for stable self-worth, for corresponding social recognition, and for the experience of self-efficacy (the feeling that one can achieve something and control one's own actions). [51]. In Estonia the social pedagogues usually work in general education – they support students with study- and/or behaviour difficulties, especially when the background of problems is rather social: the aim is to support education, behaviour, and to improve the study results. Future and perspectives in life are important concepts: one must study hard. But for too eager students the social pedagogy is useful, too. For them the slogan could be: study, but don't forget to live here and now. This kind of reverse social pedagogy is good for prevention of mental health. According to the statistics, even eager and educated young people cannot be safe in the labour market. The world is getting unpredictable, and it is hard to say for sure what kind of people will be winners in the future. D. Goleman [52], for example, stresses that emotional intelligence is much more important than IQ and academic achievements. Here the concept of *animation sociocultural* seems to be suitable: this is a famous tradition of South-European social pedagogy. The words *anima* or *animus* in Latin mean giving life, or start moving. The message is that a social pedagogue must show clients the best possible way to reach a better future. *Re-anima* is kind of activating: for solving problems one must do something differently.[53]. In the context of this article, it means that eager students should learn to live here and now, not only for the future.

## VI. SUMMARY

This article started from the PISA-list and two countries - neighbours in the top. The question was about the connection of the impulse/cause and result. When two countries are next to each-other, over and over again, it cannot be a coincidence. It seemed to be impossible that so different countries (geographically, historically, culturally, and also from the point of religions) have something common. But we have. The theoretical sources and Hofstede's research helped to find some answers. To know more, the qualitative research is needed: for example, to ask directly from the students themselves – why do they study so hard? Not to mention a deeper analysis in context of the value system of youth. Being a neighbour is not a problem, but students' depression and burnouts are. In this context the social pedagogical prevention is suggested. Finally, a short summary of the risk factors in context of exhaustion and burn-out-feelings among youth. The students may be in danger (of depression, burn out, etc.), if the country has:

- an individualistic, pragmatic, neoliberal, restraint culture;
- a religion, which supports hard work with minimal entertainment;
- the minimalistic social benefit system: low unemployment-money in the country;
- the slogan: *study hard in order to live later*;
- high unemployment among youth;
- a neighbourhood of an aggressive country;
- high *population density*;
- rather low salary of teachers.

The intensity of those factors differs in the world, and some countries can cope better with the risk factors. Which means that the prevention is important. It seems like the main joint-factor / similarity between Estonia and South Korea is the readiness to live later; to direct the pleasure to the future, which is the case in both countries. '*To live later*' is kind of masochist tendency, which often ends with the burn-out-syndrome. How to avoid it? At first this habit has to be recognized and named, and then some prevention is needed.

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