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Consumers during the 2008-2011 Economic Crisis in Estonia: Mainstream and Grass Roots Media Discourses

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss the development of consumer culture in Estonia, which is a vivid example of the ways consumers make do in rapidly changing circumstances. Our specific focus was on the period of 2008–2010, a time of severe economic crisis, unemployment and reduction of income, when consumption per household fell by a total of 12 percent compared to the pre-crisis period. We employed quantitative content and discourse analysis of media texts published in the Estonian-language press, on forums and in blogs to study representations of consumer culture during crisis. In general, the media discussion featured (self)-criticism about succumbing – with little calculation and thought about the precariousness of the future – to the hedonistic allure of the market. Nor was a serious alternative offered to the economic crisis, which was portrayed by the media as a temporary condition and not as a new normality. Thus the mediatization of the people's experiences of the downturn during 2008–2011 did not bring about any principal change to the pre-crisis normalities of Estonian consumer culture. This can partly be explained by the fact that consumption-related aspects of the recession were mainly represented in the Estonian media from the point of view of the middle class, who had sufficient resources. Social media channels also mainly reflected the middle class's experience of perceiving the crisis as temporary and only involving slight lifestyle modifications that could be endured by working hard and being a smart consumer. Any critique of consumerist values and calls for solidarity expressed by journalists or the cultural elite did not resonate with the grassroots level social innovations born of everyday frugality and sharing.

Keywords: contested consumption, economic crisis, mediatization

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1. Introduction

Discussion regarding perceived excessive consumption in Western welfare countries emerges periodically in different political, economic and cultural contexts. The economic crisis fuelled a discourse on thriftiness in high-level political forums, as well as at grassroots levels. Although the connection between limited economic resources and a change of lifestyle is not linear, a lack of resources restricts consumption. For example, half of the Estonian population admitted in a survey conducted in 2014 that they had to re-arrange their lifestyle and habits in recent years owing to a lack of money (Keller & Kiisel, forthcoming). Surveys also indicate that consumers' eco-friendliness is higher in poorer countries, even though the populations' eco-awareness is higher in economically better-off countries (Orru & Lilleoja, 2015). Individual and collective capabilities of lifestyle change are socio-materially and culturally embedded. Given that re-shaping consumption is one possible solution to global ecological and social sustainability problems, a question emerges: what kind of socio-cultural transformations are required to achieve this? Peoples' everyday lives and the dominant public discourses have revolved around economic growth and technological development. Assuming that social practices are the sociological site of change (being at the same time the product and medium of change), how can culturally embedded social practices transform under the conditions of limited resources and increasing social differentiation? For example in Estonia the share of people whose social involvement is low, i.e. who are passive and indifferent, has grown during the last decade (Kiisel & Seljamaa, forthcoming). So has the share of people who claim not to need to consume various goods and services, what we have termed indifference towards consumption (Keller & Kiisel, forthcoming). This implies that the predominant coping strategy adopted within limited possibilities is withdrawal and social encapsulation, rather than proactive re-arrangement of one's lifestyle. The ideology and actions of contested consumption are similar to the Enlightenment, i.e. born and developed in the social circles of the educated and better-off and based on empathy towards vulnerable yet distant groups and on future projections about the scarcity of resources for coming generations, but not on the objective circumstances of today (e.g. eco-friendly goods are more expensive).

For many people the economic crisis created an urgent necessity to alter their buying habits. Our study investigated how changing consumption patterns were mediated through Estonian nationwide dailies, forums and social media. Media representation was analysed for two reasons. First, we assumed that changes in consumer practices were accompanied by (mass)-

mediation and public sense-making. We considered social interaction – and media discourse as part of it – to be one element of everyday social practice (Vihalemm et al, 2015) and therefore that its analysis should give valuable insights. Second, we assumed that in the context of the economic crisis the newsworthiness of consumption-related themes grew because of their wide appeal.

We also investigated: *i*) any connection between material and immaterial resources, or in other words: who was given the power to speak in the media?; *ii*) how were the (new) normalities constructed: from the point of view of those who had more or less means? Earlier research demonstrates that weaker social involvement is related to weaker reflexivity that leads to purposeful action (Kiisel, 2013; Seljamaa, 2015). Thus, there are vulnerable groups in society not only in terms of resources, but also in terms of their ability to affect change. The crucial issue is: how much does the media pay attention to them?

For this study we addressed four research questions:

1. How were consumption activities constructed in the media in the context of an economic crisis and shortage of financial means?
2. If and how were consumption activities criticized and any need for change constructed?
3. Who had a voice in the media to construct new normalities?
4. What was the position of people with different material resources in the media discourse?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Contested consumption: the need to change consumer lifestyles

Cultural criticism of consumerism has a long history: themes, such as a loss of authenticity in relationships between subject and object and the advent of materialism and hedonism at the expense of the work ethic and a frugal way of life, reoccur in laments about the consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998; Featherstone, 1991; Gronow, 2015). Moral issues regarding consumption have been an object of heated debate for decades. In 2001 Daniel Miller wrote that “The study of consumption is often subsumed within an ideological concern to castigate society for its materialism at the expense of an alternative morality that emerges from an empathetic concern with poverty and the desire for greater access to material resources. An anti-materialist ideology is favoured by associating consumption with production rather than studying consumers

themselves and their struggles to discriminate between the positive and negative consequences of commodities” (p. 225, see Wilk, 2001 for a response to Miller). This brings forth a poignancy and the impossibility to unidimensionally criticise consumerism as the ‘ill’ of today’s society.

The recent decades have brought forth—what we may call—late modern criticism. Ideological discourses, as well as applied policies and interventions to shift and shape consumers’ habits, abound. Reasons are many from environmental sustainability to health and financial literacy to name but a few. This has made consumption a much contested terrain, not only because of the moral high ground of ‘castigating’ materialism, but also because of the very real need for societies to fight climate change and obesity. Quality of life for individuals and households in the here and now, as well as sustaining a high quality of life for future generations, has become the linchpin of present day rapidly expanding research, policy-making and intervention programme design that directly or indirectly pertain to consumers’ lifestyles (Halkier, 2010; Sulkunen, 2011; Spurling et al, 2013; Strengers & Maller, 2014). As numerous authors have stressed, consumer habits need changing in western countries, because present levels are unsustainable. One question looms large: which ways of doing so are possible and legitimate (Sulkunen, 2011; Keller et al, 2016 forthcoming; Vihalemm et al, 2015)? This question sets the recent economic downturn in an interesting light: as a time of externally induced rapid change, a forced downshifting where the hitherto consumption volumes and ways all of a sudden became financially unsustainable.

2.2 Media shaping of consumers’ everyday practices

Contested consumption is deeply interwoven with the media in today’s world (Halkier, 2010). Jansson (2002) argues that the distinction between consumer culture and media culture is blurred, producing a specific condition of ‘commercial intertextuality’ where the contribution of the media in the production of goods’ market value is crucial. Scholars conceptualize the condition where the media mediates social interaction within and between social subsystems and thereby plays a key role in social change - while society has become dependent on the ‘logic of [the] media’ (Hjarvard, 2008; Schulz, 2004) - as *mediatization*.

Mediatization studies have devoted rather limited attention to the mediatization of (and therefore also contesting) consumption (Eskjær, 2013). This topic has been to some extent explored by journalism researchers who investigated the interrelationships between environmental issues related to

food production and consumption and some mediated effects – via shifts in public agendas and popular norms – in ‘hard’¹ news coverage (Almiron & Zoppeddu, 2015; Yadavalli & Jones, 2014). We consider traditional news coverage and its agenda-related approach as too narrow for explaining the effect of mediatization in the context of the economic crisis and contested consumption. Our approach was wider and included the utilitarian or self-expressional type of content produced in forums and social media. The authors argue that culture, lifestyle and consumption today are intertwined with journalistic coverage and that the mediatization of consumption is a sign of a general cultural transformation of society (Kristensen & From, 2012). Researchers have also stressed the importance of specific types of media content that primarily aim to provide practical advice for individuals in their everyday lives: e.g. reviews of products. This does not automatically mean only the commercialization of ‘real’ issues, but also the spread of journalistic practices and the blurring of genres. The authors have stressed that consumer and lifestyle journalism is not necessarily uncritical, but also applies elements of investigative journalism and ‘hard news’ (Sundvor, 2008, cited from Kristensen & From, 2012). We argue that not only is content production, but also the modes of reception - e.g. citizen and consumer positions - interwoven with the receiving and interpreting of media content by people. For example, studies conducted in Denmark showed that mediatization processes mainstream ideas of ethical and sustainable consumption (Eskjær, 2013), and studies conducted in the U.S.A. revealed a connection between feeling responsible for one’s consumption decisions and mediated (via Facebook) political activism (Vraga et al, 2015).

Research about the discursive construction of the economic crisis in the media has mainly dealt with the interrelations between political ideologies and the economic systems (e.g. Cross & Ma, 2015; Halsall, 2015; Mitsikopoulou & Lykou, 2015), but the mediatization of consumption in the context of the economic crisis has been rare. With this article we aim to fill this gap.

2.3 Consumption and economic crises

The economic crisis of 2008–2011 was a time of extensive changes for consumers. Research into consumption behaviour has indicated a major shift in the types of goods bought, with less goods related to lifestyle and self-expression purchased. For example, Ion (2014) analysed the impact of the

¹ Journalism researchers normally distinguish between ‘hard news’ (which concerns topical issues of public relevance) and ‘soft news’ (which can be published any time and concerns more personal matters) (see e.g. Boczkowski 2009).

crisis on the Romanian retail sector and concluded that “In a very short horizon of time, the ‘objectives’ of consumption have changed from a better standard of living to resisting uncertainty, vulnerability and accomplishing basic needs.” (p. 183).

Such uncertainty has raised a lot of questions with regard to researching people’s coping strategies, such as cautious spending (Alimen & Bayraktaroglu, 2011), changing of shopping to a functional instead of recreational activity, bargain-hunting (Mihai et al, 2010) and choosing cheaper alternatives (Kaytaz & Gul, 2014). Time use studies have revealed (Ironmonger, 2012) that the time spent on household chores decreased during the crisis, whereas time spent on consumption activities increased. This points to consumption choices becoming more sophisticated, and more demanding in terms of time and effort. However, scholars who studied the Eastern and Central European countries reported that people did their shopping less frequently than before the crisis and this led to conclude that time freed from consumption was spent on substitution activities (Ion, 2014).

Researchers who investigated peoples’ values and social relationships during times of economic hardship reported opposite results. Kolar et al (2012) challenged this finding by showing that traditional goods, such as those related to health, security and the environment, were valued less during the crisis and material values took centre stage. Biressi and Nunn (2014) likewise claimed that individuals became more selfish and less interested in protecting the weaker during the crisis.

Other consumer studies reported a shift from material to immaterial values and from consumer to citizen practices, e.g. more voluntary work, cultural participation and social networking (Dahl, 2009). Consumer research conducted in Slovenia reported a shift from individualistic consumerism towards more consideration of the community and family, as well as an awareness of the power of consumption activities and a readiness to ‘raise [their] voice’ (Faganel, 2011). Several U.S.A. based studies reported a link between media use, perceived economic threat, and community belonging (Matsaganis & Seo, 2014).

Many of the previous papers on the economic crises and consumption have been based on surveys. Our analysis zoomed in on the meanings constructed by the media and how they wielded their power to emphasize some voices whilst leaving others in the background.

Questions regarding lifestyle and consumption changes also involve the unequal distribution of social capabilities and resources. Empirical mapping of social involvement revealed that about one fifth of the population were capable of changing their lifestyle according to e.g., mediated calls, ideologically reasoned mobilisations or campaigns (Kiisel 2013; Seljamaa

2015). As a rule, these were better-off and more highly educated people with very active and multifarious media consumption. The lifestyle of the rest of the population was inertial ('sticky') in relation to externally induced – i.e. outside of their own everyday living arrangements – pushes for change (op. cit.). An economic crisis certainly decomposed some of the everyday arrangements of poorer people, forcing change upon them. A question arises, if and how were they involved in the media representations of the changes and negotiations of new normalities carried out within media text?

3. The case of Estonia

The Estonian case is very suitable for investigating the repercussions of an economic crisis on consumption patterns and lifestyles. First, due to Estonia's relatively recent transition to a market economy, consumption has special connotations for people in terms of freedom and a better life. Second, the Actual Individual Consumption (AIC, an index calculated by Eurostat) of the majority of the population is still relatively low, being at a level of 65 (where 100 is the EU28 average), while, for example, Germany's indicator is 123, the United Kingdom's is 114, Italy's is 98 and Greece's is 83². For this reason, we assume that the people's inner tensions between the willingness to consume (more) and the objective constraints that arose from the economic crisis – the conflict between culturally supported hedonistic orientation and real-life possibilities – were especially sharp in Estonia. Also, the strong liberal ideology counter-positions everything even remotely associated with the Soviet era as old-fashioned. Thus, one may assume that Estonian media's any discourses on sustainability had a rather narrow cultural-historical legitimacy.

3.1 Periodization of the development of Estonian consumer culture

Estonia is a country of 1.3 million inhabitants that regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and – compared with other post-Soviet countries – undertook the processes of democratisation and marketization rather radically. People had to cope with a change of consumption regime from a state governed economy of scarcity, but relative

² Actual Individual Consumption is an indicator used to describe the individual material wealth of households; it measures households' total value in terms of final consumption expenditure regardless of whether the goods and services were paid for by the households themselves or, for example, by the government.

stability, to a free market of increased opportunities albeit accompanied by an exacerbation of economic inequality and uncertainty. Estonia joined the European Union in 2004 and introduced its common currency – the Euro – in 2011, a time when the consequences of the world recession were most apparent in Estonia. Consumers had to adapt to a new financial regime in parallel with dwindling personal finances.

In order to better understand the logic behind various conflicting discourses on consumer culture, we will outline – based on previous studies – the periodization of Estonia’s societal transformations over a longer time period to highlight some key events as well as some dominant public discourses.

The timeline consists of four periods. First, the rapid transformation of Estonian consumer culture from the late Soviet period (roughly 1989) to the late 1990s, which has been termed as a ‘return to the consuming west’ (see Lauristin et al., 1997; Keller, 2004). During that time, the profusion of goods available and the official ideology of freedom of choice, consumer capitalism and individualism prevailed, in sharp contrast to the Soviet era shortage of goods, ‘dictatorship over needs’ (Feher et al., 1984) and forced homogeneity of lifestyle. In spite of all its deficiencies the socialist consumer culture has been represented – primarily by the elderly – ‘as a time of solidarity and a more respectful relationship between consumers and things, subjects and objects. Since there was no market economy-based cycle of fashions and quick obsolescence of things, there was less waste and ‘colourful cheap trash’ (see Keller & Vihalemm, 2005). Thus, people were either ‘consciously or unconsciously “sustainable” in their everyday consumption’ (Keller, 2011: 342). On the other side of the profusion and consumerism coin were ambivalences and disharmonies – such as marginalization owing to lack of money, or specific needs not being met by the constraints of the small and ultra-liberal market – in everyday private life that produced disillusionment with the rapid transition to consumer capitalism (Keller & Vihalemm, 2005).

Second, we can delineate the ‘boom’ period from the early 2000s to 2008 as a steady climb of economic indicators and self-expression oriented hedonistic consumption. It was a growth period of living standards and consumption levels, of a fast increase in the numbers of new shopping outlets, particularly malls and supermarket chains. Marketing communications – i.e. branding and image advertising – advanced rapidly, adding fuel to the flourishing media representation of consumerism and a ‘good life’ in terms of consumerist and hedonist ways (Keller, 2005a). This was also the time of the emergence of recreational shopping as a new cultural form (Keller, 2005b). The survey ‘Me. The World. The Media’ conducted by the University of Tartu

in five consecutive waves (in 2002, 2005, 2008, 2011 and 2014) demonstrated a hike in the consumerism index³, between 2002–2008, especially among young people aged 15–29 (those exhibiting high to very high consumerism in this age group increased from 19–38%).

The survey also indicated that proportion of people who perceived to have sufficient money to meet their ‘basic needs’ increased between 2002–2005: 72% of the respondents said that they had ‘enough money’ for ‘decent food’ in 2002, whereas 80% said the same in 2005.

The third period - from 2008 to approximately the end of 2011 - was the economic crisis. During this time, Estonia’s previous economic growth of 6.3 % (in 2007) turned into a 9.0% decrease in 2008 (Sutt, 2009). This recession paved the way for a fast climb in unemployment that peaked at almost 20% in 2010 (Rosenblad, 2011) and an inflation of 12% over the years of 2008-2010 (Raus, 2010). The consumer confidence index fell from plus 10 to minus 30 over 2007–2010 (Eurostat). In addition 12% of people lost their jobs because of the crisis, 23% of those retaining their jobs said that their wages were cut (Integration Monitoring, 2011). The economic crisis hit the vulnerable groups of society hardest, such as the 16% of Estonian households living below the poverty line (Võrk, 2015).

During the period of economic crisis, the rapid increase in the consumerism index plateaued. Which means that consumption was still important - with regard to social practices and social relations - to the Estonian population; although people felt that they lacked money (e.g. while in 2005 80% of the sample said that they had enough money for ‘decent food’, only 70% said the same in 2011). A qualitative study showed that the relatively quick adaptation at an instrumental level was accompanied by civic and consumer disengagement: recognition of one’s powerlessness regarding decisions that shape social relationships and affect a person’s dignity as a citizen and consumer (Keller & Vihalemm, 2015). The meaning of money as a mediator of future goods and monetary transactions in domestic and civic practices became more ambivalent (op. cit.). The survey data showed that people’s readiness to engage in activities officially regarded as ‘financially literate’, such as buying insurance and regularly saving for the future, was not remarkable.

The fourth period we can call the post-crisis recovery and polarisation period. While consumerism slowly increased (e.g. the amount of 15–29 year

³ This is an aggregate indicator expressing people's attitudes and practices related to more hedonistic consumption (e.g. preferring brands over price when purchasing clothes, using the services of an interior decorator, having a specific cosmetics brand preference; using services related to the body [spa, fitness club]).

olds exhibiting high or very high consumerism rose by 1% from 41–42% between 2011 and 2014), indifference towards consumption⁴ climbed considerably (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Indifference towards consumption (% of the total sample, N=1500)*

	2002	2005	2008	2011	2014
Non-existent	26	25	22	21	16
Low	12	11	8	7	6
Moderate	26	28	26	26	23
High	22	22	24	24	28
Very high	14	14	20	22	26

Source: Survey “Me. The World. The Media.”

Indifference towards consumerism was especially marked among those aged 66–74 years old and women. Estonia has experienced—after the initial very sharp fall—a relative easing and recovery of the economic situation post-crisis (as opposed to the more prolonged crisis in, for example, Italy); however the level of poverty is considerable. In 2013, 22.3% of Estonian inhabitants lived in relative poverty and 8% in absolute poverty (Statistics Estonia, 2015).

For a country (Estonia) with such a strong neo-liberal economic and political doctrine, there is a remarkable proportion of people who consider it a legitimate option to switch-off various goods and services as ‘unnecessary’. The real causes and justifications for this require further in-depth research, but we may assume that the crisis may have had many and often counterintuitive effects: making different consumption activities inaccessible (either financially or culturally) or making consumers refrain from them because of their recently acquired experiences that life without them is manageable (e.g. sports and fitness, reading books, or buying a new car or household appliance). Qualitative data leads us to believe that the post-crisis period is a time of ambivalence, where consumer literacy and competence are sought for both in official ideology (e.g. expressed via state intervention programmes) and in consumers’ everyday discourses (Keller & Vihalemm, 2015).

⁴ This is an aggregate indicator consisting of variables that demonstrate respondents’ indifference towards various goods and services. The question was “To what extent do you or your household have sufficient money for the following expenses?”. The scale of responses was ‘generally sufficient’; ‘sometimes sufficient, sometimes not’; ‘not sufficient, we have had to give this up’; ‘we do not need this, we do not spend on this’. The ‘indifference’ index is calculated by summing up the ‘do not need’ responses for each individual. The goods and services included food, rent, medicines, expenses related to raising and schooling children, books, entertainment, sports etc.

4. Method

This study proceeds from the positioning theory. Its assumption is that media discourse offers symbolic resources for people for “discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts” (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999: 16). We approached media texts as a source of symbolic tools for consumers to position themselves and others in the performance of everyday actions and also to negotiate their re-crafting when conditions alter. Rom Harré and his colleagues, who have conceptualised the positioning theory, describe the ‘position’ as “a cluster of rights and duties to perform certain actions with certain significance as acts, which may also include prohibitions or denials of access to some of the local repertoire of meaningful acts” (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003: 6). Earlier analyses mainly dealt with positioning in interpersonal communication, while Harré and Moghaddam claimed that it is possible to generalise the concept of ‘position’ to analyse “interactions between larger units than interpersonal conversations” (2003: 5). They saw links between the media and peoples’ reflection of their everyday repertoires; however, this is done not in a ‘direct’ manner, but rather by building larger frameworks or, as they call it, ‘story lines’; larger principles and conventions follow in the unfolding of a social episode and sum up what is expected (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). This theoretical conceptualisation is in line with the above-referred empirical findings about the “indirect” impact of the media on consumption activities. For this study we asked which story lines related to changes in consumption did the media offer during the period 2008–2010 for peoples’ self- and other-positioning.

In order to analyse the media texts, standardized content analysis and qualitative analysis were deployed. A total of 528 texts were used for quantitative analysis, while 52 texts (34 mass media articles, 13 forum posts and 5 blog posts) were used for qualitative analysis. The overall sample consisted of 319 mass media articles, 160 forum posts and 49 blog posts, all published between 2008–2010, i.e. during the economic crisis.

The mass media channels included five national daily or weekly newspapers (*Postimees*, *Eesti Päevaleht*, *Õhtuleht*, *Maaleht* and *Eesti Ekspress*) and one news portal (*Delfi*). The search engines of these channels were used to search for the terms ‘economic crisis’ and ‘consumption’, and only articles expressing the author’s opinion were selected (such as interviews, commentaries or editorials).

Regarding forums, three of the largest and most active were chosen: the female-oriented *Delfi Naistekas*; the technology-oriented *Hinnavaatlus*; and the finance-oriented *LHV Finance Portal*. In order to find blogs to the sample, a

privately held catalogue listing of Estonian blogs (*blog.tr.ee*) was used and the term 'economic crisis' was searched for from the top 100 most visited blogs.

The quantitative analysis was based on a coding of texts that explored the problems and solutions related to the economic crisis and consumption. A standardized content analysis guideline was prepared, consisting of the main codes (besides descriptive codes like channel, year etc.) inspired by a problem-analysis approach: the problem (specification of an unwanted condition and its causes); possible solutions (what would change the unwanted condition) and actors (institutional or individuals) responsible for finding or implementing the solutions. The coding system was rather detailed, therefore single codes were assembled into larger sub-topics during the analysis process. Within the category 'problems' 23 sub-codes were identified, however during the analysis phase these topics were assembled into larger groups (see Appendix 1); 20 sub-codes were distinguished under the category 'solutions/resolvers', which were also combined into larger units (see Appendix 2). Within both the category of problems and category of solutions, the types of actor(s) from whose viewpoint the problem was reflected, or on whom the responsibility for finding a solution was imposed, were also coded. Since multiple codes could be found in one text, some of the topics were coded multiple times. For example, two codes ('investments and actions of enterprises' and 'buying local goods', plus the responsibility of both the state and of individuals) were counted in the following text: "*We have to favour the development of our own enterprises, not only with short-term guarantees, but also by encouraging people at the national level to start consuming local production ...*" (forum *Delfi Naistekas*, 2009). A text could also contain several sub-codes that fell into the same category.

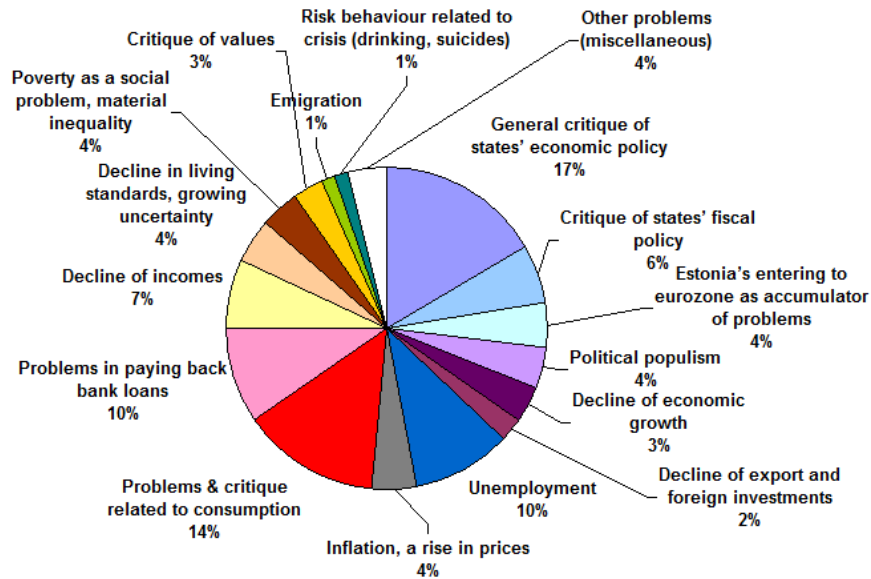
The larger story lines were explained with the help of factor analysis (principal components analysis with Varimax rotation) that delineated the structural connections between the coded problems and solutions. The formed factors were interpreted at first quantitatively and afterwards qualitatively. For the qualitative text analysis, only texts that touched upon individual-related issues and solutions, such as consumption, values and decrease of incomes, and which had high scores for the relevant factors, were selected.

5. Results

Media reflections on the problems and solutions related to the economic crisis. Before focusing on the problems directly pertaining to consumption, the general context of the discussion of the economic crisis in the Estonian

media is explained. Chart 1 and Appendix 1 show what kind of problems and issues were raised in the media texts in relation to the economic crisis.

Chart 1. Proportions of the instances of specific problems mentioned in relation to the economic crisis or consumption in the Estonian press and social media during 2008–2010

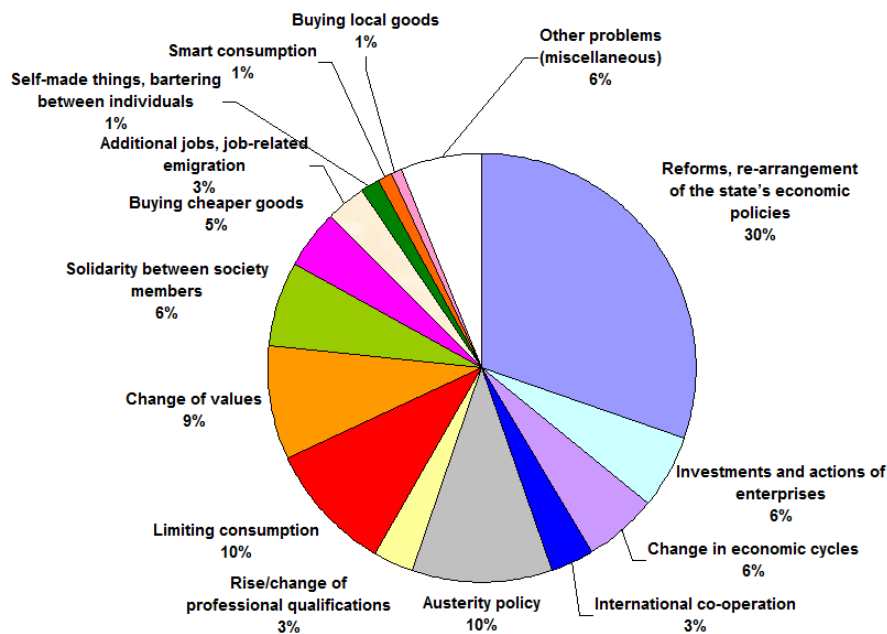


About half of the texts in the sample problematized the Government's economic and fiscal policy (including Estonia joining the Euro Zone), entrepreneurial activities (export, investments) and political populism as contributing to the crisis and hindering the finding of solutions. 20 percent of the texts concerned individuals' problems in relation to lack of money in one or another way: increased prices of goods; declining living standards and growing uncertainty; problems with repaying bank loans; poverty and material inequality as a social problem. Ten percent of the texts specifically concerned the topic of unemployment as one of the causes of material hardship. The share of texts devoted to the discussion of problems related to consumption (i.e. how to spend money) was 14%. In addition to exploring the problems caused by or accompanying the economic crisis, proposed solutions were also investigated. The results are shown in Chart 2 and Appendix 2.

About 55 percent of the solutions proposed in the media concerned state level actions: general economic or specific fiscal policy; support for entrepreneurs to export and receive investment; developing international co-operation. Six percent of the texts discussed individual actions in relation to

jobs and employment, such as improving one's qualifications, learning new skills or working abroad. 15 percent of the texts proposed more abstract solutions: the need to change one's values (a shift from materialism, hedonism and individualism towards universalism) and calling for stronger solidarity between people and to help each other. 18 percent of the texts proposed solutions directly related to changing individuals' consumption patterns and activities: discontinuing or limiting the consumption of certain product categories (e.g. holidays abroad, eating out); buying cheaper goods (e.g. foodstuff, clothes); producing things instead of buying them (e.g. making presents for Christmas, growing one's own vegetables); consuming smartly (e.g. cooking good food from cheap ingredients).

Chart 2. Proportions of the instances of solutions to the problems related to the economic crisis proposed in Estonian press and social media during 2008–2010



Of all the texts that problematized consumption, changing relevant activities was most often suggested as a solution: 62% of the texts used this problem-and-solution construction. Mental development (change of values) was also proposed as a solution to consumption-related issues (9% of texts). Almost a quarter of the texts included state level actions as a resolution to

individuals' consumption-related worries. Changing one's habits was also suggested as a solution to a lack of money (in 23% of the relevant texts). Thus, consumption was constructed as a relatively important domain of change; it had a rather powerful position in the mediated reflections on the sources of, and solutions to, economic adversity during the crisis.

Chart 3 shows how different types of media and different authors reported on the economic difficulties. Politicians, experts, scientists and representatives of the liberal arts who had a voice in the media, discussed the issues predominantly from the viewpoint of institutional actors. The grassroots content produced via social networks focused much more frequently – but not exclusively – on the perspective of an individual actor. The journalistic production was in the middle. Consumption-related issues were discussed as a main topic in a total of 139 media texts. Of them, 25% were written by professional journalists, 27% were the opinions of writers, politicians or specialists in other fields, or were published in the press and mediated/edited by professional journalists, and 46% were (mainly anonymous) comments in forums or on blogs. At the same time, from all the texts written on social media, those that dealt with consumption formed 30%. The grassroots content producers discussed the topic more actively compared to the various opinion leaders who gave interviews or published columns in the press.

We also looked for interrelationships between different categories of problems and solutions in the texts with the aim of exploring the meta-level story lines. The complexity of the inner structure of the texts varied: two thirds of them concerned multiple problems and or multiple solutions; one third concerned just one issue and its resolution or raised a concern without offering any solution. It is worth mentioning that the number of multiple issues raised was higher (1/2 of the texts) than the number of multiple solutions proposed (1/3 of the texts).

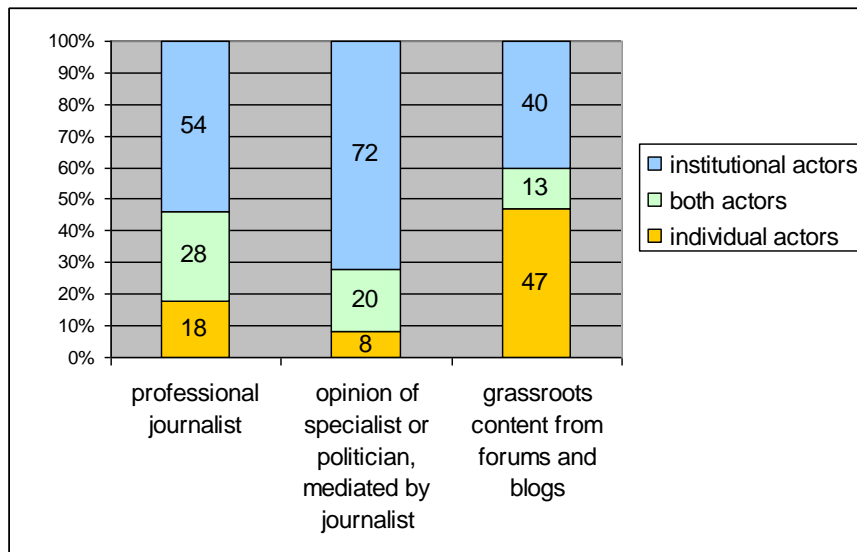
For a deeper insight we used factor analysis for categories of both problem and solution variables. From the several factor graphs produced, the eight-factor graph was the clearest and most informative (Appendix 3).

The formed factors (Appendix 3) indicated the dominant story lines in the Estonian media with reference to the economic downturn. The first factor – with the strongest explanatory power – centred on the state's economic policy, interpreted in the media as a somewhat 'closed' system and solely responsible for doing away with economic hardship. It is remarkable that the possible contribution of consumers (via buying cheaper goods) was correlated negatively (though rather weakly) with this pattern.

The second factor represented a mental interpretation of the economic crisis, concentrating on a criticism of the perceived materialistic and

individualistic values prevailing in society that could be improved with a value shift. It is noteworthy that this pattern was ‘purely’ idealistic, i.e. the problems and their solutions exist solely in people’s mentality, forming a sort of self-referential system.

Chart 3. The actors from whose viewpoint the problem was reflected in the media discourse over 2008–2010, broken down by the different types of media content production



The third factor united the troubles related to a lack of money and unemployment, and suggested increasing one’s income by being more active in the labour market (including emigration and continuing education) as a solution. These active strategies aimed at improving one’s living standard were opposed to the passive strategy of curbing consumption. Thus, this factor represents a rather liberal and modern approach (i.e. work harder, do not limit your consumption) that is opposite to the critique of consumerism.

The fourth factor combined disapproval of the state’s fiscal policy and of Estonia joining the Euro Zone as the cause of the complications and a policy of austerity as a way out. This story line was rather similar to the government’s own ideas about a conservative state budget; however, people were also rather critical of EU issues (i.e. diverging from government rhetoric). The fifth factor represented a macro-level (economic growth, inflation), global and long-term (change in economic cycles) interpretation of the economic crisis.

The sixth factor focused more on individual level reflections of the recession. As a solution of, and alternative to, criticized consumerism, smarter

consumption patterns and a return to a “natural” economy (self-made things and bartering) was proposed. It is notable that the idea of an alternative way of living and anti-consumerist notions were negatively connected with the social problems and more risky behaviours fostered by the economic crisis. Thus, criticism of consumption was rather elitist and oriented to a change in lifestyle rather than to alleviating the social side effects of the modern capitalist system.

The seventh factor concerned social problems – increasing poverty and material inequality – for which political populism is blamed. More solidarity in society was proposed, while international co-operation that would need a state policy was not trusted. This kind of pattern was very local and social, and had a somewhat populist tint.

The eighth factor represented the opposing nature of entrepreneurial and critical discourses regarding the loan policies of banks, which was heavily criticized by the Estonian media (Sobak, forthcoming).

Thus, the story lines in the media were rather different in terms of different societal sub-systems: state policy; enterprises; the labour market; anti-materialist ideologies; the idea of solidarity. Consumerist ideas were covertly accompanied by the ideas of harder-working individuals and the ability to uphold consumption volumes, constructed as a symbol of a person’s worth in the labour market. The anti-consumerist idea was oriented towards experimentation with lifestyle, not on the idea of solidarity and sharing.

While quantitative structural analysis helps to build the scaffolding that surrounds the building of story lines for socially meaningful acts in times of economic crisis, the positioning of the consumer and their repertoires of performances can only be explained via qualitative analysis.

6. Positioning of the consumer

As the content analysis indicates, individual deprivation was reflected from a liberal context (suggestions to work more and harder, rather than limit one’s consumption). The qualitative analysis of the texts revealed a similar pattern. The responsibility for solving one’s material troubles was imposed on the individual. Discussion of the difficulties on women's social forums was positioned outside of social norms and considered ‘whining’. For example:

Why do you whine, change something about your life. Work more or free yourself from your loan burden, everything is up to you. It is always easier to whine Delfi Naistekas, 2008

The factor analysis indicated that criticism of consumerism was constructed in the media as a matter of lifestyle that was easy to alter. The qualitative analysis revealed that the crisis was portrayed as temporary. For example, the synonyms used to describe the economic crisis represented it as something hard but that would pass, a temporary setback without fatal consequences, e.g. 'a crisis of lifestyle' or 'a post-boom hangover'. The latter corresponds to the findings of Cibulskienė (2012), who analysed the metaphors used to describe the economic crisis in Lithuanian media discourse and found the metaphor 'illness' was frequently used. However, compared to the phrases used in Lithuanian media, the Estonian media depicted the crisis as a more temporary phenomenon.

The temporal view was connected with the (self)-positioning of the author and or addressee as an educated, middle-class person, who was well equipped for adapting their consumption patterns to hard times. The crisis was sometimes even seen as something beneficial, i.e. that slowed down the consumption frenzy of the economic boom. The modifications to consumption, seen as socially 'normal' during a crisis, were rather elitist, such as giving up holidays abroad, limiting conveniences. A quote from a newspaper in the first year of the crisis highlights this:

You don't have to run underfloor heating at full power all the time; and walk shorter distances rather than drive. Toivo Tänavsuu, 2008

The texts also suggest that owing to lower incomes, people should not spend as much time on consumption activities and therefore that consumption would become more about function than entertainment. This meant that time freed from consumption could be put to other uses, such as the possibility of spending more time with one's friends and family—thereby strengthening social ties that might have been overshadowed by people's hectic lifestyles during the time of fast economic growth:

Now I have time for myself and my family. There is no rush, you can sit at home and do the things you could only dream of earlier. You can visit friends and they have time for you. Delfi Naistekas, 2009

The quantitative analysis indicated that about half of the texts that contained—in some form or another—criticism of consumption, were written by professional journalists, columnists, politicians and specialists. These people represent well-educated, relatively well-off white collar workers, whose personal experience with the crisis was related to more amenable-to-change lifestyle aspects, rather than structurally prescribed everyday facets of domestic

and professional life that are complicated, if not impossible, to alter. To a large extent the media did not touch upon the adversity of the low-income population, who faced graver difficulties (lack of food, utility payment debts, loans) when trying to cope with the crisis and unemployment. They were portrayed as ‘others’. The expressions were empathetic, yet lacked calls to help them with real actions (except for the Christmas campaigns). While lifestyle-related advice was frequent in the social media, for more serious misfortunes, such as unemployment or the inability to repay bank loans, no advice was offered. Some people posting on social media admitted their lack of room for manoeuvre openly. For example:

The main thing now is to keep calm and hold on to your job. [...] I really feel for those who have been made redundant and I cannot imagine what I would do if it was me Delfi Naistekas, 2008

Some advice was however provided regarding how to make ends meet. The main source of this were not forums or blogs, but the weekly paper *Maaleht* that is aimed at the rural population. This newspaper organised a competition of thriftiness tips that was popular among its readers. One example from this collection was:

... at the beginning of the month when I get my benefit money, then I'll pay the bills immediately, for 200 kroons I'll also buy dry ingredients for the whole month. Saving tips collected by the weekly paper *Maaleht*, 2008

This competition also engendered active forum discussion, where the imagined borders of “normalities” clearly emerged. Some of the tips suggested were positioned by other forum writers as “too” drastic ways of saving that were below human dignity. Some examples with a meaning below (or dangerously close to) the borderline of dignity were: using dish washing water in the bathroom; watering flowers with melt water from snow; consuming cheaper herbs instead of expensive medicines; ordering one plate for two persons when eating in a restaurant; having children draw with coal instead of pencils; having children play with empty yoghurt cups in a sand box; grinding up egg shells to retrieve calcium. Thus even when somebody came along with radically innovative ideas (either from real economic need or for fun), these were de-normalized on social media.

The factor analysis revealed that the story line of values was quite distinct from other constructed patterns of problems-and-solutions. The qualitative analysis indicated that criticism of consumerist values was very idealistic, was

accompanied by strong (somewhat religious) rhetoric, and had poor critical analysis of societal structures, power relations and or the historical-cultural background. At best, the crisis was seen as a kind of punishment for people for exhausting their consumption opportunities after the collapse of the Soviet system, under which people were deprived of most consumer pleasures. For example, the following quote states that when in the Soviet Union, people naively dreamed of a better life with unlimited consumption possibilities, but now they realize that consumption is not the thing that makes them happy:

During the Soviet era we dreamed about capitalism that would take us to the Nirvana of goods of extremely high quality. Such Nirvana is nowhere to be seen, there is just consumption mania and growth percentages that do not mean anything. Blogger Sekeldaja, 2010

The critique of consumerist values was accompanied by romanticized calls to 'return' to one's ancestors' wisdom and traditional way of life. Media texts represented berry-picking and vegetable gardening as 'nice' practices of traditional life, yet the hardships of traditional farming were left unmentioned. Thriftiness was represented as a pristine value and an intrinsic characteristic of Estonians. For example:

... the difficulties will not knock us down; with a peasant's stamina we will overcome the bottom of the downturn. Märt Rask, 2009

The recession was also seen as an opportunity or redemption: (re)-turning to nobler values such as relationships with loved ones, culture, hobbies, recycling and environmental conservation. Excessive consumption was seen as being needed to be substituted by thriftiness and responsible consumption choices, which may form a base for future, more sustainable, changes:

Actually, it should be like this all the time, i.e. the economic crisis should be permanent to ensure a sustainable and environmentally friendly life. Blogger Roheline Magnet, 2009.

The quantitative inquiry revealed that the story line of a socially and environmentally responsible lifestyle was rather marginal and distinguished from other, more 'mundane', story lines. In this form it offered hardly any encouragement for consumers' self-positioning.

In general the economic crisis was reflected in the Estonian media from the viewpoint of (upper)-middle class consumers, who were socio-materially capable of modifying their lifestyles. The latter was supported by the story line

about thriftiness and patriotic traditional values that nonetheless maintained modern criteria for dignity and a somewhat elitist flavour.

7. Discussion

Given that despite the idea of sustainability is gradually becoming more powerful both in academic and lay discourse, the construct of abundant consumption as a symbol of well-being, social status and freedom of self-expression is still deeply embedded in the social practices of modern societies, we asked: how were consumption related issues mediatized during the recent economic recession?

The article analyses public reflection of the abundant consumption in Estonia in the context of economic crisis. Estonia offers a good case where the consumption is a symbol not only of social status but since the re-gaining of independence in 1991 it has also maintained the connotation with freedom and Western way of life (as opposed to the Soviet state regulated economy of scarcity). The empirical analysis investigated how the issues related to consumption were represented in nationwide dailies, in forums and on social media, and whether and how new consumption normalities were constructed and who was given the power to speak in the media.

The results revealed that both professional and grassroots level media channels discussed consumption alongside the topics of e.g. state policy, the labour market and entrepreneurship. 14 percent of the texts tackled consumption related problems directly and 18 percent of the texts contained a proposition for changing consumption patterns as a solution to the individual economic difficulty. As Ion (2014), we also saw that (in)sufficient income and uncertainty about the future were prominent topics, as was consumer advice that suggested people discontinue the expensive habits of a “better living standard” (such as vacationing abroad). People were vigilant that thriftiness tips did not impinge of their human dignity and that others should not take any radical steps (e.g. the idea of children playing with empty yoghurt cups was not welcomed in a consumers’ forum). Conversations on how to spend money more smartly, buy cheaper goods and limit consumption (cf. Mihai et al, 2010; Alimen & Bayraktaroglu, 2011; Kaytaz & Gul, 2014) were present in the Estonian media as the main suggested solutions to the people's economic problems. The norm of downshifting was to some extent in opposition to the norm of being active and wanted by the labour market. That is, those who were less attractive as employees were advised to restrain themselves more. This kind of story line principally follows conventional liberal and modern ideology. Texts in which use of one’s time was discussed were relatively rare, but in general the results corresponded with the findings of Khademi-Vidra

(2014), who found that time freed from consumption activities was spent on substitutions: in particular on those supporting social relationships.

Also, the discussion of values was present in the media: 10 percent of texts included a value shift as a way out of the crisis. Criticism against the pre-crisis consumer culture and some new alternatives were presented. However, in general the story lines constructed the crisis as temporary and did not refer to innovative consumption patterns. During and after the economic crisis the mediatization of contested consumption was carried out by the same middle-class consumers who were the protagonists in our analysis. They met some challenges of (temporarily) re-arranging their lifestyles, but did not risk complete socio-material deprivation. We agree with Biressi and Nunn (2014), who argued that individuals acted rather selfishly during the crisis and gave little advice for the economically vulnerable; they silenced rather than encouraged people to have their own "voice" (e.g. by de-normalizing some of the thriftiness tips suggested). On the basis of our study we partly agree with Dahl (2009), who claimed that during economic crises immaterial values become more important than material ones. The critique of material-consumerist values and the calls for people to "morally" improve themselves remained a separate category that had not much to do with more "mundane" topics of coping with everyday life. We did not identify any rise in consumer activism, as was reported in studies done elsewhere. The crisis was sometimes seen as a kind of punishment for people for their excessive consumption after the collapse of the Soviet system. Sometimes romanticized suggestions to 'return' to one's ancestors' wisdom and traditional life style was suggested instead of post-Soviet consumerism. We argue that this kind of story line, which has strong national and religious colouring, does not offer much ground for a rise in innovative ways of contested consumption.

Appendix 1. Frequency of mentioning a problem related to the economic crisis or consumption in the Estonian press and social media 2008-2010

Problems related to state policy	No of texts concerning the particular topic *
General criticism of the Government's economic policy*	155
Criticism of Government's fiscal policy	55
Estonia joining the euro zone as the underlying cause of problems	42
Political populism	40
Decline in economic growth	32
Decline in export and foreign investments	21
Problems related to both the Government policy and individuals' copying	
Unemployment	95
Inflation, price increase	40
Problems reflected mainly at the level of individuals	
Problems & criticism related to consumption*	130
Problems with the repayment of bank loans	92
Decline in incomes	64
Decline in the living standard, increasing uncertainty	41
Poverty as asocial problem, material inequality	36
Criticism of values	30
Emigration	13
Risk behaviour related to the crisis (drinking, suicides)	12
Other problems (miscellaneous)	37

* The problems presented in Table 1 were coded as mutually exclusive; however, a single text could contain several of the problems coded above.

Appendix 2. *Frequency of mentioning solutions to the problems of the economic crisis or consumption in the Estonian press and social media, 2008-2010*

Solutions related to institutional actors: state, entrepreneurs	No of texts
Reforms, re-arrangements of the Government economic policy	185
Investments and actions of enterprises	34
Changes in economic cycles	34
International co-operation	21
Solutions related both to institutional and individual actors	
Austerity policy	63
Rise/change in professional qualifications	19
Solutions related to individual actors	
Reduction of consumption	59
Change in values	53
Solidarity between members of society	39
Buying cheaper goods	28
Additional jobs, job-related emigration	19
Self-made things, bartering between individuals	8
Smart consumption	6
Buying local goods	6
Other problems (miscellaneous)	37

Appendix 3. Factors formed between crisis-related problems raised and solutions proposed as reflected in the Estonian press and social media within 2008-2010. (Variables marking the solutions are in italics, problems in the normal font. Negative factor loadings are marked in bold)

F 1	
<i>Reforms, re-arrangements of the state's economic policy</i>	,824
General criticism of the state's economic policy	,795
<i>Buying cheaper goods</i>	-,298
F2	
Criticism of values	,812
Value change	,796
F3	
Unemployment	,704
<i>Improvement/ change of professional qualifications</i>	,530
<i>Additional jobs, working abroad</i>	,476
Limited consumption	-,331
Decline in the living standard and incomes, growing uncertainty*	,203
F4	
Criticism of the state's fiscal policy	,654
Estonia joining the Eurozone as a problem	,599
<i>Austerity policy</i>	,576
F 5	
Change of economic cycles	,807
Decline in economic growth, inflation	,752
F 6	
Smart consumption	,688
<i>Self-made things, bartering between individuals*</i>	,518
Problems & criticism related to consumption	,474
Risk behaviour related to the economic crisis	-,348
F7	
Political populism	,561
<i>International co-operation</i>	-,478
Poverty and material inequality	,415
<i>Solidarity between members of society</i>	,415
F8	
Problems with repaying bank loans	,660
Decline in export and investments	-,524
<i>Investments and actions of enterprises</i>	-,434

* Some single variables with strong correlation between them were accumulated into one variable before the factor analysis.

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