

Russian Minority in Estonia

SOCIAL CO-EXISTENCE, EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE LABOUR MARKET

The role and influence of significant Russian minorities in Europe came to the fore during the current crisis in Eastern Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea. Russian minorities and their discontent, as well as so-called “pro-Russian separatists”, have repeatedly been addressed by Moscow, and the Russian majority of Crimea’s population served as an official justification for its incorporation into the Russian Federation. For this reason, the topic is also vital for the domestic affairs of Estonia – a state that has to deal with a major minority population share for years and is now reconsidering its options.

Since the re-establishment of Estonian independence in 1991, relations with the Russian Federation have never been easy but stressful and encumbered by sharp political rhetoric and recent developments in the fields of security, trade agreements and minority policies. The situation of the large ethnically Russian or Russian-speaking minority in Estonia has invoked dozens of international reports, resolutions and recommendations over the years. The consistent fear of seeing the pursuit for Estonian national unity, autonomy, confession and own cultural heritage being overturned by Russian influences familiar among Estonians. Similar are the arguments of the Russian side.

Looking back in history, there was a significant group of ethnic Russians even before the Soviet annexation in 1940. Russians always valued the region as a stepping stone towards the prosperous

countries of Northern Europe. Due to militarisation, industrialisation and Soviet policies of Russification, the number of ethnic Russians grew significantly with Russian becoming a de-facto official language in Soviet Estonia.

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the situation of the Russian minority changed dramatically with the reawakening of Estonian national consciousness as well as the societal urge to come to terms with the oppression of the past. Estonians faced the question: How can the country integrate the Russian minority in terms of citizenship, education, labour market access and social inclusion while avoiding the danger of excessive Russian influence and without coming into conflict with fundamental minority rights?

The Estonian societal participation and public visibility are useful indicators to measure the intended level of integration. Regarding the previous development, the key question is all about the extent in which societal minority participation may actually happen when historical memory overshadows social context. This extent seems to be limited for various reasons. Mainly due to the citizenship policy, the degree of political participation is relatively low. And even the Russian-speaking population with Estonian citizen status shows a rather reserved behaviour towards political or other commitment. Almost 80% of the Russian-speakers do not hold membership or participate in organizations.

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The field of citizenship is probably the most critical topic as well as the one where the unequal position of significant minority groups is the most obvious and visible. Many ethnic Russians feel humiliated by being demanded sound knowledge of Estonian and passing a history test in order to obtain a citizen's status¹; others simply have never had sufficient command of Estonian or are not willing to learn it because of the surrounding they live in being predominantly inhabited by other Russian speakers anyway. As a result, the number of completed naturalisation procedures is comparatively small and also on the decline for years.

Furthermore, growing enmities against the minority are increasing due to demographic changes and an ageing population. The fertility rate is low and many native citizens settle down elsewhere in the EU. Between 1989 and 2010, the Estonian population decreased by 0.23 Million. The Russian-speaking minority without citizen status itself often feels excluded – from access to higher positions within society or from the full benefits of the general welfare system. But there is still a strong core of (often older) minority members that will resist any state efforts to deepen their integration level. They often show difficulties and a lack of enthusiasm when it comes to language skills and the willingness to learn the official language, namely Estonian. Moreover, the required fees for completing the naturalization process as well as the ability to avoid the otherwise compulsory military service can play a role. Perhaps there is even some sort of *Slavic Pride* among certain members of the Russian minority that opposes approach-

1 Especially the history test has a reputation of being particularly Anti-Russian for focusing only on Soviet oppression and cruelties towards the Baltic population.

ing an Estonian identity. Acquiring local citizenship would also be accompanied by the loss of several visa and registration privileges for Russia and the other CIS states. But even though those points remain obstacles for a perspicacious and long-term oriented minority policy, there are other categories that define the integration process as well.

The labour market is such a category and until today one of the main areas of social discrimination, repulsion and disparity. It is the backbone of economic security, a key factor for social relations and exchange, important for individual aspects of psychological wellbeing and self-respect and a major influence for the future opportunities in life. The Estonian labour market is competitive and the situation very difficult for members of the Russian-speaking minority, regardless of citizenship status. They earn less, are often excluded from public offices and have a significant higher risk of facing rejection by potential employers than other citizens.

The employment rate among Estonians is higher than among non-Estonians: in 2013, 6.8 % of Estonians were unemployed, whereas among ethnic non-Estonians this rate was 12.4 %.² However there might be a future trend where Russian-speaking Estonians are in higher demand due to decreasing Russian skills among Estonians, opening a perspective for Russian-speakers in market areas with high interaction with Russia, amongst others tourism.

The roots for this phenomenon and for other obvious disadvantages lie deeper and its main component is primarily an educational one. The official Estonian language has an almost "sacred" status and is widely regarded as a central part of national identity and culture; a consensus that even reflects the way the

2 OECD Economic Surveys: Estonia 2015, p. 87.

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constitution³ handles this topic. According to official statistics, the Russian-speaking population makes up roughly more than a quarter of the Estonian population⁴, with many children today growing up in bilingual households. Nonetheless, in Estonia only the titular language has an official character while Russian is recognized as a mere foreign language. After the declaration of independence, the Russian language was quickly removed from all official functions and limited in usage.

Due to a mismatch between curricula and Estonia's educational plans, the language debate has gained momentum in politics as a leading topic in minority affairs. In 2007, Estonia has implemented a law that obligates schools to teach a minimum of 60% of the offered subjects exclusively in Estonian; also in cases in which the overwhelming majority of the students has a Russian-only language background. The goal is to strengthen and standardize education nation-wide, especially with the eastern region in mind, where the ethnic differences are most severe. For instance in the border town of Narva, being Estonia's third largest city, 97 % of the population are Russian speakers. Many representatives of the minority tend to recognize the pressure of the reform as an unjust imposition and when asked about the outcome, more than 50% claimed that the perspectives of Russian youth and their education quality will not improve but rather worsen.⁵ The same rigorous language

³ The Estonian Constitution states in § 6: "The official language of Estonia is Estonian."

⁴ <http://www.stat.ee/34278/>

⁵ Twelve percent (12%) agreed to the full extent, stating "Exactly true" while thirty-eight percent (38%) chose "Moderately true" and only nine percent (9%) opposed strongly with "Not true at all".

policy has also infected higher branches of education. Public universities offer their degree programs in most cases solely in Estonian. A certain fragmentation of the education thus takes place: Russian speakers without sound knowledge of Estonian or who wish to study in Russian rather choose private universities. In 2007, 55% of all students wishing to study in Russian enrolled in a private university, while for Estonian the percentage was merely 7 %.

Despite some efforts by the Council of Europe and the European Union to help solve the problems with and for Estonia's Russian speakers, the international community recognised the struggle of the minority and the fear of the majority first and foremost as a problem of national, or at the very most, regional relevance. This perception has changed with the emergence of the Ukrainian crisis and the ethnic fracture that goes along with the breach of latent linguistic, cultural and habitual borders. It graphically revealed the sizeable influence of ethnic heterogeneity and the power of minorities to cause severe political unrest when feeling oppressed and underprivileged. It also revealed how minorities can be influenced from outside sources and be deployed as an instrument for political purpose. Perhaps most notably – it finally revealed how seemingly stable political structures and constellations can cease to exist quickly and unexpectedly.

Estonians are aware that Russia's role during the crisis does not only affect their foreign and military policy plans but also raises the question of the probability for violent turmoils on their own ground. What would happen if the Crimean "referendum on independence" would have been held in Narva? Of course, there are

http://www.tiesproject.eu/component/option,com_docman/task%2cdownload/gid%2c351/Itemid%2c142/index.html.pdf

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plenty of Russians who are satisfied with the post-Soviet circumstances, enjoying the improving living conditions, the benefits of being EU citizens, the rule of law and most of all freedom, without invoking any sort of nostalgia. Others however feel isolated and disappointed with the state of affairs while they like to cultivate their minority role through glorifying their being Russian natives.

Russia gladly accepts this reception and is flexing its muscles. Since the 1990s, Moscow has emphatically proclaimed itself as the protector of Russians living in diaspora. It has developed a variety of instruments in order to try to influence domestic affairs, spanning from trade limitations, price increases for oil and gas to the utilisation of *Soft Power*. This includes but is not limited to the support of Kremlin-friendly groups and networks in the cultural sector with financial contributions, legal and organizational assistance as well as media strategies. The utmost extreme can be seen in Eastern Ukraine, where Russian-friendly groups are directly subsidized and supported with arms and weaponry.

It is hardly possible to make clear distinctions between the different spheres of Russian influence since the usage of power on the political field is highly dependent on flexible business and energy networks. Estonia even had an organized form of political representation for the Russian minority: the "Russian Party in Estonia" (VEE) merged fully into the Estonian Social Democrats (SDE) in 2012 after disappointing election results.

Estonia faces a problem that not only affects a wide variety of themes but also contains a historical dimension. Estonia had to handle a major minority population share now and for more than twenty years, and did mostly well. Nevertheless there are still issues it needs to overcome. Maybe the most important one concerns language. Estonia still considers

the Russian language as a tool for spreading Russian influence, preventing the nation of finally growing together. It is not so much about the language itself but about the influence the Russian government has on broadcast media, a well-known fact.⁶ Estonian language policy itself is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a clear sign that society is willing to foster integration. It will also most certainly help Russian-speaking youth when applying for employment inside the country. On the other hand, some arrangements appear to not only look strict, incompilant and exaggerated but also seem to be contradictory to international law.⁷ Feelings of discrimination that therefore occur lead to low level interethnic contact, isolation and open animosity towards the majority. Events like the 2007 riot over the relocation of a Soviet-era war statue in Tallinn are good examples for societal tensions that may erupt at any time. Estonia should continue to promote a strong and durable

⁶ This includes Television channels such as First Baltic, RTR Planeta, NTV Mir and radio stations. C. f. Agnia Grigas in *Legacies, Coercion and Soft Power: Russian Influence in the Baltic States* (2012), a Chatham House Paper
www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0812bp_grigas.pdf

⁷ The *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (1995), signed and ratified by all Baltic States underlines this in Article 10 (2) as follows: "In areas inhabited by persons belonging to national minorities traditionally or in substantial numbers, if those persons so request and where such a request corresponds to a real need, the Parties shall endeavour to ensure, as far as possible, the conditions which would make it possible to use the minority language in relations between those persons and the administrative authorities."

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commitment to integration while continuously encouraging Russian-speakers to be more active in the local social and political life, especially regarding the youth. They grew up in a comparatively prosperous state without the encumbrance of a Soviet past. The citizenship laws have been criticized as counterproductive and in addition inappropriate for the purpose of integration. The identity of young people and their self-conception as European citizens may help to develop a less demanding and more respectful dialogue between the members of Estonia's different ethnic groups. There are also other fields in which future generations sow the seeds of cooperation, exchange and partnership. The universities in Estonia could be a convenient tool to open up the European education market for Russian speakers in general. That would certainly strengthen the ties between all nations as well as conveying European values and a proper mode of thought to young Russians' mind-sets. In addition, it could serve the system of higher education in itself. A different position on the education market, including also a look towards Russia, could satisfy all parties and become an important step on the road towards surmounting the past. The success of socialization and integration procedures as a whole will be in any case

highly dependent on these educational developments but will also be affected by the general satisfaction with life and economic perspectives which society can ultimately provide.

Minority members have always been recognised as scapegoats and unreliable second-class-citizens but not many have identified them as ideal bridge-builders who can connect the titular identities and values. It is difficult as long as the relationship between Estonia and Russia remains frosty but in the long run their capability to transcend linguistic and cultural borders can prove itself valuable for further societal developments in 21st century Europe.

The task is to make this positive change happen without trapping itself into a rigid and inflexible position or neglecting fear, sorrows and interests of the autochthonous population that already experienced marginalisation and foreign cultural imposition. Regarding the fact that any policy approach to this day was primarily motivated by the necessity to handle the situation in the short run, the situation of minorities in Estonia still has the potential to experience a quick and unexpected change when the Ukraine crisis begins to fade away.