

ASPEN REVIEW

CENTRAL EUROPE



CENTRAL EUROPE RE-ENTERS HISTORY

Marek Cichocki, Robert Cooper, Tomáš Klvaňa, Luuk van Middelaar, Peter Pomeranstsev, Emmanuel Todd

Ukraine Can Be a Neutral State

An interview with Roman Szporluk

Right in Ascendance or Mainstream in Decline?

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POLITICS Exit Politics I. Krastev | Russian Minority in Estonia after Crimea M. Ehala
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Russian Minority in Estonia after Crimea

Martin Ehala

The Crimean *Anschluss* has raised security concerns in the neighboring countries of Russia. Having a relatively large Russian speaking minority, Estonia certainly needs to analyze the situation and take appropriate measures.

According to the 2011 census, there are 1.29 million people in Estonia, roughly 70% of whom are ethnic Estonians and the remaining 30% Russian-speakers. The vast majority of Russian-speakers are ethnic Russians, but this category includes also Ukrainians, Belarusians, and representatives of dozens of other ethnicities who speak Russian as their home language, but may still value their heritage in the form of “symbolic ethnicity.”

Historically the Russian speaking population has largely been formed after the annexation of Estonia to the Soviet Union in 1940. During the Soviet period, immigration of Russians and other Soviet ethnicities into Estonia was encouraged by the Soviet authorities. As a consequence, the share of ethnic Estonians in the population dropped from 93% in 1940 to 61% in 1989. After regaining the independence in 1991, the trend reversed, partly due to withdrawal of Soviet troops and their families from Estonia in mid-1990s.

Currently, about a half of the Estonian Russian-speakers live in the capital Tallinn area where they constitute nearly 50% of the population. Residentially, most of them are concentrated into a few ethnic suburbs. About 30% of Russian-speakers live compactly in industrial cities in East

Estonia, near the border of the Russian Federation. The proportion of Russian speakers in these cities is around 90%. The region is strategically crucial to Estonia, as it has the mines of oil shale, fuelling the largest national power plants. The remaining 20% of the Russian-speakers are scattered in other cities and towns of Estonia where they are a small minority.

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As Russian was the official language in the USSR, the Russian speakers of Estonia had little or no motivation to learn Estonian. After the collapse of Soviet Union, the language status was reversed: Russian lost its official position and Estonian was re-established as the only state

language. Since most of the Russian speakers were monolingual, one of the main goals of Estonian language policy during the last 25 years has been establishing Estonian as the main language of communication.

What is certain is that at present, no Russian politician or community leader in Estonia denies the need to learn and know Estonian, and this opinion seems to be shared by the majority of Russian speakers, too.

This enterprise has been followed by some success: in 1990, as many as 85% of Russian speakers did not know Estonian at all; by 2013 this has fallen to 25%. Those figures reflect self-assessment, which may not be fully accurate. What is certain is that at present, no Russian politician or community leader in Estonia denies the need to learn and know Estonian, and this opinion seems to be shared by the majority of Russian speakers, too.

Despite increased language knowledge, there are still little personal contacts between the members of the main linguistic groups in Estonia. Roughly a half of Russian-speakers live in a virtually monolingual Russian environment where there is little contact with Estonians, and about 45% of Estonians have no daily contact with Russian speakers, either, according to a recent survey. The phenomenon is often characterized as living in parallel worlds, the more that the Russian speakers mainly follow the TV channels of Russia while Estonians prefer Estonian and Western channels. Obviously these media provide

quite different interpretation of world events, particularly of those in Ukraine.

Because of the large proportion of Russian speakers in Estonia, their segregated pattern of residence in the border areas, and their adherence to the Russia's channels of mass media there is an inclination to see them as a potential threat to Estonia's internal security and territorial integrity, especially after the annexation of Crimea. While such potential may be present in principle, its possible realization also depends on several other crucial elements.

According to the social identity theory, the interethnic stability is contingent on three social psychological factors—the perception of legitimacy of the interethnic power relations, the perception of ethnic deprivation; and the perception of the strength differential between the competing groups. For example, the Russian separatism in Ukraine actualized its potential after all three conditions became satisfied. First, the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich enabled to construct the perception of the Kiev government as illegitimate. Second, the subsequent withdrawal of the official status of the Russian language by Ukrainian parliament strengthened the perceptions of deprivation. Third, the strong support of Russia for the pro-Russian powers and the weakness of the pro-Ukrainian powers in Crimea made the idea of changing the *status quo* realistic. To analyze the situation in Estonia, the perceptions of legitimacy, deprivation and strength need to be taken into account, too.

What concerns legitimacy, there is no doubt that the status of Estonia as an EU and NATO member is perceived legitimate amongst the Estonian Russian speakers. Ethnic Russian politicians run for seats in the European Parliament, Estonian *Riigikogu*, and at municipal level. It must also be noted that the vast majority of Russian speakers support ethnically mixed major parties, such as the Centre Party, the Social Democrats, and to a lesser degree the liberal Reform Party. These parties provide

a legitimate path to power for politically active part of the Russian speaking community—most of the opinion leaders of the Russian speakers are the members of these large parties. On the other hand, the support for ethnic Russian parties has been for many years extremely low, just below 3%.

Furthermore, the participation activity of Russian speakers at the EP and local elections is the same as amongst Estonians, while it is somewhat lower at the national parliamentary elections. All this indicates that the Russian speaking community seems to be politically well integrated to Estonian society and participates in democratic processes, recognizing its legitimacy.

However, it must be taken into account that differently from local elections, not all Russian speakers can participate in national and EP elections. These are restricted to citizens of Estonia, but only 54% of the Russian speakers have Estonian citizenship, while a quarter has Russian citizenship and a 20% is still stateless.

This brings us to the ethnic equality issue where Estonia is the most vulnerable. While in objective terms, the Russian speaking minority is by no means culturally threatened; such perception is quite widely held. It has two main sources, the issue of citizenship and the issue of Russian-medium schools.

Estonian citizenship policy is grounded on the fact that Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 as a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. People of the Russian-speaking minority—that formed during the Soviet period—were seen as immigrants who had to apply for citizenship requiring Estonian language examination. While in the first 10–15 post-Soviet years, they applied to citizenship in large numbers, it has considerably slowed down in recent years. This may be partly due to rational choice: a stateless permanent resident of Estonia has the advantage of travelling visa free to both the EU and Russia, while Estonian and Russian nationals need a visa to Russia and the EU, respectively.

Even if it is profitable to be stateless instrumentally, the sense of being a “second class citizen” is the strongest drawback of this status. This is annoying to the people who have been born and lived all their lives in Republic of Estonia, but are still not recognized as its citizens. Some of them have taken a principal stand not to apply for citizenship because they believe that they have a moral right to have it by birth. Some have even stated that they would not take the Estonian citizenship even if they were given to them as a gift, since it is too little and too late.

The other major issue is the reform of the Russian-medium schools that started 2007. According to the plan, in the last three grades of the secondary school, 60% of the subjects must be taught in the Estonian language. Before the reform, the Russian-medium schools had the right to teach all subjects in Russian. The goal of this reform is to increase the knowledge of Estonian amongst Russian speaking youth. While there is a public consensus about the need to know the Estonian language, there is disagreement on methods how this goal should be reached. Quite clearly, the reform has made many Russian speakers worried, because of the fear that learning in Estonian would weaken the overall learning results, particularly if the teachers themselves were not native speakers of Estonian. Reducing the Russian-language education has also increased fears of linguistic and cultural assimilation.

The third factor influencing interethnic stability is the perceived strength differential. The ease of the Crimean annexation showed that if the population welcomes the external intervention, separatism would be hard to counter. So, Russia’s bold willingness to support its diaspora’s separatist sentiments certainly increased the perceived strength of the Russian speaking minorities in the nearby countries.

However, as the subsequent developments have showed, the power balance has remained quite constant compared to the pre-Crimean

time. First, the West has assured its unity by economic sanctions and by increasing its military presence in the Baltic Countries, countering power with power. And second, Russia has failed to show clear and easy success in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. Instead of finding unanimous popular support, it has only managed to raise a small fraction of separatists to an armed confrontation. Thus, the stalling of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is a cautionary example for everybody who dreams of a miraculous return of the USSR. Most likely any such attempts would turn into a lose-lose situation for all sides. Considering this, the question that the Estonian Russian speakers might ask in their hearts is whether their deprivation is really of such magnitude, and the Estonian state so illegitimate that taking the separatist cause would be preferable to any other option.

Some answer to this question was aired at the latest celebration of the victory in the WWII in Estonia on May 9th. In the last years, these celebrations have been massively decorated by the orange-black Georgian ribbons. Many Estonian Russian speakers liked to display them in their cars permanently as an identity sign. This year, the display of Georgian ribbons was considerably decreased. As the Ukrainian separatists use this ribbon as their identification, the symbol has acquired aggressive imperialist connotations. A notable drop in the use of this symbol in Estonia might be a sign of disassociation from the sentiments characterizing its wearers in Ukraine.

There is no doubt that the Russian speakers feel somewhat deprived in Estonia, because of the citizenship and educational policy. The positive thing about the Ukrainian crisis is that perhaps the first time ever the Estonian mainstream political discourse has started to realize that the only long-term security guarantee against Russia's imperialistic ambitions would be the welfare of all people in Estonia, notwithstanding their home language. This has already led to some positive steps—the ministry of justice has started

translating Estonian legislation to Russian, it has promised that the consumer information of medical products needs to be also printed in Russian; and that the school reform needs adjustments. Thus, at present it seems that the lesson of Ukraine might have an improving rather than obstructing effect on the interethnic relations in Estonia. ●



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Photo: Eva-Maria Truusalu