

THE RUSSIAN MINORITY: DILEMMAS FOR ESTONIA

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Abstract. During the 1990s, an Estonian minority paradigm has been established. In the context of this paradigm, sometimes called *silent separation*, the historical closed-community model for the predominantly Russian-speaking minority has deepened and seems to persevere. Considering this model as potentially dangerous for the country, especially in a long-run perspective, I am arguing for the need of paradigm shift. The separational paradigm should be replaced by an integrational one. According to the opinion polls, the society is quite ready for such a paradigm shift, the problem is that the political establishment is not yet enough motivated for the next step in an Estonian minority policy.

Multicultural Estonia

Contemporary Estonia is a multicultural country. By January 1996 there were about 950,000 ethnic Estonians living in Estonia while the total number of inhabitants of the country was about 1,480,000. It means that more than half a million non-Estonians are living and working today in this country. Although there are representatives of more than 100 nationalities, the vast majority (more than 80%) of non-Estonians are Russian. And even more Russian speakers, more than 90% of non-Estonians are using Russian as their mother tongue.

One can encounter the multiculturalism also in everyday life, while observing people in the streets, in shopping areas or using public transport. A friend of mine is absolutely certain that he is able to identify the ethnic background of each person he meets in the Tallinn streets. He argues that nothing more is needed than to take a glance at the person and it becomes clear whether he/she is an Estonian, Russian, Finn or somebody else.

The multicultural nature of society is reflected in the people's minds. If somebody asks an ordinary Estonian which nationalities/ethnic groups are living in this country, the typical answer is: Estonians and Russians. Although in reality

there are representatives of dozens of nationalities in Estonia, the everyday experience tells us that there *are* Estonians and there *are* Russians. Which means that the ethnically based differences at least at the everyday level are predominantly the differences between Estonians and Russians, between the Estonian culture and identity and Russian culture and identity. In this sense the Estonian multiculturalism is predominantly biculturalism.

There are Estonians and there are Russians. And there are differences between those groups. I am not going to analyze deeply how substantial those differences are, I merely mention that I cannot fully agree with the authors defining these differences as *civilizational ones* (Huntington 1993 and his followers) which seemed to be the largest imaginable difference. Sure, Estonians and Russians differ in their religious background (Orthodox and Protestants), in language, in communication and behavioral patterns. But while communicating and functioning together with the local Russians (which I have to do quite often) it has been hard to detect today anything which might be called *civilizational differences*. Maybe such a definition is true in a very high macrolevel where the world stands as a unit for drawing civilizational borderlines, but it has been really complicated to find the correlates of such differences in my everyday experience. If I have to outline and rank the existing differences between Estonians and local Russians, I will put in the first place not the cultural ones (the existence of which I am not denying) but first of all the differences in some *basic political attitudes*, especially the attitudes towards Russia as well as attitudes towards Estonia and Estonian state. It is natural, due to our historical experience, that Estonians' trust of Russia (as a state, as a political system) is not very high, that there are strong prejudices residing in the Estonians' minds about Russia's intentions and sincerity of its actions. At the same time, and it is also very natural, the feelings of Russian Estonians towards Russia are quite different from those of the Estonians. Although the political context has changed, most of Russians emotionally identify themselves with Russia. This identification is certainly more cultural than political, people feel themselves part of Russian culture/civilization, they value their Russian roots, maybe less identifying themselves with the Russian State. Anyway, the *image of Russia* in the minds of Estonians and Russian Estonians differs considerably. According to Iris Pettai (1997), two thirds of Estonians consider Russia as a dangerous neighbour to Estonia, while 80% of non-Estonians are sure that there is no danger or harm of any kind from the Russian side coming to Estonia.

One can observe quite similar differences while comparing the attitudes of Estonians and Russians towards the Estonian state. Strong emotional identification from one side and hesitations and suspicions from another.

Therefore, while talking about differences, among the first ones for me are the identificational differences, and resulting from those, the quite different basic political attitudes. Thus, Estonian multiculturalism has a strong political component, the differences between Estonians and Russian Estonians are not purely cultural but they are very often politically coloured.

I will focus on the question of how Estonian society has been able to adjust, after the restoration of independence, to the above described multicultural conditions. Although the multicultural situation also existed during the Soviet time, it was only after the restoration of independence in 1991 when actors in Estonian society were able to express their own attitudes towards ethnic minorities, when society was able to deal with actual multiculturalism. I will try to follow the main characteristics of this process during the nineties.

The minority paradigm established in the early 1990s

Historically Russians, similarly to other minorities in Estonia, have lived as comparatively closed communities, it was the case during the pre-war republic as well as during the Soviet time. The historical minority model for this country has been predominantly the model of (socially and culturally) separated communities. There have been comparatively few interethnic marriages in Estonia as well as ethnically mixed schools, churches or informal friendship circles. At the same time, the model of living in *one's own world* has been remarkably peaceful, there have not been any ethnically based hostility, conflicts or street clashes in this country.

At the same time, since the 1960s, when due to forced immigration the Russian population increased considerably and the Russian community in Estonia became more and more influential, the Russian minority came to be considered as a *problem* for this country. The Russian minority transformed into the *Russian issue in Estonia* as a complex set of questions concerning the role and niche of this minority, its impact on Estonian culture and mentality, the perspectives of Russian language and Russian schooling as well as the questions of integration-separation or assimilation as future minority models for the country. The Russian issue becomes one of the crucial problems in Estonian society, the issue was widely (but informally) discussed during the late Soviet period, it was one of the key problems during the political transformations in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

After restoring independence in 1991, the Estonian state and politicians were for the first time able to present their own solutions to the Russian issue. The first *dilemma* the restored state was facing concerned the definition of this minority in the context of the newly independent statehood: to accept them or keep them at a distance, to fully recognize the Soviet period immigrants (the majority of non-Estonians are Soviet immigrants) as citizens of Estonian Republic, which means accepting them as participants in the state restoring process, accepting them as *our* people or consider them as real immigrants/newcomers with the demand of naturalization, which psychologically means considering them as strangers/others. There was a heated discussion in the early nineties concerning the possible legal status of immigrants during the last decades. The discussion outlined benefits and dangers of both possible solutions. In the first case one might expect more stability and involvement from non-Estonians, but there was a danger that a great number of people who were not loyal enough to Estonian state, will influence the political decision-making process, will try to shift the independence process back

to some kind of partnership with Russia. The second way offered hope that there will not be any deviations from restoring real independence, but it contained a danger to the stability, the danger of creating a really divided society. The question was - which is more benefiting/dangerous - to let the immigrants inside (as full participants and decision-makers) or keep them at least at some distance (establishing procedures for coming in).

The choice of Estonia was the second way. And if to analyze the situation in society in the early 1990s, it seems that this was almost an inevitable choice. As usual in Eastern Europe, after regaining independence, a period of emotionally coloured radicalization emerged in society. The attitudes of the majority of Estonians in the early 1990s were strongly supportive of this quite radical decision of restitutorial citizenship. The emotional atmosphere in society was not ready to accept any more liberal solutions.

The second option meant first of all adopting a set of laws, which defined Soviet time immigrants as aliens. As Rein Ruutsoo (1998:280) pointed out: "After restoring our national independence in August 1991, the population of Estonia was in legal terms separated into two main groups - citizens of the restored Estonian Republic (and their descendants) and non-citizens (citizens of the Soviet Union)... According to the strong position of the Estonian state authorities, the new residents had moved to the territory of occupied Estonian Republic illegally."

This solution actually means that the traditional social and cultural separation of Estonian and Russian communities acquires strong political and legal framework. And even if this framework does not personally touch each non-Estonian, it revealed the existing barriers. Although the legal classification of Estonian residents into citizens and non-citizens is not ethnically based (as we know this model is based on the idea of the continuation of the pre-war citizenship), in reality in the large group of non-citizens there are almost 100% of non-Estonians. To this group belong individuals whose legal status today is an alien or a Russian citizen or an illegal person. Which means that those people are not legally part of the local civil society, which inevitably shapes their ties with the country where they are living, as well as their attitudes towards it.

Based on decisions from the early 1990s, a particular minority model was established in this country, a model which might be called *Estonian minority paradigm*. As I mentioned, this model is a kind of continuation of the historical models of living by its own, which now gained several new features. First of all the legal framework, which makes clear distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. Another important quality characterizing this paradigm happened to be the comparatively high level of uncertainty about the future of this legally marginal group of non-citizens. Up to 1998, the Estonian government and state authorities have not issued any definite messages to this group about their future intentions and preferred developments. As a result, the separation of two communities has deepened. Some analysts have defined the established situation as "two societies in one country".

One can observe this “two societies” model in different fields of social life. It is observable in *public opinion* where there are a number of topics where the attitudes of Estonians and non-Estonians are quite opposite (issues of language and citizenship, the above mentioned attitudes towards Russia). The differences are easily observable in the *media* where there are Estonian and Russian newspapers, radio and TV channels, which have little in common, nothing which might be called a dialogue, or co-operation (Raudsepp 1998). There are also Estonian and Russian based *political parties* which define a number of key political issues quite differently, there are Estonian and Russian schools, youth organizations, sport clubs. There is Estonian life and Russian life going on in this country.

Although the established paradigm has strong separational elements, it should be emphasized that all the development in the 1990s has been remarkably peaceful. Even during the most critical times of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia was able to avoid any ethnically based conflicts. Quiet and peaceful separation might stand as a label for Estonian interethnic situation in the nineties. Estonia is multicultural, but in its own, peaceful and closed way.

How can this paradigm be evaluated, has it been a success story or is it a bomb building effort?

Evaluations differ today from highly positive to extremely critical. There are a number of Estonian politicians who consider the situation excellent, especially while reporting to the foreign audience. At the same time, there are also quite skeptical messages, a special report by the Forced Migration Project of the Open Society Institute (1997:71) about Estonia and Latvia defines the situation in both countries as a “socio-political schizophrenia, which would be debilitating for any country, but it could be catastrophic for a state with fledgling democratic and market economic institutions.”

My opinion is that the paradigm established in the early nineties is neither good nor bad, but first of all it has been inevitable. This paradigm reflects the understandings and abilities of the recently liberated nation to deal with this highly complicated issue. The way of dealing with it has been successful in this sense, that due to this model the society has quite rapidly changed. It means that Estonians have regained the sense of confidence in their future, which (at least theoretically) makes the majority more open and liberal while seeking the solutions to minority issues today. It also means that despite the occurred changes being a shock for most non-Estonians, the radical solutions have quite rapidly changed their attitudes and interpretations of the situation. The majority of non-Estonians are today accepting Estonia's independence and seeking for their place in society. The widespread illusions from the early 1990s (back to the Russian empire, two official languages, territorial autonomy) have disappeared, as well as illusions among Estonians concerning first of all the mass returning of Russians to Russia. As an outcome of the developments in the nineties we have today a more self-confident Estonian society and a legally divided non-Estonian community

with remarkably high level of uncertainty and with remarkable readiness to come in into Estonian playground. The established paradigm has shifted the society to a new condition, it has changed the mentality of both of its parts. Now the question is how to go on.

Paradigm objections and recent developments

Although the established minority paradigm has had substantial support from the Estonian population, there have always been voices questioning the model, especially while discussing its long term costs and benefits. In 1996, the Estonian Ministry of Education initiated a special study about the possible future scenarios of majority-minority relations in Estonia. The interuniversity research team *VERA* analyzed the four possible strategies of those relations – assimilation, integration, separation and confrontation (see Heidmets 1997:340–342) defining for each the forces in society supporting and hindering them. The conclusion of the team was that one can identify the elements of all four routes in contemporary Estonia, but the dominating tendency during the nineties has been the separation. The separation tendencies have enjoyed considerable support by the political attitudes and legal framework as well as by tradition and dominating public opinion, especially among Estonians. At the same time the researchers clearly pointed out that the price of such a development might be quite high. If the model “two societies in one country” will be sustained and deepened, it will sooner or later become a real danger to national security and a barrier for rapid development. The conclusion was that what Estonia needed was a real shift towards an integrational model of development. A need for such a shift has been today realized by a number of people, it becomes (although slowly) a more and more accepted interpretation of the current situation.

During the last couple of years one can observe the growing acceptance of the ideas of integration. Although the separation paradigm is still there, the society has begun to change. If we look at the opinion polls, one can observe more liberal and pragmatic attitudes than in the early nineties. More and more Estonians are accepting the fact that the big Russian minority will remain in this country and that it is benefiting to both sides to have normal relations. And more and more non-Estonians have realized that there is no alternative to integrating into Estonian society, accepting the status of bilingual and bicultural minority. The emotional radicalism of the early nineties is gradually being replaced by more pragmatic attitudes. Despite the fact that this shift has been supported by neighboring countries who have exerted noticeable pressure to overcome a divided society model, the main factor has been internal development, the rationalization of attitudes from both sides. According to a survey by Jüri Kruusvall (1998), the attitudes of various groups of Estonians towards minority issues become more and more heterogeneous; only less than one third of Estonians feel themselves still highly disturbed by the presence of a big Russian

community. The same tendencies are present in Russian community, *opinions become more pragmatic and differentiated.*

The problem is that the political and legal scheme is exactly the same as 7 years ago. According to Klara Hallik's analysis (1998), there have not been any substantial changes in the party programs and political attitudes during the last 4–5 transitional years. One has to conclude that society has developed more rapidly than its political establishment. And the *dilemma today* is: to sustain the paradigm established in the early nineties, or to change it, to move towards integrational model or sustain the divided society scheme.

Vision

A lack of vision about an integrated/multicultural Estonia has been an important barrier to shifting towards integration. For different persons this very widely used notion of integration might mean quite contradictory things, from absolute Estonization of all non-Estonians to sustaining the current model. I will try now to present my vision about the possible future scheme for Estonia after the paradigm shift.

By integration I mean the process of inclusion of non-Estonians into the local society. Integration means the barrier vanishing process, it means the disappearing of the barriers, which today prevent many non-Estonians from being competitive enough in the local labor market, to have a good education in Estonian schools, to participate in the local cultural and political life. Those barriers are first of all related to the language skills, legal status, knowledge of the local culture. The integration does not mean giving something up, losing something, it means obtaining *additional qualities*, those qualities which allow the person with non-Estonian origin to fully participate in the social, political and cultural life of the country. Integration does not mean the change of ethnic identity, it means obtaining the elements of additional identity. It means an emerging identification with the current country of residence, at the same time retaining emotional attachment with the country and culture of Russia/Ukraine/Latvia, etc.

As an outcome of the integration processes, some kind of Estonian version of *open multicultural society* might be envisioned. This model might be characterized by three essential moments (Heidmets and Lauristin 1998:14–15):

(1) *focusing on individuals*. Although Estonia is recognizing the rights of minority groups to maintain their own culture and traditions, the right of each single person to define his/her ethnic belonging and identity should be strongly emphasized. An Estonian version of multiculturalism cannot rely on the legally fixed group rights, but first of all on free choices of persons, cultivation of tolerance and openness in society.

(2) by strong *common course*. It seems that in a small country the multicultural society is effective only if there is a strong common course for all participants. By common course I mean the shared values and attitudes, accepted behavioral and

interaction models in everyday life. Only having strong common course can the multiculturalism survive.

(3) by *Estonian cultural dominance*. If in a social dialogue all the cultures in Estonia are equal, then in their relations to the state the Estonian culture should remain privileged. As the idea of the Estonian state is to maintain and develop Estonian cultural space, the privileged status of Estonian cultural element should be present. The idea of the widely used notion in Estonia about the *nation state* can be understood just as a special obligations of the state to protect and promote Estonian culture.

Therefore, this is a vision of society where there are no more legal barriers (Estonian citizenship is dominating), no substantial language barriers (almost everyone is fluent in Estonian), and the cultural differences are considered not so much as a problem but more as an advantage. And different political attitudes have become a topic for rational discussion. Achieving this means substantial efforts from both sides. From Russians first of all spending time and energy in language training, from Estonians accepting the new model of society with real support to the Russians *coming in*.

I know exactly that there are today people on both sides who are not very enthusiastic to accept such kind of perspectives. There are Estonians who consider this betraying Estonia and there are Russians who consider this as violation of their human and all other rights. But I do not think that there is really any alternative to such or similar future schemes.

Practical steps

What should be done for moving from a separational model towards an integrational one? If we define the integration as a barrier-removing process, the question is how to deal with the really existing barriers. As I mentioned earlier, the most influential among them are psychological ones (different attitudes toward central political issues), language barriers (knowledge of Estonian) and legal barriers (being an Estonian citizen).

Up to now, the main efforts have been made in the field of language training. At least in a sense of spent money. At the same time the results have been comparatively poor. And as the citizenship issue is closely tied to the language skills, it also means that there has not been any remarkable progress in the field of obtaining Estonian citizenship through naturalization.

There are about 130,000 non-Estonians who are today Estonian citizens (by descent, by naturalization, by using some temporary advantages we had during the transition times). And this makes only one fourth of the whole non-Estonian population. At the same time there are about 3,000 persons who passed the naturalization process during the 1996. If this figure will remain more or less the same, it takes more than a hundred years to obtain citizenship for 90 percent of non-Estonian population. On the one hand, the current scheme is obviously not effective, on the other hand it is hardly believable that a situation where there are

hundreds of thousands of non-citizens (who also happen to be non-Estonians) can survive as a long term model for the country. And some sort of quick solution (like zero-option in Lithuania) seems also to be almost impossible.

In my understanding we cannot change the language competence very quickly, we cannot change very quickly the citizenship barriers, but what we can do is to hasten the attitude rationalization processes in society. I have to agree with the experts from the UN Development Programme (1997) when they, while elaborating the integration strategy for Estonia, defined the integration as "mutual acceptance of different ethnic and language communities" (p. 3). Acceptance in my understanding means first of all an attitude change, and a realization that Estonia's stability and development do not need a divided, but an integrated society, that the paradigm shift is serving the vital interests of both Estonians and non-Estonians. If the attitude rationalization among different groups in society will deepen, as it has happened during the last couple of years, this inevitably shapes the political establishment as well as gives new motivation to non-Estonians to make an effort both in language training and projecting themselves into Estonian society.

On 10 February 1998, the Estonian Government adopted the document titled: *The Integration of non-Estonians into Estonian society: The principles of national integration policy*. This seems to be good news, it was the first time since the restoration of independence when the state has defined its position and aims about the Russian issue. The integration of non-Estonians into Estonian society is defined there as the main goal for the Estonian minority policy. And among the means to achieve this task, the attitude change stands in the first place. The document states: "The attitude 'non-Estonians as a problem' should be replaced by understanding that the non-Estonian part of population are real participants in building up new Estonia" (p. 3).

I am sure that this document is a move in the right direction. We must now hope that this step will not remain only verbal. If not, there is some chance that during the coming years we can deal effectively also with our contemporary dilemma: to stay with the old model or to move to a new one.

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