

ESTONIA

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The Crisis in Ukraine: An Estonian Perspective

AN ABSTRACT OF THE ESTONIAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL OUTLOOK AS A RESULT OF THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS.

While the two former Soviet republics are geographically located rather far apart on continental Europe, the crisis in Ukraine has a much greater effect on the Baltic state of Estonia than one would have originally assumed. The narrative of the so-called "artificial" internal Ukrainian boundary drawn up in 1945 that divides the country into a "European-influenced West" and a "Russian-influenced East" permeating European media since Maidan is also reflected in Estonia, which has a significant Russian-speaking minority of its own. Estonia's original ethnical homogeneity was upset by deportations and Russian settlement after the annexation by the Soviets, whereas former Soviet Ukraine after the Second World War was enlarged by incorporating large, which were traditionally more oriented towards the West. Both Ukraine and Estonia are finding it hard to escape this legacy of Soviet history, thus giving the crisis even more authenticity once reflected from an Estonian perspective. Not only does the linguistic divide split public opinions, ethnic and generational divides too largely affect the perception of the crisis.

From the walls of Toompea, surrounded by the fairy-tale like medieval city of Old Tallinn, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine seems to be taking place in another

world. But since Maidan and the overthrow of Yanukovych, which culminated into the Russian annexation of Crimea, Estonia is now starting to feel a tiny pinch as a result of the crisis. The Ukrainian crisis has reawakened memories that were perhaps better left asleep. First and foremost it detracts the integration process of Russian minorities which has always been on choppy water, but since the crisis the tens of thousands of "non-citizens" with grey alien passports feel even more isolated as a result of their identity and of political discrepancy. Secondly, it has opened an old wound in Estonia's linguistic divide, with Russian-speaking minorities making up a little more than a quarter of Estonia's population (approximately the same ratio that exists in Ukraine). Thus old and perhaps unfounded "suspicions and mistrusts" arose once again. On a more jubilant note however, the economy did not suffer too badly as it remains resilient and prone to immediate fluctuations in markets.

As in similar Western European narratives, the majority of Estonian news agencies blame Russia for the ongoing conflict. Nevertheless, to assume that Estonia only covers the Ukrainian side and perspectives is adamantly wrong. Estonian speaking media has been ex-

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tremely fair in giving space to both sides in its news-making process, for example Russian and separatists' speeches were broadcasted alongside Ukrainian ones concerning the Crimean annexation. Estonian media also understands Ukraine better than many of its counterparts in the West, with many reporters and journalists being of Ukrainian descent and having relatives in the country. In spite of that, it must be noted that some Russian language media outlets report on the crisis with narratives that are quite similar to Moscow, though the proportion remains small within the large pool, with major arguments breaking out inside the Russian speaking offices over how to report and portray certain situations. On the other hand, the availability of news channels broadcasted from Russia affects the delicate understanding and perceptions of the situation too. These "news" are regarded as nothing more than "lies and propaganda" by for instance journalist Erkki Bahovsky, who saw it being deployed by the Kremlin as a "tool" in its hybrid war in the Ukraine. While the portion is not big, certain Russian language outlets have been influenced by the Kremlin in their news-making and reporting process as could be seen from the 2007 scenario of the Bronze Soldier. The removal of the statue to commemorate Soviet veterans of the "Great Patriotic War" sparked a riot in Tallinn, with misinformation from the Russian language media further increasing violence by reports that the statue was destroyed or that it was dismembered and then reassembled. Although Moscow denied it, the riot gave a pretext for Russia to disable many of Estonia's media outlets', banking and governmental websites as a "lesson".

Estonia is as close as it could be to NATO with the Baltic state fulfilling the 2% defence budget and the quota of participation in Iraq and Afghanistan and the crisis has almost cemented the closeness of this relationship. While many doubted the credibility and the capability of the defence pact, Obama's visit in September 2014 was heralded as a symbol of the USA's commitment to the Baltics in case the region should ever be under threat. It dismissed fears arousing in the previous years about the Pacific Region evolving as the US first priority to counter the rise of China, leaving Eastern Europe and the Baltic region of marginal importance to Washington. Estonia's small military stature has contributed to strong support for NATO and foreign forces on the territory, with Euro scepticism level amongst the lowest in the EU. Despite being a full-fledged member of NATO, Estonia remains vigilant due to Russian unpredictability. The decision to annex Crimea about which many had not speculated illustrates that the Kremlin is under increasing pressure, both in terms of security and internal policy. Furthermore the fall of the rouble and the effects of EU sanctions only add to upset the impetuous Kremlin.

Unlike Ukraine, Estonia does not have an open border with Russia, one of the post-Soviet legacies the country chose not to adopt. Tight border controls ensure that a Ukrainian scenario will not ensue in the Baltic country. Russia mainly pursues its objectives by hybrid warfare especially in its attempt to split the Russian-speaking population by propaganda, the effectiveness of which for example is not as prominent in Estonia as it is in Latvia where the linguistic divide is deeper. Moscow has twofold objectives from the

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Ukrainian crisis: Firstly, it wishes to create internal cleavages within European countries, which shall lead to questioning Europe's orientation towards the West and transatlantic partnership. Secondly, it is trying to undermine the unity of the European Union by supporting Eurosceptic parties who performed particularly well in recent European Parliament elections.

When Crimea was annexed in April 2014, a few Western journalists wrote of a similar course of events happening in Narva and the Ida-Virumaa region of Estonia. These speculations were based on the rationale that the region too is populated by ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers with low socio-economic status compared to for example those in Tallinn. Nonetheless this thought has proven to be false. When sanctions were announced and the rouble started to depreciate, many Russian-speaking Estonians around the region (who often cross over to Ivangorod to shop) saw the "economic misery" with their own eyes, strengthening their perception that they are economically better off under Estonian administration. However some "hardliners" think otherwise and support the Russian stance as they are not afforded the opportunity that residents in Narva have. They are not able to experience the more rampant corruption that took hold of the Russian economy after sanctions and therefore remain largely unaware and misinformed due to the propaganda of the Russian language media.

Compared to the Russians of Estonia, the Estonian speaking community remains largely coherent in its view and support for the Ukraine in the crisis. The rift within the Russian-speaking community itself is sharper than the divide between the

Russian and Estonian speaking communities. Generational, geographical, and socio-economic status are some of the factors that divide the Russian-speaking community of Estonia regarding the Ukrainian crisis. In a community of 370,000 strong, it must also be noted that there are other Russian-speaking nationalities such as Belarusians and Ukrainians. It comes as no surprise that Ukrainians would condemn Russian actions in their country as they are able to see the hardships and sufferings of their relatives. In comparison, Belarusians remain somewhat divided due to the older generation and blue collar workers being more in favour of Putin and his actions. Some, especially the younger generation, choose to ignore the ordeal altogether as they did not experience the societal paranoia that their parents likely have experienced.

Grassroot initiatives have been organised by NGOs such as *Vaba Ukraina* (Free Ukraine) whereby the collection of materials, food and clothing have been substantial to help with the aid effort. They also organised concerts, opera and folk events under the banner of "From Estonia to Ukraine" ("Eestist Ukrainale") attended by hundreds of people to raise money for the Ukraine and to show solidarity and support. Relief supplies and other equipment were also collected for the Ukrainian military as well as money raised. The Ukrainian Catholic Church in Tallinn too has been the focal point of the relief effort with many volunteers and donations transferred to the Ukraine from Tallinn.

From an economic point of view, the Estonian market initially reacted calmly as it was used to the volatility of the Russian counter-part. In the past Russia of-

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ten invented certain economic barriers when the two countries experienced difficulties in relations. Therefore Estonia understands that the Russian market remains unreliable which is reflected through the percentage of exports share which stood at merely 11% before the sanctions, making Russia the third largest trading partner for Estonia as of February 2014. This fact forced Estonian markets in the past to constantly search for new markets which buoyed her economy up from a slump when sanctions were introduced. Trade trends from the Estonian Statistics office suggest that exports to Russia decreased by as much as 20% in the month of May, amounting to 108 million euros compared to the same period in the prior year. While it may be easy to apportion this trade loss to sanctions, the economic situation actually remains more complex. When compared to other Estonian export destinations such as the Ukraine (50%), the US (25%), Lithuania (17%) or even Sweden (19%), it can be seen that the loss in export to Russia is not an anomaly as it fits the pattern for the general reduction in Estonian exports with exports to Ukraine decreasing as much as 50% in the same period. However, since the trade volume is greater for Russia, it may seem that sanctions are having an effect. Cargo transport on Estonian railways for instance decreased in total by a fifth in 2014, with the amount of goods from Russia representing the highest percentage, but however decreasing by 30 % compared to the year before. Transit cargo declined by 25 %, causing 15 million euros in revenue loss. These effects can nearly all be attributed to Russian sanctions implemented against EU member states. In actuality, the recent depreciation of the Russian rouble has so far

had an even greater impact on the Estonian market than sanctions, with depreciation affecting a third of the real value trade volume. As a result the GDP increased only by 2% in 2014 opposed to 3.6% as predicted before the sanctions.

Russian tourists are also a large source of Estonian tourism income (57% of all foreign visitors to Estonia are from Russia, Latvia and Finland), with many of the infrastructure and facilities e.g. in Ida-Virumaa region aimed solely at Russians. With the fall of the rouble some of these are seeing less Russian tourists. Statistics from September 2014 show a 10% decrease in the number of Russian visitors to Estonia compared to the year before, resulting in a relatively quiet New Year period for many of the hotels. Consequently, this forces many of the hotels and tourist facilities to find ways to attract other tourists via additional means and special offerings. Russian airlines in general expect a drop in passenger numbers (as the first three quarters of 2014 showed 13 % less growth in passenger numbers) due to the Ukraine crisis and Western sanctions, forcing them to cut back on flights especially to Western destinations. Less Russian tourists have come to Estonia by train, too, which is illustrated by a decrease in passenger numbers on the train lines from Russia to Tallinn run by the private company "Go-Rail" by 40 % in the 2nd half of 2014. Recent cutbacks in prices and extended discounts between 50 and 60 % may also hint at difficulties for the operator of train connections from and to Moscow and St. Petersburg, which was even targeted by a potential state takeover in late autumn in order to compensate for losses of profit on the eastbound train connections. Possible explanations for the drop in pas-

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senger numbers include Russian railway customers (who alone are supposed to serve the Estonian tourism business profits of up to 60 million euros) following official advice not to travel to states that joined the sanctions against Russia. Narva in Eastern Estonia on the other hand is seeing a large influx of "Russian shoppers" hit by recent inflation and lack of Western commodities.

The crisis is providing the political establishment with certain nightmares. Estonian politicians have been rather quiet compared to those in other countries, with for example the Lithuanian President labelling Russia as a "terrorist state". Security has proven to be the issue number 1 on the political agenda for the elections in March 2015, whereby all parties sought for votes also of Russian speakers. Regardless of this many voters were more concerned with the "blunders of politics" than the Russian threat or the Ukrainian crisis. Not few Estonians are disappointed about politics in general and especially about the Reform Party who made a few blunders in recent years with allegations of corruption in their headquarter, internal disagreements within the government and Andrus Ansip's decision to leave office as Prime Minister and to move to the European Commission instead. These issues are however separate from that of the Ukrainian crisis as their nature derives from internal Estonian politics. On 01 March 2015, the Reform Party, stressing the importance of Estonian EU and NATO membership, was able to secure its leading position in Estonian politics although losing some seats. The Centre Party, which did well in the 2013 municipal election and prominently addresses Russian speaking voters, has polled strongly and came in second place.

However, they will probably become the largest opposition party, especially since their leader has expressed pro-Russian stances that alienated both Estonian voters and the other parties in parliament. Polls already indicated some losses for the national conservative IRL and it ended up losing nine of its former 23 seats in Parliament, thus ranking fourth largest party and probably having lost most of its former voters to the two newly emerging centre-right parties, the Free Party and the Conservative People's Party, who both addressed rather internal policy issues than security and foreign policy. IRL may however gain an important role by supporting or tolerating the continuation of the former government coalition consisting of the Reform Party and the Social Democrats. The latter, having recently given up their stance on the issue of defence cuts during the election campaign, also suffered significant losses but became the third largest party. Not only has the Ukrainian crisis had a particular and probably decisive influence on the elections in Estonia, it furthermore unified the standpoint of most parties concerning national defence.

The crisis still marks a challenging episode for Estonia in all possible ways but unless one really looks into the effects, it is not always thoroughly visible on the fabric of society. Similar to the younger generation of Estonians who are altogether indifferent to the crisis in the far-away land, everyday life functions regularly without any great disruptions or threats from the political implications of the events in Ukraine. But as one moves beyond youths, the generational, ethnic and linguistic divides will puzzle any onlooker to some degree. Not least because of its diverse and distinctive characteris-

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tics, Estonia's depths and varieties of opinions may be regarded themselves a microcosm of the situation in Ukraine. The crisis manifests itself in Estonia through the prominent election campaign issues of defence and security policy that will also feature in the agenda of the future government, as the main political parties stand united on this front with the developments and events in Ukraine in mind.