

The Global Yearning for Cultural Continuity, National Identity, and Nostalgia in the 2020s

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Abstract

This article examines the worldwide phenomenon of heightened desire for cultural continuity and national identity—conceptualized through the German term *Heimat*—as documented in major international surveys and regional studies from 2025–2026. Rather than attributing these sentiments solely to external political influences, this analysis demonstrates their endogenous roots in demographic change, economic anxiety, and institutional disruption. Through comparative analysis of data from Pew Research, the World Values Survey, Eurobarometer, and regional institutes, the article maps the global manifestations of this phenomenon while demonstrating that the Dutch case, though often framed through the lens of American political imports, reflects authentic domestic concerns rooted in decades of systematic social-scientific documentation. The article argues that understanding *Heimat* as a legitimate expression of human need for belonging—rather than primarily a vehicle for political extremism—enables more nuanced policy responses and intellectual discourse.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary moment of rapid technological change, institutional fragmentation, and demographic fluidity, a distinctive pattern has emerged across multiple societies: populations increasingly express concern about the loss of cultural continuity, national distinctiveness, and shared belonging. These expressions manifest variously as concerns about immigration policy, demands for cultural preservation, assertions of national sovereignty, and appeals to historical identity. Scholarly and policy attention has often focused on the most visible political expressions of these sentiments—particularly the American "Make America Great Again" movement—yet recent data suggests this framing obscures a more complex, globally distributed, and deeply rooted phenomenon.

The German concept of *Heimat*, approximately translatable as homeland or the experiential sense of home, encompasses not merely geographic location but the emotional, social, and cultural infrastructure through which individuals experience belonging. It comprises linguistic continuity, customary practices, historical narrative, and the felt coherence of a shared social world. The contemporary yearning for *Heimat* represents something distinct from classical nationalism: it is not principally a demand for territorial expansion or ideological dominance, but rather an expression of existential concern about the maintenance of recognizable social worlds in the face of transformative change.

This article examines the empirical evidence for this global phenomenon, analyzes its regional variations, and addresses its manifestation in the Dutch context specifically. The analysis draws on

major international surveys conducted in 2025–2026, including studies by Pew Research, the World Values Survey, Eurobarometer, and regional research institutes, alongside systematic Dutch social-scientific documentation stretching back more than a decade.

2. Conceptual Framework: *Heimat* as Analytical Category

Heimat resists simple definition precisely because it integrates multiple dimensions of human experience. Contemporary scholarship on the concept distinguishes between several analytical levels:

Geographic-Political Dimension: The nation-state as bounded territory and locus of governance and sovereignty.

Linguistic-Cultural Dimension: Shared language, artistic traditions, customary practices, and symbolic repertoires that constitute collective identity.

Temporal-Historical Dimension: Continuity with and narrative integration of the past into present identity.

Affective-Existential Dimension: The subjective experience of security, recognition, and belonging within a comprehensible social order.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that *Heimat*-seeking behavior is neither pathological nor reducible to xenophobia (though it may be instrumentalized for xenophobic purposes). Rather, it appears to represent a fundamental human orientation toward cognitive coherence, social recognition, and intergenerational continuity. Research in environmental psychology and sense-of-place studies has documented that experiences of rapid environmental and social change correlate with increased emphasis on stability and familiar reference points.

Critically, the concept is cross-culturally valid, though its specific manifestations vary. While the German *Heimat* carries particular historical weight and conceptual sophistication, functionally equivalent yearnings appear throughout human societies: the Japanese *furusato* (hometown/home village), the Portuguese *saudade*, and various expressions in Nordic, Eastern European, and other linguistic contexts all capture dimensions of this experience.

3. Global Survey Evidence: Structural Commonalities and Regional Variations

3.1 Universal Dimensions of Identity

The most comprehensive recent assessment of national identity criteria comes from Pew Research Center's January 2025 cross-national survey, which measured 36 countries across multiple identity components. The research found remarkable consistency regarding which factors respondents consider most important for "truly" belonging to one's nation:

Language and Linguistic Continuity emerge as the dominant criterion, with a median of 86% of European respondents and comparable figures in other regions identifying language proficiency as essential to national belonging. This consistency across diverse societies suggests that linguistic continuity functions as a primary vector for the experience of *Heimat*—language carries not merely

communicative content but accumulated cultural meaning, historical reference, and the subtle coordinate systems through which one's society makes sense.

Traditions and Customary Practices follow closely, with 75–82% of respondents in Western democracies identifying these as important. This category encompasses rituals, celebrations, arts, food practices, and behavioral norms that mark the boundaries of "how we do things here."

These findings are replicated and extended in the ongoing World Values Survey Wave 8 (2024–2026), which similarly finds that national pride remains robust across established democracies, contradicting assumptions about the decline of national identification in cosmopolitan societies.

3.2 Secondary and Context-Dependent Dimensions

Pew's supplementary analysis on religious nationalism reveals significant regional variation. Religio-national identification is substantially stronger in societies with recent experiences of religious-political mobilization (Indonesia, Pakistan, Tunisia) than in secular Western contexts. This suggests that *Heimat* components are culturally and historically contingent: the "formula" for belonging varies based on a society's particular historical trajectory and current institutional configuration.

Birth location similarly shows differential weight: in countries with significant internal migration or recent nation-state formation (India, Brazil), birthplace carries substantial psychological weight; in more historically stable, geographically mobile societies, it functions as a more minor identity component.

3.3 Measuring Nostalgia and Temporal Orientation

The Museums Association's February 2026 report documents what it terms a "rise of nostalgic nationalism" across Western societies. Unlike earlier waves of historical interest, this pattern exhibits specific characteristics: intensified emphasis on "national glories," attention to historical ruptures perceived as losses, and mobilization of historical narrative for contemporary political purposes. The association's data suggest this phenomenon appears particularly pronounced in the United States and Europe—precisely those societies experiencing the most acute institutional disruption and demographic change.

4. Regional Manifestations

4.1 United States: Nostalgic Nationalism and National Decline Narratives

American expressions of *Heimat*-seeking are deeply imbricated with national-decline narratives. Gallup's June 2025 measurement of American national pride registered a historical minimum—a finding of considerable significance precisely because it correlates with intensified emotional investment in historical narratives of American greatness. This pattern suggests that the demand for restoration ("Make Again") functions as psychological response to documented loss of national confidence.

The American variant differs from other Western expressions in its explicit racialization and internationalist dimensions. Concerns about national identity in the American context are disproportionately articulated through immigration rhetoric and anxieties about demographic

change—reflecting America's particular history of racial hierarchy and its role as immigration destination.

4.2 European Contexts: Sovereignty, Cultural Preservation, and Historical Rehabilitation

European expressions of *Heimat*-seeking manifest through several distinctive channels:

Germany presents a particularly instructive case. The term *Heimat* itself, burdened by Nazi appropriation, had largely disappeared from respectable discourse. Its recent reappearance in mainstream politics—particularly through the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and its articulation of cultural defensiveness against globalization and migration—represents what might be termed a "de-prohibition" of the concept. Recent scholarship documents how this rehabilitation functions simultaneously as cultural reclamation and political extremism, depending on context and actors.

Eurobarometer data (February 2026) confirm that despite decades of European integration efforts, national identification remains the primary identity reference point for EU citizens. While contingent support for European institutional frameworks appears during crises, national identity constitutes the stable, affectively dominant orientation. This finding has profound implications for EU cohesion and helps explain the persistent salience of sovereignty discussions across member states.

Eastern European countries (Poland, Hungary) exhibit particularly pronounced articulations of *Heimat*-seeking, framed through narratives of historical victimization and contemporary cultural defense. Government-sponsored cultural nationalism functions not as aberration but as continuation of post-Cold War identity politics.

4.3 Asia: State Nationalism and Regional Ordering

The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's 2025 "State of Southeast Asia" survey documents that national resilience and regional positioning dominate elite and popular concern across Southeast Asia. Here, *Heimat*-seeking articulates not primarily as defense against internal cultural change but as assertion of national autonomy within great-power competition. The emphasis falls on economic sovereignty, resource control, and self-determination in foreign relations rather than cultural preservation per se.

East Asian contexts (Japan, China, India) similarly demonstrate heightened attention to cultural and historical continuity, but more systematically integrated with state developmental projects and regional positioning strategies. National identity functions as mobilization resource for state projects rather than (as in Western democracies) as counterbalance to state-directed globalization.

4.4 Latin America: Ethnicity, Resource Nationalism, and Historical Reckoning

Latin American manifestations integrate questions of ethnic identity, indigenous rights, and resource control into *Heimat*-seeking narratives. Recent scholarship in *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* documents that in multi-ethnic societies with histories of racial hierarchy, national identity claims necessarily intersect with ethno-racial identity and historical justice concerns.

"Resource nationalism"—the assertion of state control over extractive industries—functions as contemporary expression of *Heimat*-seeking at the level of political economy. Countries including Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile have increasingly prioritized national control of lithium extraction, framing this through narratives of national sovereignty and the prevention of foreign economic domination. This represents *Heimat*-seeking transformed into economic and developmental register.

5. The Dutch Case: Endogenous Roots and Analytical Distortion

The Netherlands provides a particularly instructive case for examining how *Heimat*-seeking phenomena are understood, and how external political framings can obscure domestic realities.

5.1 Empirical Documentation of Dutch Identity Concerns

The Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (Social and Cultural Planning Office, SCP), an independent research institute with mandate to systematically document Dutch social conditions, has documented heightened identity concerns through multiple measurement waves.

"Thinking About the Netherlands" (2019): This foundational SCP report established baseline measurements of Dutch national identity and concern about cultural continuity. The survey found that 83% of respondents acknowledged the existence of a distinctive Dutch identity, grounded in shared language, symbolic repertoires, and historical narrative. Notably, this high percentage appeared across political spectrum, suggesting identity concern is not reducible to right-wing political movements.

"Migration as Mirror of Societal Self-Understanding" (2025): This recent SCP report constitutes the most significant recent documentation of Dutch sentiment regarding cultural change. The key findings warrant extended attention:

- 51% of respondents expressed concern that migration and open border policies threaten Netherlands' cultural distinctiveness ("eigenheid")
- 65% expressed preference for stricter migration policies
- Lower-educated respondents disproportionately frame authentic Dutchness through ancestry and tradition, suggesting that less-credentialed groups experience greater subjective cultural displacement
- The SCP's analytical interpretation frames migration concerns not as isolated xenophobia but as "mirror" reflecting broader societal pessimism regarding social cohesion, housing security, perceived safety, and economic opportunity

Critically, the SCP report explicitly characterizes these sentiments as endogenous—emerging from internal Dutch social conditions—rather than imported from external sources. The concerns reflect what might be termed "structural anxiety": the documented experience of changed circumstances (housing cost escalation, perceived neighborhood change, institutional stress) generates psychological need for explanation and reversal.

5.2 The Clingendael Framing and Its Limitations

The Clingendael Institute's two-part 2026 report "MAGA in the Netherlands" provides detailed analysis of how American political ideology circulates within Dutch society. The institute's first installment offers conceptual analysis of MAGA ideology; the second, empirically grounded in survey research, measures resonance of MAGA themes within Dutch public opinion.

The Clingendael data confirm the SCP findings: 54% of respondents perceive Western civilization as threatened; 63% prefer stricter migration policy. These figures closely align with the SCP measurements, suggesting consistent underlying sentiment.

However, the Clingendael analytical frame—emphasizing potential American political contagion and warning against destabilizing external influence—introduces significant interpretive distortion. The institute's conclusion emphasizes risks of American political imports threatening Dutch institutional stability. Yet this framing systematically underemphasizes several critical points:

1. **Temporal Precedence:** Dutch identity concerns appear in SCP documentation from 2019, prior to the intensification of American MAGA discourse, suggesting these concerns are not recent imports but represent continuation of documented trends.
2. **Institutional Autonomy:** The political expressions of Dutch identity concerns emerge through domestically-rooted parties (Forum voor Democratie, Geert Wilders' PVV) with independently-developed ideologies and constituencies. While these parties may draw rhetorical resources from international sources, their appeal rests fundamentally on domestic grievances and political space created by mainstream-party failures to address identity concerns.
3. **Normative Framing:** By emphasizing external threat, the Clingendael approach implicitly delegitimizes domestically-rooted identity concerns as somehow inauthentic or contaminated by foreign ideology. This rhetorical move forecloses serious engagement with the substantive questions—how should societies balance openness with stability, diversity with cohesion, cultural change with intergenerational continuity?

5.3 Forum voor Democratie as Dutch Expression of *Heimat*-Seeking

Forum voor Democratie, the primary political vehicle for Dutch identity-focused political mobilization, provides instructive demonstration of how *Heimat*-seeking articulates through domestic political channels. Examination of party programs, leadership statements, and media coverage reveals consistent emphasis on:

- Cultural preservation and defense of "Western civilization"
- Migration restriction as policy priority
- National sovereignty and skepticism toward supranational institutions (EU)
- Historical narrative emphasizing Dutch cultural and maritime accomplishments
- Concern about demographic change and cultural dilution

Critically, these emphases emerge from party's independent political development and respond to documented public concerns, rather than representing simple importation of American themes. The party's particular inflection—emphasis on Dutch Golden Age history, specific migration-source anxieties, skepticism about EU architecture—reflects Dutch rather than American political contexts.

6. Sociological Analysis: Why *Heimat*-Seeking Now?

Understanding the contemporary intensification of *Heimat*-seeking requires attention to structural conditions generating what might be termed "coherence anxiety"—the psychological experience of living in a social world whose rules, compositions, and trajectories have become difficult to comprehend or navigate.

6.1 Velocity and Visibility of Change

Demographic change in Western societies has accelerated dramatically over recent decades. The rapidity of neighborhood composition change, particularly in urban centers, exceeds the pace at

which previous generations experienced environmental change. This acceleration generates what sociologists term "cognitive strain"—the psychological burden of attempting to maintain stable self-understanding and social orientation amid rapidly shifting contexts.

6.2 Institutional Capacity and Responsiveness

Parallel to demographic change, citizens across Western democracies report declining institutional responsiveness and diminished efficacy of democratic voice. The combination of rapid change experienced as imposed (rather than chosen) with institutional inability to alter trajectory generates distinctive frustration. *Heimat*-seeking emerges partly as response to perceived institutional failure to manage change in ways preserving continuity.

6.3 Economic Precarity and Status Anxiety

While not uniformly distributed, economic restructuring—deindustrialization, housing-cost escalation, credential inflation—has generated genuine material insecurity for substantial populations. The SCP's finding that lower-educated respondents disproportionately express cultural displacement concerns may reflect underlying economic precarity experienced through cultural idiom. "Loss of cultural distinctiveness" functions as articulation of real economic marginalization.

6.4 Information Ecosystem Fragmentation

The fragmentation of information environments—the collapse of shared media landscapes—means that citizens inhabit increasingly divergent factual worlds. This fragmentation itself generates need for stronger identity anchoring, as large-scale collective problem-solving becomes more difficult. Identity provides cognitive coherence when shared factual understanding erodes.

7. Normative Implications and Policy Considerations

The preceding analysis generates several critical implications for policy and democratic discourse:

7.1 Legitimacy of Identity Concerns

Treating *Heimat*-seeking sentiments as intrinsically extremist or pathological forecloses serious democratic engagement. Citizens' concerns about cultural continuity, institutional stability, and intergenerational transmission represent legitimate dimensions of human flourishing. Democratic societies require mechanisms for articulating and addressing these concerns substantively rather than dismissing them as xenophobia or false consciousness.

7.2 Distinction Between Sentiment and Political Expression

The legitimate status of *Heimat*-seeking as sentiment does not entail endorsement of particular political expressions thereof. Identity-based concern can manifest through inclusive (emphasizing shared civic culture) or exclusionary (emphasizing ethnic or religious boundaries) political mobilization. Democratic discourse requires ability to distinguish and evaluate these different political expressions without delegitimizing the underlying sentiment.

7.3 Institutional Design and Inclusivity

The research suggests that heightened identity concern often correlates with perceived loss of voice and influence in institutional decision-making. Institutional designs enabling broader participation, transparency, and responsiveness to constituent concerns may address underlying anxieties even when they cannot reverse demographic or technological changes.

7.4 Narrative Competition and Historical Representation

The salience of historical narrative in *Heimat*-seeking suggests that how societies publicly represent their past carries significant implications for contemporary political orientation. Museums, educational curricula, and public commemorations constitute sites where *Heimat*-seeking can be engaged either through inclusive or exclusionary historical narratives.

8. Conclusion

The worldwide phenomenon of heightened *Heimat*-seeking represents neither anomaly nor temporary political fad, but rather a significant manifestation of human orientations toward coherence, belonging, and historical continuity under conditions of rapid change. International surveys from Pew Research, the World Values Survey, Eurobarometer, and regional institutes document this phenomenon across diverse contexts with regional-specific manifestations.

The Dutch case exemplifies the analytical problem generated by excessive focus on external political influences. The Clingendael Institute's concern with American political contagion, while not wholly baseless, obscures the deep endogenous roots of Dutch identity concerns, documented in SCP research spanning multiple years. Dutch citizens' concerns about cultural continuity, immigration policy, and national distinctiveness emerge from domestic social conditions, structural anxieties, and institutional failures to address change—not primarily from American political imports.

Understanding *Heimat*-seeking as legitimate human orientation—rather than primarily as vehicle for political extremism—enables more productive democratic discourse. It permits acknowledgment that demographic change, institutional transformation, and cultural evolution carry genuine losses alongside potential gains; that human beings reasonably seek continuity alongside change; and that democratic societies require mechanisms for integrating these concerns into governance rather than dismissing or suppressing them.

Future research should focus on: (1) longitudinal tracking of *Heimat*-sentiment intensity and its correlation with measurable social changes; (2) comparative analysis of institutional responses enabling *Heimat*-seeking to be channeled through inclusive rather than exclusionary political forms; (3) investigation of how different educational and institutional socialization pathways shape the political expression of identity concerns; and (4) analysis of narrative resources through which different societies represent historical and cultural continuity to younger generations.

The contemporary challenge for liberal democracies involves neither suppression nor instrumentalization of *Heimat*-seeking, but rather the difficult work of creating institutional, cultural, and political forms through which legitimate orientations toward belonging can be integrated with the irreversible conditions of modern pluralism.

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