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Mental Recession and the 1990s Economic Crisis as a Nationalist Experience

Abstract

This article explores the 1990s economic crisis in Finland as a national experience, emphasizing the influence of historical context and future expectations on political and public narratives. The article examines this on two levels: in political discourse and in letters sent to politicians. Political debates framed the recession as a national and spiritual crisis, invoking the spirit of the Winter War. Letters revealed that citizens used history in diverse ways to interpret the events. The study highlights the interplay between economic conditions, political discourse, and cultural narratives in shaping responses to the crisis.

Introduction

> We need to pull ourselves together; over the years we've grown mentally lax. It's time to shoulder responsibility and take responsibility for ourselves. Not only to demand rights, but to call for responsibilities.[1]

During the budget debates in autumn 2024, Finland's Minister of Finance, Riikka Purra, used this language about a collective mental state. According to her, the weak economy was not solely the result of business performance or global headwinds. It reflected something deeper, both mental and national.

Finnish politicians rarely speak openly about a national mental state, yet Purra's phrasing echoes a period in the recent past. During the recession in the early 1990s, the mental state of Finns appeared to be constantly in debate. During those years, Finland faced the deepest economic crisis in its history. At the time, it was also the most severe slump among the OECD countries since World War II.[2]

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The background and depth of the crisis involved several factors, whose weight economic historians continue to debate. Financial markets had been liberalised in the late 1980s. The end of Soviet trade removed a long familiar anchor. A European downturn intensified the shock.[3] Between 1991 and 1993, the Finnish GDP fell by about 13%, and unemployment soared to over 400,000 people, accounting for around 17% of the workforce.[4]

At first, forecasts anticipated a short recession. That hope was one reason why the cabinet, led by Prime Minister Esko Aho, a centre-right coalition that governed from 1991 to 1995, chose cuts in public expenditure. The crisis looked like a moment to carry through reforms that would have been harder in "normal" times. Decision-makers believed that the post-Cold War economy required structural changes as the world was thought to have shifted from the closed economy of the Cold War to a more competitive environment.[5]

As contraction, contrary to expectations, deepened year after year, the question of Finland's mental state moved to the center of debate.[6] The slump was not only a collapse of output and employment. It also unsettled how many citizens saw themselves and their place in the world. People who did not lose a job or business felt the crisis in the rapid disappearance of firms from the streets and in the banking crash that shook institutions once considered permanent. The sense of upheaval grew through the end of the Cold War, which forced many to ask again where Finland and Finnishness as a cultural concept belonged.[7] By the 1980s, national identity had partly rested on economic stability and the Nordic welfare state. The recession forced a new conversation about the role of the state in securing well-being.[8]

The crisis altered structures and attitudes alike. It reshaped views of the future, solidarity, and the meaning of the nation state in a world that felt increasingly global from month to month. Geopolitical change opened new options. After the Cold War, a new neo-patriotic mood drew strength from renewed remembrance of World War II. European integration promised opportunities beyond national borders.

In 1993, philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright, a major public intellectual in Finland, suggested that the country was living through an economic and ideological upheaval that could only be compared with the shock of Enlightenment and industrialization two centuries earlier. During the same year, filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki and the Leningrad Cowboys, a popular band, staged a large concert at Senate Square in Helsinki with the Red Army Choir of the Soviet Union. The concert was meant to be a symbol of co-operation between East and West af-

ter decades of geopolitical tension. These two separate events demonstrate that the early 1990s mixed feelings of liberation and change – breaking off from the shackles of the era of Finlandization – with the dark weight of economic stress.

This article examines how the recession of the 1990s shaped experiences of national identity. The focus is on the history of experience; in particular, the ways the crisis was nationalised and temporalised. The analysis is guided by three questions. First, in what contexts was the recession nationalised: was it interpreted as a problem of Finnishness or of national morale? Second, how was the recession temporalised: how was it placed in national history and linked to expectations of the future? Third, how did these frameworks differ across the arenas of public debate?

Previous research, methods and sources

The recession of the early 1990s has received significant attention from economic historians, social researchers, and cultural studies scholars, to name a few. For example, Noora Kallioniemi has studied the portrayal of idle men in comedy entertainment, Minna-Kristiina Linkala has examined changes in theater criticism, and Susanna Laamanen has researched changes in rock lyrics.[9]

Economic historians have traced both policy choices and global shocks. They highlight the interaction between deregulation, fixed exchange rate choices, and the collapse of trade with the Soviet Union. Core findings have argued that the recession was a textbook financial crisis triggered by the deregulation of money markets and monetary policy (interest rates). This shift fueled both an increase in foreign borrowing by firms and a surge in domestic bank lending, all while maintaining a commitment to stable monetary policy.

The chosen model of stable monetary policy proved ill-suited to newly liberalised markets. The result was an unstable interest rate environment and an exchange rate that failed to respond to a growing current account deficit. Both households and firms accumulated debt in foreign currencies, while the current account slipped further into the red. Sensing weakness, financial markets began anticipating a devaluation.

Once capital flows reversed direction, the policy options narrowed dramatically. Defending the exchange rate required tightening monetary policy, pushing interest rates up, and placing severe strain on households and busi-

nesses indebted to domestic banks. Devaluing the currency, on the other hand, would harm those carrying foreign-currency loans. Initially, the authorities chose to tighten policy, triggering bankruptcies, further unemployment, and banking sector distress. In the end, defending the *markka* became too costly. The currency was allowed to float twice, each time worsening the position of borrowers with foreign-denominated debt. Meanwhile, public sector cutbacks deepened the unemployment crisis.[10]

Cultural and political research has illuminated how elites and media framed the slump. According to Anu Kantola, the economic and political elite came to view the recession, in hindsight, as a Schumpeterian cleansing force, where a wave of "creative destruction" swept away the distorted corporate and labor market structures left over from the Cold War era. The downturn, they argued, revealed that Finnish industry was ill-prepared to compete once markets opened. In the elite's view, the only escape from a quasi-planned economy was through pain and severe austerity. This austerity mindset drew on a "crime and punishment" logic: the "crime" was embodied in the anti-competitive structures of the mixed economy and the excesses of the 1980s consumption boom; the "punishment" was to be endured in the form of public spending cuts and mass unemployment. Only by enduring that punishment, they believed, could Finland be restored to economic health.[11]

Raija Julkunen describes how the meaning of public sector size was turned on its head during the 1990s recession. Where once social policy reforms had been seen as markers of progress and symbols of a Western way of life, they now came to be framed as a burden on the economy. The downturn marked Finland's entry into a post-expansive phase of the welfare state.

Julkunen doesn't label the process as the dismantling of the welfare state, arguing that such a label would present too monolithic a picture. Still, the changes were both institutional and ideological. The latter was reflected, for instance, in a shift in political discourse towards emphasizing the individual's responsibility for their own fate. Alongside this ideological shift came concrete reforms: reductions in benefit levels and durations, expanded means-testing, a retreat from universalism, and the introduction of service fees. Municipal budget cuts further increased the workload for those public employees who remained.[12]

Ilkka Levä has explored how the press articulated a new psychological contract in working life in the 1990s. According to Levä, the press discourse cast the slump as a "war", normalized austerity, and shifted the psychological

contract of work towards efficiency, flexibility, and individualized responsibility, thereby generating new "ideal worker" subjectivities.

Ilkka Kärrylä, Johan Strang, and Maiju Wuokko have argued that Finland's liberal turn in the 1980s–1990s was driven less by revolt against the welfare state and more by a wish to escape the Soviet shadow and anchor firmly in Western Europe, showing how local political culture shaped imported ideas. Libertarianism remained fragmentary and mostly subcultural, while mainstream change took a neoliberal form that "retasked" the state instead of rolling it back. In other words, anti-statist and cultural libertarianism was ultimately subsumed by statist, economic neoliberalism, even as libertarian language lent an emancipatory gloss to reform.[13]

In Pauli Kettunen's analysis, the elite repackaged patriotism with globalization. After the Cold War and during the deep recession, the "national we" was mobilized through competitiveness talk: appeals to unity, duty, and a strong work ethic justified austerity, labor-market flexibility, and welfare retrenchment in the name of a more competitive nation. EU integration and global market pressures were invoked as external necessities that reinforced, rather than replaced, national framing.[14]

The analysis pursues these questions through elite policy talk and a corpus of citizens' letters addressed to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance, and other ministers and MPs during the crisis. These materials are read for how they nationalised the crisis and placed it in time. The reading follows Reinhart Koselleck's idea that people interpret the present through layers of past experience and future expectation. I treat experience as a social process that becomes meaningful when shared, circulated, and institutionalized in the public sphere.

The study of the history of experience has taken much inspiration from Koselleck's idea of how the move from the static experience (*Erfahrungsraum – Space of Experience*) of the cyclical concept of time change in modern times to the expectation of the future (*Erwartungshorizont – Horizon of Expectation*).[15] Koselleck uses these concepts to show that people in modern times are disconnected from their past as a reliable guide to the future. This is why the ideas people had about the future became more important to their lived experience.[16]

Expectations of the future are not neutral or universal. They rest on how the past is remembered and on how the present is lived. Present experience can redraw the past: moments of crisis often lead people to re-read earlier decades and their own "journey." In the early 1990s, the neo-patriotic turn is

one such present frame that made the memory of war and the 1980s boom appear in new ways. In this sense, temporalisation is not only placing events in national time; it is also the work by which the present reinterprets the past. Experiences and the growth environment in childhood and youth affect the interpretive framework through which the present is lived and how the future is perceived.[17]

Koselleck's application brought a connection between experience and society into the history of experience itself: the present is interpreted as based on past experiences, and at the same time, this interpretation influences society through actions – and the future. Structures produce experiences, and, at the same time, they can be shaped by those experiences. Understood this way, the history of experience examines how people in the past have experienced and understood their world and how these experiences and perceptions have shaped historical events and cultural development.

Experience can be defined as a social process in which the individuals' experiences occurring at a certain time become a shared social experience. Experiences become important when they are given meaning. In turn, meaningful things become reality and affect perceptions. Experiences are socially and culturally constructed and shared. Additionally, experiences form layers of collective and institutionalized knowledge. As a result, the history of experience does not position experiences in the minds of individuals, but rather experiences are perceived as cultural, social, and societal phenomena.[18]

Applying the frame of history of experiences, I will argue that the neo-patriotic turn affected the political debate with regard to the economic crisis. In this sense, neo-patriotism refers to the late-1980s and early-1990s revival of national sentiment tied to the memory of World War II. With the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union, Finns felt freer to speak about the war openly, because the constraints associated with Finlandization were widely felt to have eased. The history of World War II was utilized in the economic policy debate. The recession was "temporalised" and "nationalised" by analysing economic issues in terms of Finnish character, spirit, and history.

Neo-patriotism also influenced the way citizens viewed the crisis. There was a strong need to place the economic crisis within the context of Finnish history and to reflect on the present time and the future through the lessons of the past. In other words, the past was used to understand the present. At the same time, previously held ideas about the future had to be reassessed. The research

questions introduced above are pursued here through a combination of elite sources and citizens' letters, read with the tools of the history of experience.

The sources include citizen letters to ministers, party and parliamentary group minutes, and newspapers, especially *Helsingin Sanomat*. The volume of citizen letters during the recession was exceptionally high compared with the 1980s. The letters include personal appeals but also analytical essays that address the national situation and offer advice. The authors of the letters are, naturally, selected in many ways, and no statistically valid conclusions can be drawn from them. I treat the letters as voices of experience rather than as a representative sample. I therefore avoid claims about precise proportions and instead map recurrent themes and counter themes.

Neo-patriotism

In the 1980s, many believed nationalism had lost force. Benedict Anderson's work "revealed" that nations are imagined communities and that many traditions are modern. Anderson was not the first researcher to emphasize the conscious construction of nationalism, but his concept of imagined community was so strong that it spread widely beyond academic circles.[19]

Michael Billig then showed how nationalism persists in ordinary routines and language, even while flag-waving nationalism was steadily dwindling.[20] By the 1980s, youth and youth-linked popular culture in Finland could already view the home, religion, and fatherland ideology with cool irony.[21]

In addition, globalization and an expanding consumer society influenced the secularization of nationalism, enabling and highlighting various consumer-based identities.[22] By the 1990s, social scientists were analyzing how globalization would also reduce the political power of nation states.[23] On the other hand, there were also analyses suggesting that ethnic elements would only strengthen in the globalizing postmodern era, as those suffering from globalization would rely on nationalism and religion to regain pride.[24]

Nevertheless, the late Cold War and its end did not produce a simple decline of national feeling. In Finland a new neo-patriotic mood formed around a revaluation of World War II. This began in the 1980s and accelerated after 1991. At the same time, nationalism returned in a "hot" form (as defined by Billig) elsewhere in Europe – most visibly in the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which kept questions of nation and history sharply in view.

Cultural and political markers illustrate the change. By the mid-1980s, the most heated cultural battles over the war had ebbed. In 1985, a statue was erected to commemorate Lotta Svärd (an organization banned as a "fascist" organization at the request of the Soviet Union after World War II). The monument was erected in Lappeenranta with less controversy than similar projects in the 1970s.[25] In 1986, the government established National Veterans' Day.[26] In 1987, the preparation of the film *Talvisota* (Winter War) proceeded without any resistance. The Winter War had earlier been a diplomatically difficult subject, because Finland and the Soviet Union did not agree on who had started the war.[27] When a formerly controversial Suojeluskuntalainen (White Guard[28]) statue was unveiled in Seinäjoki in 1988, a state representative attended.[29]

Glasnost widened the space for Finnish cultural expression, though expressions of dissatisfaction could still occur. For example, the Soviet Union protested against the release of a computer game (*Raid Over Moscow*, 1984), a book (Paasikivi's diaries, 1985), and a film (*Born American*, 1986). On the other hand, the Finnish cultural business already used censorship demands to increase visibility and sales – so these protests made by Soviet officials were not taken seriously outside political circles.[30] Caution was mainly present among political leaders: for example, President Mauno Koivisto did not attend the premiere of the film *Talvisota* despite the invitation, because he was unsure whether such participation might trigger a diplomatic incident.[31]

After 1991, the restraints of "Finlandization" vanished. Public history shifted: for example, in 1984, the Continuation War was presented in the media as a lost war, but by 1994, patriotic perspectives, defensive victory, and the concept of a separate war (separate from Germany) were given emphasis.[32] Eastern European countries typically engaged in similar historical reframing and reinterpretation. For example, Dan Stone has analyzed how collective memory became a site of political struggle in post-Cold War Europe. He shows how competing narratives about World War II, particularly the roles of Nazism and Stalinism, have been used to shape national identities, justify political agendas, and influence European integration. Stone highlights the rise of historical revisionism and the European Union's attempts to establish a shared framework for remembering the past.[33]

The post-Cold War political field also changed. Two new parties stressed the concept of Finnishness in their very names. The Young Finns Party formed in 1994. The Finns Party (sometimes characterized as "the True Finns") formed in 1995. Young Finns emphasized that the Cold War had erased a true national

identity. They blamed a left-leaning admiration of the Soviet Union for the loss, which was reflected, among other things, in a suspicious attitude towards anything "national." The cure, they argued, was a turn rightward and a rekindling of national spirit.[34] These claims had already appeared in the 1980s and merged with the larger neo-patriotic mood.[35]

Most of the neo-patriotic effort was directed at the youth, who were raised with emphasis on the memory of World War II and particularly the Winter War (1939–1940). This was a stated goal set by politicians and veteran organizations.

The goal (of patriotically raised youth) was achieved. Sirkka Ahonen has shown how belonging to the nation was personally more important to Finnish youth than to their Central European peers in the late 1990s. National self-esteem was built on the remembrance of the war. The core of the historical identity of post-Cold War Finnish youth was: we are survivors and the proof for this is the history of the Second World War.[36] Thus, in one decade the skeptical or ironically-minded youth of the 1980s had been replaced by youth raised to be patriotic.

Economic crisis and neo-patriotism

The final breakthrough of neo-patriotism coincided with the recession. The new mood seeped into the economic debate and shaped the national framework.

Under Cold War conditions, foreign trade was as political as it was economic.[37] Companies working together in alliance with the government tried to benefit and survive between the lines of the Cold War. For example, policy-makers and business leaders regarded cartels in the paper industry or other sectors as forms of national cooperation. Cartels were part of the "national competitiveness" of the era.[38]

Deregulation of the markets, which started gradually in the 1980s, changed the way "national competitiveness" was perceived.[39] Money could no longer have a homeland, but this did not mean that patriotism was thoroughly cleansed from economic policy.[40] This time, nationalism was re-constructed to match the globalized economy. Politicians used competitiveness-based rhetoric to rally a shared national identity; presenting unity, responsibility, and a strong work ethic as reasons to adopt austerity, make labor markets

more flexible, and trim welfare so that the country could compete more effectively.[41]

The economic crisis was interpreted as a national trial. It was Finland and Finns who had to reform to survive. Calls for national unity were frequent in politics and the press. Those whose voices made those calls changed with the circumstances, and the language varied from appeals for shared sacrifice to accusations of selfishness.

> Selfishness and lack of solidarity have taken over Finland. Consensus Finland has been transformed into a cold republic of non-people in the economic boom of the 1980s. Nobody wants to compromise on anything.[42]

This statement reflects a critical view of societal change in Finland during the 1980s. It suggests that economic prosperity fostered increased individualism and a decline in communal values. The term "cold republic of non-people" implies a loss of empathy and social cohesion, with personal interests overshadowing collective well-being. The unwillingness to compromise signals a shift toward more rigid, self-centered attitudes, potentially undermining the sense of community and mutual support that had previously characterized Finnish society. The text also refers to the culture of consensus by comparing the climate of the 1980s and 1990s with the 1970s, when Finland's political and economic elite convened to address the decade's economic problems together.

Discussion of economic policy was not immune to the rise of neo-patriotism. From appeals to national unity, it was a short step to invoking Finland's emblem of unity, the so-called spirit of the Winter War. Prime Minister Esko Aho often reached for wartime frameworks. He argued that Finns could overcome the slump through unity and hard work, as they had done in wartime. In his view, the post–war generations had lost virtues secured by the wartime generation. That loss had helped to cause the crisis and had slowed recovery. He used comparisons with veterans to defend fiscal consolidation. The current hardship was smaller than theirs.[43] The cuts made to the public sector would preserve the most important fruit of the wartime sacrifices, namely independence. "A shaky economy shakes the country's independence, its ability to defend its interests in an internationalizing world."[44]

President Mauno Koivisto (1982–1994) struck a similar tone when warning about the risks of growing foreign debt.[45] At the same time, he emphasized that Finland's opportunity to align more closely with the West was at risk. In a 1992

speech to European leaders, Koivisto underlined the country's record of paying debts on time. According to Koivisto, Finland might have had problems with foreign indebtedness, but it had proved a reliable debtor in the past.[46] The allusion pointed back to the repayment of World War I debt to the United States by 1933, which the wartime propaganda efforts later incorporated as a symbol of Finland's honor and reliability.[47]

Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, Commander-in-Chief during World War II and later President of Finland, emphasized after the Winter War that by fighting, Finland had already paid the debt incurred by belonging to the West — in intellectual and cultural terms as well as material ones.[48] Koivisto's emphasis on reliability in debt repayment echoed that tradition. Although Mannerheim spoke of an abstract debt of honor and Koivisto of a concrete state debt, Koivisto's speech also sought to show that Finland was well-suited for European Union membership in economic, cultural, and national character terms, even though at the time its economy more closely resembled that of the "transition countries" (as they were called at the time) of Eastern Europe.

War language crossed party lines. At contentious moments, actors accused opponents of failing the spirit of the Winter War, which in this rhetoric required work for the wider good and resistance to being selfish. Initially, the discussion featured warnings about selfishness and employed battle metaphors, and on many occasions the "spirit of the Winter War" was explicitly invoked. The media, citizens and politicians, as well as employer and employee organizations, all took part. Speakers sought to create a sense of unity through the rhetoric of a "national crisis," framing the crisis as affecting the entire nation.[49]

The fall season of 1991 brought a clear example. The prime minister proposed a new social contract that would have cut wages. When negotiations failed and the markka was devalued, the rhetoric sharpened and borrowed from battle talk: "There has been a tough battle situation. When the battle did not succeed with the first chosen line, we now continue the battle from a fallback position."[50]

Devaluation became a matter of national shame for some. No longer was there just an appeal to unity or warnings about the dangers of selfishness, but direct accusations of unpatriotic selfishness.[51] Supporters of devaluation, along with others deemed culpable, were portrayed as jeopardizing Finland's path to Europe and thus tarnishing the nation. Commentators argued that devaluation placed Finland in a position where it appeared neither psycho-

logically or culturally ready for the European Union.[52] According to *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland had lost face in the eyes of Europe and was heading toward chaos in a manner reminiscent of some South American countries.[53]

President Koivisto denounced "slimy" speculators whose actions had undermined confidence in Finland's economic policy on international financial markets. He did not accuse them of illegality but of moral wrongdoing. The Centre Party adopted the same patriotic rhetoric and broadened the charge of "sliminess" to include not only speculators but also the opposition and the labor movement.[54]

In his 1992 New Year's speech, Prime Minister Aho again compared Finland's situation to World War II. He argued that Finland had weathered even harder trials than the present and that the crisis contained a silver lining. In his view, hard times had often toughened and unified Finns, and that opportunity had opened again: "Now, too, the sacrifice, faith, and self-confidence of all Finns are needed to secure the nation's future." This, he stressed, was needed above all to lift the spirit of the nation.[55] Some in the opposition also argued that the spirit of the Winter War was needed and that triggering a government crisis should not be the goal of opposition politics.[56]

As the economy sank deeper, governing parties increasingly argued that Finland lacked the wartime spirit. A repeatedly invoked comparison held that 'no one was left behind' in World War II, whereas now each political actor looked out only for themselves.[57] The point is not that such talk silenced all other frameworks. It is that neo-patriotic language influenced how decision-makers, journalists, and citizens understood the crisis. The nation's moral fiber and spirit of unity became part of the economic argument.

Mental recession

During the recession, many in the media and politics spoke about Finns as a collective with a shared mental essence and a shared state of mind. From the start, this lens appeared in discussions about national character and its role in the crisis. In other words, the recession was "nationalized" by means of national characteristics.

This started during the first summer of the crisis. In 1991, *Helsingin Sanomat* editorial writer Kristiina Ritvos argued that Finland faced an illness worse than the recession: a psychological or mental depression. She criticized aus-

terity and targeted the business community and the Aho government, both of which, she said, had thrown in the towel: "Mental depression involves lying down and waiting for death or a miracle healer. The medicines offered are rejected without examination."[58]

Ritvos criticized the 'cheese-slicer' cuts and constant crisis talk, which only made things worse. She saw no hope or real plan anywhere.[59] After Ritvos's piece, *Helsingin Sanomat* ran an article on the psychological or mental side of the recession, in which economist Pertti Haaparanta criticized the government's austerity line.[60]

At the same time, Paavo Lipponen of the Social Democrats framed the recession as a mental issue, urging politicians to take a more active role and to develop Helsinki into an international hub of European creativity. It was simply necessary, he said, to stop "whining about recession" and get to work.[61]

Others used the same words to argue for different causes. The National Coalition Party's parliamentary group also discussed the psychological dimension of the recession, but its analysis differed from those of Ritvos and Lipponen. MP Eeva Turunen argued that the downturn was "psychological" in the sense that wage earners refused to relinquish benefits they had gained; the trade union movement, according to Turunen, failed to see the national interest and clung to old ways.[62]

The business funded think tank EVA, the Finnish Business and Policy Forum, published a survey that gave the debate new fuel. A survey from autumn 1990, released in summer 1991, found that the mental climate had worsened quickly. Fewer agreed that it was a lottery win to be born in Finland.[63] The majority felt that greed, self-interest, crime, violence, indifference, and superficiality were on the rise. At the same time, honesty, respect for the law, "sisu", happiness, mental well-being, loyalty, neighborly love, diligence, appreciation of work, and belief in a better future had declined. The sharpest change concerned immigration: more people did not want immigration to increase.[64] EVA read the results to mean that internationalization caused anxiety and that Finns were mentally divided into conservatives who felt threatened and liberals who saw opportunity.[65]

The government did not contest the idea of a psychological or mental depression. Rather, it sought to define the phenomenon on its own terms, and the concept became a subject of political struggle. Aho argued that the source of the mental recession lay in a loss of Finnish identity. In his view, the psychological or mental depression was essentially a crisis of being Finnish: Finns had

drifted from the virtuous historical path secured by the veterans of World War II. They had, he said, lost the capacity to sustain national unity and spirit. The Prime Minister also identified the turning point: the boom of the 1980s, when the decline began.

He argued that the boom had brought out the worst sides of the Finnish national character, but that its best would reemerge through hardship, as it had before. In Aho's view, this created a mental need for austerity. The crisis was, therefore, a chance to bring out the best in Finns, since they often performed best when times were hard. By meeting the recession with hard work, national unity, and lessons from military history, he believed the country could overcome its psychological depression.[66]

Aho used state-subsidized culture, especially theaters, as an example. He argued that the permanent statutory institutions built in Finland over the years had institutionalized cultural life in ways that produced weak results: high state subsidies did not necessarily yield high quality. By contrast, according to Aho, folk music, despite limited public support, achieved notable successes internationally.[67]

Talk of psychological depression gradually spilled into arenas that had first tried to treat the recession in economic terms. In December 1991, the Economic Council (an advisory body chaired by the Prime Minister and including ministers, the central bank, and labour market organisations) discussed the psychological dimension of the slump and considered ways to build confidence in the future. Concrete proposals were scarce, and the discussion largely called for solidarity among Finns.[68]

In this chapter, I have shown how the economic crisis was articulated as a collective national condition, a psychological and mental crisis, in elite discourse. Now I move to ordinary citizens, examining how those who wrote to politicians during the recession responded to the claim that the downturn was essentially a psychological and national problem.

Mental recession in citizen letters

Mental depression was not just an elite diagnosis. Many citizens who wrote to politicians also described Finns as being beset by mental depression, but their explanations did not always align with the public debate.

Some argued that the government's austerity line caused the malaise by draining not only demand but also the will to live.[69] Letter writers judged the cuts unjust, since those they considered guilty did not bear the pain.[70]

Some entrepreneurs argued that excessively strict economic policies pushed the country and its businesses into mental distress. In their view, firms needed support during the acute phase, such as low interest loans, but writers claimed the state was unwilling to help, which deepened the mental depression and squandered psychological resources. [71]

In addition to entrepreneurs, other groups also saw themselves as the backbone of the nation, yet felt they were treated in exactly the opposite manner. "I want to warn you against pushing low-income mothers too hard, as we are an essential part of this nation's mental backbone."[72]

Consequently, writers felt the wrong people got punished in the recession. This sense was reinforced by the government's decision to purchase new destroyers for the Finnish Defence Forces, a choice many saw as outdated in the post-Cold War world, where the outlook appeared more peaceful and defense policy was shifting toward supranational bodies such as the European Union.[73]

Others traced the psychological depression to something deeper than day-to-day politics: pessimism and envy embedded in Finnish culture that fostered a negative atmosphere at work and in society.[74] These citizens viewed the recession fatalistically, as if the national character made economic crises inevitable. At the same time, they saw the downturn as a chance to curb these perceived cultural flaws, with unity and mutual support as the remedies.

For many religious people, the recession stemmed from Finland's secularization. It was interpreted as divine punishment for abandoning Christian values, and the way out of mental and moral decay ran through the suffering the recession imposed.[75] Some non-religious analyses reached similar conclusions: expanding individual freedoms was said to have fostered crime, and financial market liberalization to have encouraged the relocation of major industries abroad, which in turn eroded work ethic.[76]

For some, the moral lapse had already reached even the Defence Forces, which they felt did not understand mental issues and were excluding more and more young people from service on psychological grounds. One writer argued that an inclusive mindset grounded in the spirit of the Winter War would have strengthened national unity and helped prevent youth marginalization even in civilian life.[77]

Although many citizens interpreted the recession as an inner or mental crisis, the letters offer no single, consistent explanation. Accounts of the causes vary widely. At its core, however, psychological depression was linked to powerlessness, misplaced suffering, and a loss of national cohesion. Whether framed in economic, moral, cultural, or religious terms, the crisis was experienced as a deep rupture in social well-being. In sum, the letters show that ordinary citizens framed the recession in collective terms rather than as a set of private misfortunes. Despite differing explanations in policy, culture, and religion, the shared view was that burdens fell on the wrong people, morale and cohesion had been eroded, and that recovery conversely depended on fairness and solidarity, with burdens redistributed more justly.

Temporal contextualization and historical comparisons

Citizens did not only nationalize the crisis. They also placed it in time. There was a clear need to place the economic crisis within a historical continuum. By searching reference points from a nationally shared past, they tried to make sense of the present. In their letters to politicians, they offered interpretations of its causes, compared the downturn with earlier turning points in Finland's history, and proposed remedies drawn from historical lessons.

This kind of analysis is completely missing from the letters sent during the previous government.[78] During the previous government, citizens mainly wrote about personal problems and sought solutions. Such letters continued during the recession, but this new category emerged: analyses of the era's events and spirit, often accompanied by advice and proposals. Taken together, the letters show that citizens approached the recession as a national matter, concerned not only with their own difficulties but also with the nation's history, remedies, and future.

Temporal reflection ranged across both long- and short-time spans. In the short term, writers examined the immediate causes of the recession, namely the 1980s. In these accounts, "excessive consumption in the late 1980s" was a common theme. The view of the 1980s boom as a national misstep was not confined to the political elite or the media, as discussed above. Many citizens interpreted excess consumption and speculative fever after financial deregulation as a moral failure.[79]

Citizens, however, shifted blame to the elite, banks, and fellow citizens who had embraced speculative investing after deregulation. Such "casino gambling" on the stock market was cast as morally wrong and incompatible with Finnishness, which made the recession seem like a justified punishment for the excesses of the 1980s. Citizens complained that the innocent bore the brunt.[80]

Historical reference points came not only from the recent past but also from a longer arc, from the nineteenth century to the era of President Urho Kekkonen (1956 to 1982), with particular emphasis on World War II.[81]

Especially among older writers, some traced the roots of the recession to a loss of values among post-war generations, as well as a slackening work ethic and declining morality. Modesty and industriousness, which they treated as core elements of Finnishness, were said to have nearly vanished. In this reading, Finland had forfeited a central part of its national identity and was being punished through the recession.

In addition to analysis, citizens offered advice on how to overcome the recession. Their proposals rested on the idea that a national misstep had led to the downturn and aimed to return Finland to its "proper" historical path. What counted as the misstep depended on the diagnosis: for some, the "social democratic" tax and welfare policies of the 1960s and 1970s; for others, the turbo-capitalism of the late 1980s.

> Aggressive, arrogant, ruthless, merciless, large, and competitive are today's adjectives, often in superlative form. Allowing freedom without responsibility has led to a sharp increase in all forms of crime. Insurance companies can also exploit this. The liberalization of currency exports led to the relocation of large industries abroad, which in turn caused the complete disappearance of work ethics. 'Our house' was taken from under us.[82]

The writer cited as an example here sharply criticized the social and psychological harms of globalization, the market economy, and competition. Instead, he called for moral renewal, international cooperation, and prioritizing mental well-being over material success. The way out of the crisis was thus found in the renaissance of national values. Invoking the wartime and post-war spirit of unity, work ethic, and perseverance, the advice was to recover the optimism and self confidence that had powered earlier achievements in culture, sport, and the economy.[83]

Some argued that Finland had lost its "true" identity to excessive social democracy, claiming that the welfare state corroded a culture in which everyone supported themselves through hard work.[84] Dependence on the state, they said, was weakening the nation's work ethic.[85]

Some expressed concern that social welfare was being misused. In their view, people increasingly relied on benefits instead of working, and this mindset was being passed down across generations. The younger generation, which had not experienced war or hardship and was thought to be accustomed to an easy life, was said to have forgotten self-responsibility.[86]

Citizens framed this erosion of work ethic in national terms. Reliance on social security was said to sap the nation's vitality, and times of ease had dulled Finns' patriotism. Citizens urged politicians to restore patriotic self-reliance to public debate.[87]

Writers from the older generation often voiced frustration. They said they had helped lift Finland out of post-war poverty. Yet, they felt they were once again expected to rescue the nation from a crisis they believed was caused by others' irresponsible actions.[88] This reading echoed a strand of 1990s criticism of Finlandization: during the Cold War, under the leadership of the baby boom generation, Finland was said to have lost its patriotic values. Only the wartime generation was seen as immune to Finlandization's propaganda, while younger cohorts were thought to have taken the friendship liturgy between the Soviet Union and Finland at face value.

Many writers focused their frustration on the government's pension cuts. Some veterans were puzzled that, even as public speeches celebrated their wartime sacrifices, their livelihoods were reduced through pension reductions.[89]

Beyond World War II, the letters also expressed nostalgia for the era of President Urho Kekkonen. He was valued for his pragmatic approach and for preventing the elite from squandering national assets on frivolities. Kekkonen was seen as embodying the hard work, frugality, and a sense of justice on which Finland was built.[90]

On the other hand, citizens also drew on the past for faith and a vision that the country would survive the recession, because Finland and Finns had weathered earlier crises that were much worse. With "sisu", they had overcome all kinds of adversity, so they would overcome this crisis as well, and in a neo-patriotic register, Finns were cast as a nation of survivors.[91] In accounts that emphasized Finnish perseverance, the most common reference point

was (again) World War II, when Finland and Finns were thought to have proved that difficult situations could be overcome.[92]

Common to both the analyses and the advice was the idea that work ethic had eroded. Hard work was closely tied to Finnishness, so a departure from the national historical path was taken to mean that core elements of the Finnish identity had broken. Explanations for the erosion differed with each writer's reading of history.

Also common was the belief that unity and consensus would make it possible to overcome the recession.[93]

> Finland has knowledge and skills. They are needed now and even more in the future. Now we should have the admired SPIRIT OF THE WINTER WAR. Thanks to all those who created that spirit and managed to fight and work. Otherwise, we would not have had an independent FINLAND. I also gave my contribution.[94]

For some, the absence of unanimity showed in demonstrations against government actions: "Mass demonstrations are in themselves a shameful phenomenon in matters where the aim is to overcome the recession and unemployment with the support of all."[95]

Some citizens pointed to the habit of buying foreign goods as evidence of declining national unity. They urged the government to organize campaigns to persuade people to buy Finnish products and thus boost demand through patriotic spirit. If formal protection was politically impossible, they argued, the same effect should be sought through strong nationalism.[96]

At its most extreme, some argued that the long-term lesson of Finnish history was that Keynesian economic stimulus preserved national unity, because it prevented crises from splitting the country in two as in the Civil War of 1918.[97]

The government also took measures it justified as steering demand toward domestic goods. For example, it defended the new travel tax by saying it would redirect travel spending to domestic destinations. For expatriate Finns, this fostered a sense of estrangement from the homeland: "Yes, the roots can now take root [in the new homeland] as long as the tax bites."[98]

These examples show that citizens framed the recession as a shared national crisis rather than as a set of private misfortunes. They pinpointed its causes in national time references from the excess of the late 1980s after deregulation to longer arcs reaching back to World War II and the Kekkonen era.

Many treated the downturn as a moral consequence of lost values, yet they redirected blame from households to elites, banks, and speculative finance. Proposed remedies were collective: unity campaigns, buying domestic, fairer burden sharing, and, at the most emphatic end, Keynesian stimulus to preserve cohesion in the shadow of 1918.

As the downturn deepened, contrary to the forecasts, the stimulus versus cuts divide moved to the center. Citizens questioned why austerity had not revived the economy as promised and argued that a climate of psychological depression and weak demand called for fiscal expansion. The debate shifted from whether to consolidate to whether renewed public spending was needed to restore confidence and cohesion.

Mental depression as an obstacle to recovery

As the recession persisted through 1992 and into early 1993, contrary to forecasts, the debate in politics and the media increasingly asked whether Finland had been psychologically scarred by the slump. The government used this framing to counter the opposition, whose calls for fiscal stimulus were gaining ground. Even MPs from the governing parties began to question the wisdom of continued austerity.

To counter growing support for fiscal stimulus, the government argued that it had taken the right economic steps to turn the crisis around, but that growth was hindered by mental blocks that policy could not easily unlock. Rather than debt-financed spending, it called for a "mental" stimulus: "Helplessness and resignation must be replaced with faith in the future."[99]

Amid mounting pressure for Keynesian stimulus and simultaneous plans to cut public expenditure, on 6 September 1993 the Prime Minister established a working group of social scientists, historians, and philosophers – Ilkka Niiniluoto, Terho Pursiainen, Matti Kortteinen, Elina Sana, Kari Hokkanen, Jari Ehrnrooth, and Liisa Uusitalo – tasked with drafting, within three months, a citizen statement on Finland's mental state and future prospects. The decision provoked considerable controversy, with strong views both for and against.[100]

In an opinion piece submitted to *Helsingin Sanomat*, the writer argued that the working group should examine the mindset and morality of the Prime Minister and other decision-makers, rather than the nation's mental state. In the writer's view, the group looked like a government attempt to shift blame onto

the people, even though the recession's culprits lay with the political and financial elite.[101]

Professor Ilkka Niiniluoto was appointed chair of the group. Over a period of three months, it prepared a joint statement, which Niiniluoto presented at the House of the Estates on 1 December 1993. In his remarks, he stressed that the recession was also psychological: Finns were confused. This was evident in a lack of vision, an opaque society, and uncertainty among citizens and decision-makers regarding what was happening and the direction in which the country was heading. Sociologist Matti Kortteinen later described the group's work as contentious. Members disagreed in particular over whether the crisis was primarily political, economic, or psychological. Due to these disagreements, they published a book, *Suomen henkinen tila ja tulevaisuus* (The Mental State and Future of Finland), in which each member set out their own perspective. [102]

In the book, Jari Ehrnrooth, among others, called for individual creativity instead of collectivism. He proposed that the state could support this if intellectuals working on mental questions designed a therapy project, the public broadcaster Yleisradio adopted a therapeutic cultural strategy, and maternity clinics, day care centers, and schools initiated a "ventilation" of collectivist values.[103]

Alongside the group examining Finland's mental state, the government prepared a future report for parliament. The report stated that the future was uncertain and unclear, and that decision-making would require more flexibility because there would be little time for long deliberation.

For this report, the government commissioned a study from Statistics Finland on value change. It found a mental climate of uncertainty and depression, with security values central and confidence in the future low. Older Finns felt insecurity and the shaking of core values, while young people lacked vision. Russians and other refugees were seen as the greatest threat to the future. Respondents expected politicians to respect core values, take moral stands, act socially, and provide security. The survey recorded two notable shifts: from self-centeredness towards social responsibility, and from a sense of control over one's life toward frustration, marginalization, and insecurity.[104]

On this basis, the future report concluded that Finns were experiencing an identity crisis, attributed to rapid change and to both economic and mental depression. Yet it offered few concrete measures to address the problem.[105]

In this final chapter, the report analyzed how the debate over fiscal stimulus helped sustain talk of a mental or psychological recession. The sequence shows how a classic policy debate was recast and nationalized as a question

of collective character. Shifts in values, confusion, uncertainty, and a lack of vision were repeatedly noted, reinforcing the interpretation that collective national traits were at work. Framed in this manner, attention moved from economic instruments to national morale.

Conclusion

The rise of neo-patriotism and the 1990s recession did not coincide by chance. Globalization and international deregulation shaped both the end of the Cold War and the slump, leaving cultural as well as economic traces. Economic turbulence and wider upheavals created fertile ground for reflection as a way to endure uncertainty, and the recession was read through history as much as through economics.

In this article, I have examined how the 1990s recession in Finland was a national and temporal experience. Drawing on citizen letters, elite discourse, and press debate, I have shown how economic hardship was narrated not only in financial but also in moral, cultural, and historical terms.

My first research question was about the contexts in which the recession was nationalized. The material reveals several overlapping elite strands rather than a single line. A competitiveness strand tied wartime endurance, unity, and work ethic to fiscal consolidation. A confidence strand treated the "mental recession" as a collapse of confidence and expectations, calling for trust building rather than punishment. A values strand read the downturn as laxed virtues that called for the reaffirmation of shared norms. A cohesion strand warned that austerity and talk of crisis drained morale and widened divides.

Citizens likewise nationalized the downturn in different ways. For example, some appealed to unity and to "buy Finnish". Many questioned the fairness of austerity and assigned responsibility to elites, banks and financial deregulation rather than households. Some messages emphasized that veterans and low-income families were part of the nation's backbone. Religious writers said the slump showed the effects of secularization.

All in all, both sides used the same national talk to push very different policies, while the downturn was made meaningful as a collective national condition rather than merely an economic shock. From the perspective of the divide between citizens and elites, the same national motifs moved across arenas and were used to justify various policies.

My second question was related to how the recession was temporalized, positioned in national history, and linked to expectations of the future. Both citizens and elites reached for comparisons. Elites used history mainly to justify present-day decisions. Citizens, on the other hand, used history to make sense of events and to defend or resist policies.

World War II served as a constant frame. People also looked back on the post-war decades, the era of President Kekkonen, and the economic boom of the late 1980s. Sometimes, they even looked back on the Civil War of 1918. Taken together, these reference points raised the question of when the country had lost the qualities that once carried it forward. Of these, the late-1980s boom mattered most in practice: it stood for deregulation, easy credit and excess, and for the sense that Finland had strayed from its natural path. Through these frameworks, the downturn could appear as the price of earlier mistakes or as another round of national endurance. They also shifted ideas about the future: for some, hardship promised renewal, while for others it signaled lasting decline.

The history of experiences approach here highlights how economic crisis was lived as a shared and contested experience of identity, morality, and temporality. The idea of "psychological depression" was more than just rhetoric; it shaped how people explained suffering and envisioned recovery.

This account also nuances elite-centered interpretations, which see the recession primarily as evidence of Finland's failure to adapt to global markets. The letters and public debate often turned the argument around. For many citizens, the real mistake was the 1980s embrace of global markets and finance. Deregulation, easy credit, and elite excess were seen as pushing Finland off its natural path. From this view, austerity placed burdens on the wrong people. National sentiment was therefore not only used to demand consolidation but also to resist it, by calling for fairness, solidarity, and the protection of cohesion. People fought whether it was mainly about money or morals, or perhaps both.

Compared with elsewhere in Europe, Finland looks distinctive. In other European countries in the 1990s, nationalism often accompanied post-socialist transformations or new claims to sovereignty. In Finland, however, war memory reinforced arguments for austerity, debt repayment, and competitiveness. At the same time, citizens used nationalistic arguments to oppose cuts, pointing back to the excesses of the 1980s and appealing to ideals of fairness and cohesion. War memory, rapid liberalization, and a new geopolitical setting pulled economics and national feeling together, but they didn't point to one answer.

This article brings two main things. First, it shows how the 1990s recession was experienced through the dual processes of nationalization and temporalization, and how these took different forms in elite and citizen perspectives. Second, it demonstrates how memory politics and market-centered reasoning converged to create a form of disciplinary nationalism that justified austerity as patriotic duty, but could also be used to resist it. In this sense, the Finnish case illuminates how crises become moments when nations reimagine themselves – not only economically but also through nationalization and temporalization.

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