

**ESTONIAN RUSSIANS:
THE SUCCESS STORY OF INTEGRATION**

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Abstract. As was the case with many other post-Soviet states, including those in the Baltics, Estonia became a place for considerable numbers of ethnic Russians/Russian-speaking minorities. The relationship between Estonians and minorities was quite tense in the beginning of the post-Soviet era. Still, as time progressed, native Estonians, the Estonian government, and Russian Estonians all tried to accommodate each other. Economic, political, and geopolitical reasons and, most of all, understanding the importance of the accommodation of the Russian-speaking population by Estonian society, contributed to the slow progress in the accommodation of the two segments of the Estonian nation. And here, Estonia is clearly ahead of other Baltic nations, such as Latvia.

Keywords: Estonia, Russian Estonian, minorities in the Baltic countries, Russia in the former Soviet Union

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1. Introduction

I had not been in Estonia, a small Baltic nation and former republic of the USSR, for almost 50 years, since the late 1960s when I was a student of Moscow State University. My interest in visiting Estonia was not related with nostalgia or abstract curiosity, but was due to my interest in ethnic problems, particularly the position of minorities.

As a Russian/Soviet Jew, I was pretty much aware of the precarious position of ethnic minorities, and I was especially interested in the feelings of ethnic Russians who, from leading ethnic groups of the empire, became transformed into mostly powerless minorities. I was interested to find out the model of the behavior of these people. Would they behave as *Sudetendeutsche*, who anxiously awaited Russian troops, or as Russian Jews, who emigrated *en masse*? Both scenarios implied deep alienation from the majority. As a result of my observations, I came

to the conclusion that neither of these models worked, and most Estonian Russians became integrated, at least partially, into Estonian life, albeit problems do exist. Still, most dissatisfied Estonian and other Baltic Russians look for solutions in the West, not in the East.

2. The integration from below

The major reason for local Russians' acceptance of present-day Estonia is the position of the natives. The process of mutual accommodation has been long and painful. The mutual distrust and often vicious hatred had been covered up during the Soviet era. However, even at that time, alienation between Estonians and other Baltic people and ethnic Russians was visible, and many Muscovites, for example, saw Baltic republics as clearly alien bodies, unmistakably different from other republics of the USSR, fully integrated into Russia's lead commonwealth. Some of them, such as Ukrainians, were seen as pretty much the same as ethnic Russians; they simply spoke a different and rather 'funny' dialect of Russian. No one, of course, could predict that in a generation or so, Ukrainians and Russians would see themselves as bitter enemies, and ideologists from both sides would underscore their absolute differences. With Estonians, and possibly with other Baltic folk, the sense of alienation was clear. They lived in a peculiar 'Soviet West'; it was West because of the clear difference from the rest of the USSR. For some Moscow intellectuals, it was a point of attraction, and while the Russian hoi polloi flocked to the Black Sea during summer vacation, Moscow intellectuals went to Palanga, a resort area on the shores of the Baltic sea; it was implied here that they arrived not to simply bathe in the cold waters of the Baltic, but to taste 'the West', the West which was available for them – for even permission to visit East European satellites was not automatically granted to everyone. While for some Russian intellectuals, the Baltic republics' 'Westernism' was a point of attraction, for the hoi polloi it was grounds for suspicion. Consequently, before my trip to the Baltics during my student years, I was told that locals could well refuse to speak in Russian, plainly because it was the language of colonial masters; it was a form of cultural and linguistic defiance. Still, the clear hostility was subdued due to the fear of repressive machinery of the state. At the same time, Gorbachev's reforms and the end of censorship provided Baltic folk, especially Estonians, with the freedom to express their deep hostility towards Russians. This could be seen in a variety of cultural manifestations, including movies. For example, the movie *Stalin and Hitler*, created in 1990, at the time when the USSR's power was breathing its last in Estonia, shows the vicious hatred of Russians by the producers and implicitly many of the movie's viewers. The tension continued. In 2007, Estonian authorities removed the remains of Soviet soldiers in Tallinn, which led to violent protests among local Russians. Still, as time progressed, the ethnic and related linguistic tensions subsided. There were many reasons for this. The negative memories about the Soviet regime were receding into the past. Moreover,

it started to be seen retrospectively as a rather positive phenomenon. For many middle-aged and elderly folk, it was not just a time when they were young, but also the era when job security, free education, and similar symbols of social stability were taken for granted.

Some of them have discovered, of course retrospectively, that they were not just Estonians, but part of a multiethnic grand empire, and acquired, at least partially, a trans-ethnic imperial identity. Consequently, even after 25 years, they still do not fit well into a new, much smaller, and mostly ethnocentric state, which itself is not completely integrated into the culturally and politically fragmented EU. Indeed, one of my casual acquaintances, a middle-aged Estonian woman, confessed that she felt that she was a 'shred of an empire' that implicitly does not fit well into the new cultural and political space. As a result of this, ethnic Russians and the Russian language started to lose their association with Soviet shortages, general drabness of living conditions, Secret Police presence, and inability to travel abroad for the majority. They also lost any direct emotional connection with the war years and Stalin's post-WWII purges, plainly because most of the people of that generation have died out. Their memories have become just curious stories from a bygone era, as was the case with one young Estonian who told me about his grandmother. She told him that Germans behaved much better than Soviets. He told me this with a smile, as if to indicate the peculiar, strange view of either very old or dead women. In any case, Russians and the Russian language are losing their emotional association with danger and suffering, and they have acquired a neutral or even positive meaning, even among elderly and middle-aged people, who spent part of their lives in the USSR.

As a result, middle-aged folk eagerly responded in Russian when asked in the street for directions, and taxis were usually willing to respond in Russian. Some were clearly eager to demonstrate their knowledge of Russian, as was the case with an Estonian hotel attendant who wrote out directions in Russian, telling me that she was taught in a Soviet high school.

3. Perception of the Russian language and Russians among the young Estonians

The appreciation of Russian is also related to the positive image of the USSR, which emerged even among the youngsters who had no experience of living during the Soviet time. For some of them, those who faced the vagaries of unemployment and other problems of modern capitalism, the Soviet era has emerged as the carefree, almost golden age. This feeling is also related to rather positive views of Russians. As a matter of fact, this resurrected Russophilia, framed in a peculiar Sovietophilia, is not unique to Estonia or even the Baltics, and could be found in East Europe, at least judging by my travel in these areas. One might also add that this positive image of the USSR and the Soviet regime started to re-emerge in the minds of a considerable number of Russian youths who have

no personal experience of living in the USSR and who regarded it as the golden era; a paradise lost, for which stupidity and/or treachery of their parents and grandparents should be blamed.

4. Economic incentives

The appreciation of Russians and Russian language is also related to purely economic interests. This feeling has also developed over time and from quite an unpromising start. On the eve of independence, most Estonians related Russians and the Russian language not just with repression but also with economic misery. In the late Gorbachev era, with increasing shortages of the basic commodities and fear of real starvation, Russians were seen as plundering locusts who took from Estonia the most essential commodities; they were blamed for Estonia's economic predicament. This feeling has been related to the notion that all goodies come only from the West, and Estonia's integration into the Western order would solve all their problems. Such illusions are mostly gone, as is the case with other East European nations. It is true that most Estonians, especially the young, see their economic well-being as being connected with the West, and this is the reason why English became really a *lingua franca*. However, the West is not seen as an ideal place, as was the case with the majority of the youth in the beginning of the 1990s, and many of the youth assumed that they should look for opportunities elsewhere. This more pragmatic and realistic consideration led to the assumption that Russian language could also be useful, and some Estonians assumed that Russia and Russians could be a source of income and therefore should be welcomed.

I found quite a few Russian tourists strolling on the streets of Tartu or discussing various matters with officials at the airport. Students from Russia are apparently welcomed to local universities; at least this is the case in Tartu University, where I found the young woman with child. She was the wife of a Russian student from St. Petersburg. She told me that she felt no discomfort and praised the quality of local education. The positive approach to Russians from Russia also has a positive implication for Estonian Russians and undoubtedly induces Estonians to see them as an integral and permanent segment of Estonian society. The integration of local Russians into Estonian society is not just a process from below but also apparently from above.

5. Integration from above

The process has also been long and painful. On the eve, or even in the beginning of independence, the officials seemed to believe that they should drive most of the ethnic Russians out, in almost a *Juden-frei* fashion. Many ethnic Russians indeed left at that time, fearing violence and open discrimination. In a way, their emigration corresponded with similar moves of ethnic Russians from

many other republics of the former USSR. It also paralleled the same movement of Russian Jews who, fearful of pogrom-type violence, had left Russia by the thousands on the eve of the collapse of the USSR and in the beginning of the post-Soviet era. Still, as time progressed, the leaders of the young republic understood that the practice was unworkable and potentially dangerous. In addition, they not only wanted to be a part of the EU, but specifically modeled themselves after Scandinavian countries, such as Finland, the place of their ethnic kin. Here, the discrimination against minorities is seen as a sign of exclusion from the civilized world. All of this led to the new approach to Estonian Russians; they became in this context 'our Russians', as a specific ethnic minority, one of the building blocks of the Estonian nation. This implied certain linguistic and cultural concessions. In the bus which took me from Tallinn to Tartu, announcements were made in Estonian, English, and Russian. The exhibition in the National Museum also had descriptions in Russian and English, and displays were arranged in a way so as not to offend the Russian viewers. The Russians became employed in politically sensitive government jobs, and I saw several ethnic Russians who worked in the airport as border guards.

6. Response of Estonian Russians

These positive steps by society and the state implicated the position and attitude of local Russians who became increasingly incorporated into Estonia's society. It looks as if inter-ethnic marriages have continued; at least I found several youth who were born into mixed families and who saw themselves as citizens of the Estonian state, not as people attached to particular ethnic groups. If not marriage, at least personal relationships between Estonians and Russians seem to be common, and one could see a peculiar sense of Estonian patriotism or at least appreciation of Estonians. One Russian middle-aged woman flatly denied any discrimination against ethnic Russians. She acknowledged that her daughter was unemployed. Still, she held, it had nothing to do with discrimination, but plainly with the vagaries of capitalism. She noted that her daughter's friend, an Estonian girl, was also unemployed. The other middle-aged Russian woman also discarded the notion of intentional discrimination. She stated that Estonia is now a capitalist society and the owners of local businesses are just concerned with profits. Consequently, they are interested in employing the most efficient workers and hardly concerned with potential employees' ethnicity. Some Estonian Russians even developed a sense of Estonian patriotism, and two Russian girls whom I met in Tartu proclaimed that not only do they feel no discrimination from the Estonian state, but 'love it'. These confessions were quite telling, and indicated the high level of integration in Estonia. Indeed, one could hardly find similar expressions in Russia. Russians could be in love with the country, people, culture, etc. They could be proud of their leaders, but hardly in love with the Russian state as aggregation of bureaucratic institutions. Quite a few are regarded as useless or

deeply corrupt. In these attitudes to the state, most Russians are quite similar to Americans, most of whom saw people in Washington as corrupt and useless. While most Estonian Russians integrated themselves, at least partially, it is not the case with all of them. Even these Russians are not anxious to part with Estonia and the economy is the major reason why most of them anchor themselves in the basically alien milieu. The cultural differences between them and the Russians in Russia also play a role in their decision to stay in Estonia.

7. Economic and cultural reasons for not emigrating

While integration, both into society and the state, inspires Estonian Russians to feel themselves as a part of Estonia, it is not the only reason. With all the vagaries of Western capitalism, the economic conditions in Estonia are still more promising than in Russia, as testified by several tourists from St. Petersburg. Many of them characterized surroundings of St. Petersburg and implicitly a good part of Russia in term of Donald Trump's inaugural speech, which displayed most of the USA as a peculiar cemetery, covered by abandoned factories as tombstones. Some of them asked me how they could get to the West. Their desire to immigrate to the West is telling. Indeed, they were not the Soviets of the Gorbachev era, for whom the West was a place of plenty, almost an ideal society. Many of these post-Soviet Russians had more realistic views of the West. They understood well that the West is hardly a problem-free society, and their desire to emigrate simply testifies that economic life in Russia has become really unpromising. This information certainly became known to Estonian Russians, who appreciate their comparatively high standard of living. They hardly want to immigrate to Russia, and they have become attached to Estonia, even if they have no emotional ties to the place. One woman, a salesperson in a Tartu store, told me that she does not feel that she is fully incorporated into Estonian society. She and her husband have Russian passports and travel to Russia often; it is only here that she feels at home. Yet, she stays in Estonia, and as one could assume, because of economic reasons: she would have a much smaller income in Russia. One should also take into account the other aspects of the socio-economic narrative. While becoming increasingly harsher in the last few years, the Putin regime does not signal a return to the Soviet past, when the state's political and intellectual control was combined with a broad security net. Actually, the opposite has happened in present-day Russia: the last leftovers from the Soviet era are in the process of continuous erosion. A friend of mine wrote me from Moscow that socialized medicine, supposedly guaranteed by Russian law, doesn't exist in actuality, and he needs to pay a hefty sum to a good doctor for a visit. At the same time, Estonia has apparently preserved socialized medicine of the past, following here, of course, the Scandinavian model. This is undoubtedly an incentive to Estonian Russians, even those who are alienated from Estonian society, to stay in the country. Besides economics, there is a cultural reason why some of them prefer to stay in Estonia, even without being integrated into Estonian society. The point

here is that they feel themselves to be aliens both in Russia and Estonia. A good example here was an elderly Russian woman I met in the Tallinn airport. She was a cleaning lady, and was not much integrated into Estonian society. Despite her humble social position, she was not going to immigrate to Russia and, possibly grudgingly, accepted Estonian society. One of the reasons was that while she felt herself alien in Estonia, she had the same feeling in Russia. She noted that she could not accept the rudeness and often aggressiveness of Russian society, foreign to the Estonian culture. She understood that she would never feel herself fully integrated in Russia, so she saw no reason why she should replace one foreign society with another. Her feeling was similar to that of many Soviet Jews, who, while feeling themselves foreigners in the USSR/Russia, had the same feeling in Israel. It was this understanding that they would never be integrated into Israel's society that kept some of them in Russia.

8. Russians as alien bodies

It is wrong to assume that all Russians or Russian-speaking people in Estonia are integrated into society or at least understand that moving to Russia would not solve their problems. Not all ethnic Russians are treated fairly by the natives. The elderly, those who are unable to master Estonian, are often in this position. I remember well the elderly Russian woman who tried to get some information from the bus driver. He pretended that he did not see her. The Russian woman in the hotel was extremely reluctant to tell me where she was born. She was clearly from outside Estonia, and felt that this made her an ugly duckling, an alien body. For some Russians, the alienation from society became complete and led to absolute asociality. I remember groups of Russian-speaking teenagers who engaged in petty hooliganism in the supermarket, absolutely oblivious to the crowd of locals who looked at them with condescending disdain. Some Estonian Russians, as well as Russians from other Baltic republics, thought to leave the Baltic state. Many of them preferred to go westward rather than eastward. One Russian woman from Latvia told me that she was born in the country and spoke fluent Latvian. Still, she wanted to emigrate. There were several reasons for this. First, she thought that she was discriminated against, plainly because she is Russian, and her ethnicity could be easily identified by her name. Secondly, she could not stand the economic situation in the country. She told me that she was surprised to find what is printed in the Western press related to the situation in Latvia and, implicitly, in the other Baltic states. These publications, she noted, presented the situation in Latvia and, implicitly, in the other Baltic states, in a most positive way. Actually, everything is the opposite. After the collapse of the USSR, the factories were closing, and the economy declined sharply. The people had no place to work and many emigrated. She also thought about leaving Latvia. Like others, she was heading not to the East but rather to the West, to Germany; as a matter of fact, her son had already gone to Germany and had already become a parent over there.

9. Conclusion

In the last 25 years, empires collapsed, leaving pockets of minorities as *Sudetendeutsche* in the midst of the new states. Millions of émigrés, often with distinctly different cultures, emerged among the people who had never seen them before. Tensions grew. The response to these problems could be different. In one case, the majority are tempted to marginalize the new minorities, reinvent or create historical grievances, and general poverty could contribute to the alienation. The results could be disastrous, as the events in Ukraine demonstrated. Alienation of Russian-speaking minorities in Crimea and Donbas contributed a lot in the bloody war in the region which transformed Ukrainians and Russians – close to each other culturally, linguistically, and ethnically – into mortal enemies. The story is different in Estonia. The country has a considerable number of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking minorities. Both Estonians and Russians have a long list of historical grievances, and the tension between Estonians and Russians and the Russian-speaking community was quite high. Many Russians left, fearing violence and discrimination. Regardless, Estonians, possibly grudgingly, accepted the notion of the large Russian-speaking community in their midst and made clear efforts to incorporate them into Estonian society. Problems still exist, but success is also evident. Many Russians in Estonia regard themselves as citizens, not just residents, of Estonia, and do not necessarily expect Russia to ‘help’ in the Ukrainian fashion. The Estonian story indicates that minorities’ problems could be solved if the government, society, and minorities are engaged in the long process of mutual accommodation and, if needed, in a peculiar amnesia about the distant or not-so-distant past. This process requires not just clear moves from both society and government but also considerable resources. The goal of accommodation or at least partial integration is possible. In the long run, it benefits both minorities and the majority, sparing the country from devastating ethnic strife and/or related foreign intervention. From this perspective, Estonia could be seen as a success story and an example for the others.

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