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POLITICS OF INTEGRATION: ESTONIA AND ITS RUSSIAN MINORITY

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Summary

This article presents a historical overview of the ways in which the relationship between Estonians and their Russian neighbors-turned-cohabitants has developed during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. It takes as its primary example the ways in which post-independence Estonia has handled its large ethnically Russian minority via citizenship and language laws as well as the impact such policies have had on integration success or lack thereof. The article concludes with a set of considerations for ways to further improve this relationship by reallocation of funding and reconsideration of targets for integration programs.

Key Words: Estonia, Russian, Integration, Citizenship, Language Policy.

Introduction

Estonia, a nation of 1.3 million inhabitants, is a post-Soviet Baltic state with a large, geographically concentrated Russian population that was settled in the country during the Soviet Union and remained there following the collapse of the Union and the concurrent declaration of Estonian independence in 1991. This Russophone minority, which accounts for approximately 26% of the Estonian population, has presented a challenge for post-Soviet state building and integration efforts, particularly given Estonia's relatively strict language and citizenship laws. While this was a pressing issue at the collapse of the Soviet Union, given the recency of the event and the accompanying uncertainty of the future, nearly three decades have passed since the early 1990s, and the relevant laws, attitudes, and even demographics of the Russian speaking Estonian minority have changed. It becomes important to ask, then, how has the Estonian government approached the issue

of minority integration, not only at the end of the 20th century, but more recently as well? Have the laws and programs implemented to aid in the integration of minorities been successful, and if so, what has their effect been on the minority populations? Finally, are there shortcomings in the Estonian approach to integration, and how might these be addressed?

This paper seeks to address these questions by first giving a brief explanation of the historical situation of the Estonian people, which may have informed their attitudes towards minorities in the post-Soviet space. Then it will continue with an explanation of the political situation accompanying the lead up to independence in the 1990s and the attitudes and relations between the ethnic Estonians and their ethnic Russian counterparts. Next, the beginning of the independence period will be examined with a look at the laws passed by the new Estonian government, their intent, and their immediate effect. This analysis will be brought into the more recent period with a look at new laws, attitudes, and surveys targeting and regarding Russian-Estonian integration. Finally, this paper will conclude with an evaluation on the effectiveness of Estonian integration, citizenship, and language policies and some suggestions for possible further actions.

Estonia through the Soviet Union

Although the Estonian language and culture have existed for centuries, much of their history has been dominated by colonization or rule by others. The Estonian people were under the dominion of the German Empire for six centuries and in the 18th century came under the influence of the Russian Empire. As the Russian Empire itself went through different periods of Russification and tolerance or intolerance with respect to its diverse territories, the Estonian language was either restricted, as under Nicholas I, or permitted, as under Alexander II. However, Bloody Sunday and the Bolshevik Revolution saw the end of the Russian Empire and with it, the realization of Estonian aspirations for independence. In 1918, Estonia officially declared independence and remained an independent state for the next 22 years, until 1940. During this time, it was signatory along with Russia to the Treaty of Tartu in which Russia relinquished its claims on Estonian territory.

Despite enjoying these two decades of independence, Estonia was allocated by the Nazi German regime to the Soviet Union as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, and was occupied by Soviet forces on June 16, 1940, being officially incorporated into the Union as the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic on August 6. During this period, Estonia and Estonian speakers were largely subject to the same set of Russifying laws that the other non-Russian soviets experienced. More specifically, because they were incorporated into the Soviet Union under the rule of Josef Stalin, they were subject to his more restrictive language and ethnic policies, such as forced migration and enforcement of Russian as the primary language of the Soviets (Melvin 2000, 134).

One of the most significant policies of the Soviet Union regarded the resettling of ethnic Estonians elsewhere in the Union and an accompanying influx of Russian-speaking settlers, primarily from Russia itself, as well as Belarus and the Ukraine. In terms of population, this shifted the demographics of Estonia drastically, with ethnic Estonians experiencing a decrease from 90% to 60% between the years of 1945 and 1989 (ECMI 1999, 6). The Russian speakers who were brought into the region were often settled in urban areas and areas designated for industrial development and the Russian language was required for a successful career (Hallik 1996, 93). This preferential treatment of Russian speakers was a part of Soviet policies encouraging asymmetrical bilingualism, under which members of titular language-speaking communities were required to learn Russian in order to advance in society or interact with administrative bodies, while Russian-speaking settlers to

these regions were given no incentive or reason to learn the relevant titular language (Melvin 2000, 134). As a nation building tactic, this type of policy aimed to gradually discourage the use of regional languages in favor of Russian in an effort to lead to a single, unified language used by all people of the Soviet Union, and by the end of the Soviet Union, only 13.1% of Russian speakers could also speak Estonian proficiently (Hallik, 1996, 93).

In spite of Soviet attempts to fully bring the Estonian people into the fold, they were never completely successful at converting the people to Soviet ideologies, in part because of the country's previous experience with independence and a democratic system (Smith 2004, 161). Further, Estonia held the status of union-republic which provided continuity in ethnic identity building via continued opportunities for printing, higher education, and employment in Estonian. This incomplete assimilation to the Soviet project came to a head towards the end of the 1980s, when Soviet policies under Gorbachev's *perestroika* began to shift, allowing for greater expression of individuality and assertion of regional authority. In Estonia, as in many of the other soviet, this led to the creation of a Popular Front. Under the direction of Edgar Savisaar, Estonia began pushing for greater independence. This involved the passing of the 1989 Law on Language and resolutions on the Preparation for National Independence and on the State Status of Estonia, among others (Hallik 1996, 98).

Although it may come as a surprise, the push for independence from the Soviet Union was not exclusive to ethnic Estonians, and the Front intentionally worked to garner the support of Russian-speaking intelligentsia (Melvin 2000, 138). Savisaar was adamant that the Russophone residents of Estonia should also give the weight of their voices to this movement, and in order to encourage their participation, vowed that all residents of the Estonian Soviet would later become citizens of the independent Estonian state (Smith 2004, 162). Ultimately, this promise was fruitful, as demonstrated in two 1991 referenda. One, held by the government of Estonia, saw 924,000 votes out of a possible 1,114,000 voters, with 78% of ballots supporting independence; a counter poll held by the Interregional Soviet saw 330,000 participants with 77% preferring to stay with the Soviet Union, with rates as high as 96% in Tallinn or Narva (Hallik 1996, 101). By the August 1991 coup attempt, however, polling in these Russian-dominated regions showed high support for independence, with Narva at 77% and cities like Sillamae as high as 91% (Melvin 2000, 139). Considering that ethnic Estonians only formed 60% of the population at this time, it is clear from these referenda and poll results that a majority of Estonian residents, including minority groups, preferred independence.

The Popular Front was not the only side in the debates regarding independence and the eventual structure of the nation. Nationalist groups began to emerge to challenge the Front and put themselves in opposition to the idea of granting all Russian speakers immediate statehood. In part, this was due to the determination that the Soviet regime represented an illegal occupation and that the Russian-speaking individuals that had been settled in the region therefore represented a tool for illegal colonization (Hallik 1996, 94). After independence, these Estonian nationalist groups held significant influence in the decision-making process of the nation, greatly impacting integration efforts for Russian-speaking residents of the country.

The Early Independence Period

As mentioned briefly above, the Estonian people had experienced lengthy periods of subjection to the rule of others, and some have suggested that this has left them with the feelings of being a “defensive minority” (Vihalemm 2008, 84). Throughout these periods, the Estonian language

served as a strong reminder of and tether to the Estonian ethnic identity (Hallik 1996, 93). Therefore, it is unsurprising that in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse the Estonian government would take strong reactive action to reassert its Estonian identity via language policies. Indeed, by enacting restrictive policies, it seems as though the hope was that many Russian settlers would simply emigrate, restoring balance to the population; it took until the last half of the 1990s to seriously begin considering integration of these individuals (Kivirähk 2014, 5).

One of the policies enacted during this early period, guided into place by the nationalist groups within the country, was the highly controversial citizenship law. While Edgar Savisaar had insisted on what was called a “zero-variant” citizenship policy that would have allowed all residents of Estonia at time of independence to become Estonian citizens, the citizenship law that was ultimately enacted in 1992 was restorationist and more restrictive, instead choosing to reinstate the Citizenship Law of 1938 (Nimmerfeldt et al. 2011, 81). This law declared that only those Estonians that had been citizens of the independent Estonian state as of June 16, 1940, as well as their descendants, would have their Estonian citizenship restored. This meant that all those who had settled in the country after this point, mainly Russian speakers, were now stateless and required to apply for Estonian citizenship (and later, even residency). This, however, was no easy feat, and required an oath of loyalty, proof of permanent residency in the country in addition to proof of command of the Estonian language and an understanding of the Estonian constitution, measured by examinations. The permanent residence requirement was initially three years but in 1995 was raised to five (Smith 2004, 165). This law was later further adjusted to allow for a simplified naturalization procedure for those who had registered as supporters of the independence movement (Kivirähk 2014, 4). The citizenship law proved to be a major barrier to integration, as even by the end of the decade, approximately 25% of Russian-speakers living in Estonia had no Estonian knowledge (ECMI 1999, 7). These laws left many Russian-speakers living in Estonia unable to quickly claim Estonian citizenship despite having widely supported the independence movement.

While some stateless residents of Estonia claim that maintaining unspecified status actually grants them some benefits, like cost-free travel throughout the EU and Russia, many also recognize one of the largest setbacks of this status is the inability to participate in the democratic processes of the Estonian government (Kondan and Sahajpal 2017, 114). These restrictions include voting, belonging to political parties, or running for political office at all levels, although permanent non-citizen residents are allowed to vote at the local level (ECMI 1999, 7). This initially led to remarkably inequitable minority representation in the first parliament (the *Riigikogu*) of 1992, with only one non-ethnic Estonian, a Swede, speaking enough Estonian to qualify for citizenship and run for a seat (Melvin 2000, 148). This imbalance was further highlighted at the city level, with urban areas like Narva having a city council composed of citizens, a group that made up less than 10% of the city’s population (Hallik 1996, 104-105). In Tallinn, the situation was less dire, with over 33% of city council seats won by non-ethnic Estonian citizens. Still, it was not until 1995 that Russians began to see representation in the *Riigikogu*, taking 6 out of 101 seats (Melvin 2000, 154).

Although minority language rights are made explicit in the 1992 Constitution, the restrictive nature of these laws and their impact on minority populations quickly brought Russian and the rest of Europe into debates about their legality and potential for human rights violations. Multiple independent inquiries and observation groups were sent into Estonia from Europe to examine the on-the-ground situation and determine the appropriateness of the enacted laws (Smith 2004, 168-169). Ultimately, the laws were deemed acceptable, lending European credence to Estonian decision-making. European observation and pressure on Estonian integration laws increased towards the turn of the century, particularly as Estonia began to eye the accession process (Kivirähk 2014,

5). Although these efforts were not necessarily part of a systematic change in mindset but an attempt to remain in compliance with European demands, they allowed for tangible goals to be set and targeted.

Post-EU Considerations

As time passed since the founding of the fully independent Estonian state, the relations between the state and its large Russian minority began to change, as did the perceptions these Russian speakers held regarding their place in Estonian society. In general, the establishment of a permanent Estonian state had become a fact of life; there was no longer a need for the Estonian government to feel defensive regarding their statehood, and tolerance for non-Estonian integration had increased (ECMI 1999, 11). In the first twenty years after the passing of the 1992 Citizenship Law, 152,000 individuals (approximately 10% of the population) had successfully completed the naturalization process, but 15.8% of the population consisted of non-citizen residents, including 7.1% of the population that was still of undetermined citizenship (Nimmerfeldt et al. 2011, 81). This demonstrates a certain level of progress that has also been accompanied by the European Union's enlargement program, which led to Estonia's accession and has seen the birth and raising of now second-generation individuals with immigrant backgrounds who have spent their entire lives in an independent Estonian Republic.

European Impact

The impact of the EU accession process on the treatment of minorities by the Estonian leadership is in some ways mixed. The European Commission had stated quite clearly that Estonia needed to speed along its naturalization process to enable to the more complete naturalization of Russian speakers into Estonian society (ECMI 1999, 8-9). In 1998 approximately 13% of Estonian residents were stateless persons, which means that in percentage terms, the number of stateless persons in Estonia nearly halved by 2010. One major legal change to improve the number of stateless individuals was the 2016 decision to grant citizenship to Estonian-born children of stateless parents (UNHCR 2016, 77; cited in Kondan and Sahajpal 2017, 77).

Although international pressure was able to exert some influence over Estonian policymaking, there were still limitations, as demonstrated by the successful passing of a 1999 law that required government officials to be fluent in Estonian, despite negative reactions among Russian-speaking politicians and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (Melvin 2000, 155). By 1998 the government was still in debates about how to handle the comparatively small proportion of residents that were of Estonian background; opinions leaned towards avoiding an alteration of the citizenship policy from its *jus sanguinis* basis and holding off on proclaiming two official languages in an effort to ensure that their culture and language would survive as it had throughout the entirety of Estonian history (ECMI 1999, 11-15). For this reason, some felt that language needed to remain the backbone of integration efforts into Estonian society. The debates on the future of language and citizenship policy centered on whether reducing statelessness should be a goal of integration policies, and how the spread of the Estonian language might be achieved without infringing on Russian language rights, in other words encouraging integration without pursuing assimilation.

Russian Language Education

One of the most important places that Russian and other minority language rights are exercised is via the educational system. After Estonian independence, there was an attempt to unify the Estonian and Russian school systems in terms of length and curriculum, with an increase in Estonian-focused classes, such as history and literature, and a compulsory Estonian as a Second Language class beginning in grade two (Ibid., 16-17). The *Riigikogu* also passed laws requiring that by 2007, upon the completion of basic education in a Russian medium, students must speak enough Estonian to be able to continue their education solely in Estonian, and that Estonian would be the language of instruction in secondary and higher education. However, these plans have been pushed back and supplemented with a 2007 law requiring minority language schools to teach 60% of their subjects in Estonian (Nimmerfeldt et al. 2011, 88). Public higher institutions are Estonian-language, but Russian-language private higher education institutions do exist.

In 2007, 70% of Russian-speaking children attended Russian schools where they learned Estonian as a second language (Worden 2012, 112). At present, 19% of all Estonian students are still enrolled in exclusively Russian language schools, but the Estonian government has still been unable to formulate a coherent response to this issue, going back and forth on restrictions, largely with respect to concerns regarding “quality of education, and the implications of Russian curricula” (Kondan and Sahajpal 2017, 115). Not only is the 60:40 ratio in bilingual higher education hard for Russian-speaking teachers to reach, there is also some psychological resistance to such plans from Russian-speaking communities (Worden 2012, 112). Even early on in the development of these educational plans, concerns were voiced that curriculum reform would not be successful without an increase in training for Russian teachers, and that the priority given to improving teachers’ language skills may be better served by increasing their professional and teaching skills instead (ECMI 1999, 17). Presently, lack of appropriate bilingual training impedes student-teacher communication and results in widening disparities in educational performance with age, while those teachers who are bilingually trained tend to seek employment outside of the education sector (Kondan and Sahajpal 2017, 115). Not only are there worries over the quality of Russian-medium schooling, there is even some debate over whether Russian-language history courses accurately reflect the content taught in Estonian-language schools or whether they might be susceptible to anti-Estonian or pro-Soviet disinformation.

While the main focus here has been on Russian language schools, other minority language education programs are also legally supported by the government; however, the use of other, non-Russian minority mother tongues seems to be fading (Worden 2012, 112). This data is further supported in the Russian case as well by the example of one Russian-speaking community that saw those students who attended Estonian-language schools perform relatively poorly on Russian reading and writing tasks. This implies that a large-scale shift towards the Estonian language may already be well under way, although there is evidence as well for minority support across the board for high quality bilingual educational programs.

Identificational Impact

It is important to view the issue of integration with an eye not just on policies, but on the people affected by those policies as well. In this case, the question arises, regardless of what efforts have actually been taken to improve the integration of non-ethnic Estonians into society, how do

these people feel about Estonia and their lives there?

In 1986, 78% of Russian-speakers living in Estonia identified with the USSR; by 1991 this number had dropped to 59%, much lower than in other soviet republics like Georgia or Uzbekistan (Melvin 2000, 139). Although some cities like Narva or Tallinn are home to respective Russian populations of 86% and 46% and tend to be highly segregated and removed from Estonian institutional structures, this trend of deidentification with the USSR has continued (Kondan and Sahajpal 2017, 110). Despite the discourse that cities like Narva, which are close to the Russian border, may be home to more Russian-sympathetic individuals and potentially separatist, people in this region seem to perceive relative hardship involved with living in nearby Russian cities and recognize the higher standards of living in Estonia (Berg 2000, 88; cited in *ibid.*). However, this does not mean that there is no perception of ethnic divisions; Russian Estonians perceive greater belonging to their own ethnic group than ethnic Estonians do (Vihalemm 2008, 81). Still, this is less a connection to Russia itself than it is a recognition of a cultural and linguistic heritage among a group.

The divide between these two populations is not only ethnic; as industrial towns, largely home to Russian speakers, began to feel the effects of marketization and the shift to capitalism, they entered a period of economic hardship, with the manufacturing industry seeing a 21% decrease in employment (Jauhiainen 2006, 275; cited in Kondan and Sahajpal 2017, 111). Because of the economic nature of privatization and economic restructuring in the wake of the Soviet legacy, those regions which were home to largest numbers of Russian speakers were some of the most affected, lending the ethnic split a socioeconomic character.

Additionally, the increasing linkages with the European Union in particular and the West in general have not gone unnoticed by the Estonian population. Russian-speaking youth are increasingly westward-thinking, particularly when it concerns employment opportunities (Kondan and Sahajpal 2017, 111). This is a point of unity for both groups, as they share a strong alignment with the West and a belief that Estonia is affected by issues of globalization (Vihalemm 2008, 81). This connection with the West has also had an interesting linguistic side effect: the influx of English as a major second language. There is some hope that the increasing influence of English as an important language in Estonia will provide a neutral space for Estonian and Russian speakers to come together in tolerance of a bilingual state (*Ibid.*, 91).

Overall, it appears that as generations pass, there is an increasing readiness by minority groups to identify themselves with Estonian society and participate in the state's political and economic structures. However, despite the progress that has been made over the past three decades, there are still problems that need to be addressed pertaining to the full integration of these minority groups. There is a wage gap between ethnic Estonians and Russian Estonians, and although educational outcomes for bilingual students seem to be equivalent, Russian students have lower success metrics regarding state-set educational goals than their bilingual counterparts (Worden 2012, 112-133). This suggests that, while Russian monolinguals may find themselves falling behind their fellow citizens, encouraging bilingual education may help bring them more success. In general, the disadvantages associated with only speaking Russian seem to be accepted by parents, who are opting to send fewer of their children to Russian-medium language schools in hope that by learning Estonian their children will have greater chances of success.

A large focus of integration taskforces is on children and youth, as they are the generation that will have grown up as Estonians in Estonia with no physical connection to the Soviet Union (ECMI 1999, 40). Indeed, in the government's 1998 Integration Policy Paper, reproduced in 1999 publication on Estonia by the European Center for Minority Issues (ECMI), it was noted that "tangible resources must be focused above all on nursery schools, schools, hobby groups and

summer camps.” At the same time, it had been noted by the discussants creating this document that among adults and the elderly, integration was progressing much more slowly (Ibid., 16). Further, by 2017, the majority of stateless individuals were above 30 years of age, well outside of the youth bracket (UNHCR 2017, 29; cited in Kondan and Sahajpal 2017, 113). It seems quite likely, then, that Estonia runs the risk of misallocation of resources directed at youth while adults, who are no longer of school age, may be most in need of integration resources like language education.

While there do exist language courses outside of the standard school system, there is limited funding to make these courses free, making both time and money disincentives for learning the Estonian language on the path to citizenship (Kondan and Sahajpal 2017, 113-114). Coupled with the ease with which Russian-speakers can go about their daily lives in areas of high Russian-language concentration, it is clear that not only greater incentives, but also opportunities must be provided for residents of these regions. Language cafes have been one suggestion, among those mentioned above, like summer camps. Indeed, while parents are hopeful that their children will learn Estonian and open more opportunities, many parents would prefer less institutionalized methods, like afterschool programs, which would allow for the preservation of a Russian cultural and linguistic heritage in schools (Ibid., 116).

International research projects, such as The Integration of the European Second Generation (TIES) Project, have made comparisons in the Estonian case between Estonian and Russian Estonian youth from ages 18 to 35 in an attempt to measure their levels of structural, cultural, social, and identificational integration (Nimmerfeldt et al. 2011, 81). In general, the data gathered show that, by 2011, professionals, those with more education, and those who had been naturalized were most likely to be highly structurally integrated, or linked with institutions, markets, and administrations, even when compared to those with birth citizenship (Ibid., 85). Cultural integration considerations, specifically self-association with Russia and a lack of Estonian language skills, were significantly correlated with low structural integration. However, this relationship does not necessarily hold for social and identificational integration measurements (in other words, avoiding social segregation and identifying oneself with Estonia), meaning that structural and cultural affinities are not enough to allow for full integration, despite the fact that language proficiency is related to social and identificational integration (Ibid., 87). This is made clear by the existence not only of groups that have poor Estonian language skills but are loyal to their country, but also of those ostensibly integrated non-ethnic Estonian youth who speak the language well but perceive of themselves as outsiders or discriminated against (Kivirähk 2014, 2). Because the Estonian government places such a high priority on the use of the Estonian language as a tool for integration, it may be missing out on other opportunities to encourage individuals to pursue the naturalization process and fully integrate themselves into the Estonian state and its society.

Overall, it is impossible to deny that the integration process of stateless individuals has seen some success. However, it is an ongoing process that should be subject to change and improvement. One of the greatest obstacles to a more complete integration has been the myopic insistence on Estonian as the key to joining Estonian society. While it is true that learning the language aids in structural and other forms of integration, the split between Russian-speakers and ethnic Estonians is not merely cultural. One issue that seems frequently to be ignored is the socioeconomic flavor that this seemingly ethnolinguistic conflict has taken on. Addressing this, perhaps by planning economic redevelopment of formerly industrial zones in which Russian-speakers were settled, would help to remove a thorn in the side of those who would be otherwise willing to integrate.

Further, investment in education, specifically in teacher training for those in bilingual and Russian-language schools, is critical to ensure the closure of the educational gap and subsequent

wage gaps. Education here must not take into account solely the educational needs of school-aged individuals however. It is adults and the elderly who are often most in need of Estonian language educational programs and integration assistance. Making these individuals a priority will surely help to eliminate the number of stateless individuals residing in Estonia.

In the end, it seems as though non-ethnic Estonians are generally more than willing to integrate with and receive the benefits related to being a part of Estonian society. They tend to identify themselves more closely with Estonia than with Russia, and parents see Estonian integration as key to providing better lives for their children. If they are able to meet their burden, it will be left up to the Estonian government to reevaluate their investment targets and policy goals and work to promote a unified society.

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