

The Wages of Fear: Estonia and Ethnicity

Accusations fly between Russia and Estonia while civilians wait for the authorities to decide their fate.

By Yelena Dudochkin

Estonia's post-independence efforts to integrate ethnic Russians have met criticism in Russia. As its international economic and political position becomes inextricably entwined in its internal political stability, the Russian question demands attention. Russian accusations of human rights abuses by the Estonian government have ironically obscured an issue they were intended to illuminate. Estonia's hesitancy to recognize the Russians within its borders and reluctance to facilitate their integration is potent with economic and political repercussions that threaten the fledgling nation as much as it does the ethnic Russians in Estonia.

VIOLATIONS AND ACCUSATIONS

Volatility is historically embedded in Estonian-Russian relations. During the Soviet era, Stalin deported thousands of Estonians and replaced them with Russians in an attempt to "Russify" the Estonian people and stamp out Estonian agitation for independence. Thirty two percent of the Estonian population is now Russophone. Since Estonia achieved independence in 1990, it has not forgotten this legacy, contributing to a general distrust of all things Russian. Andres Arujarv summed up the situation as follows:

"Under the smoke screen of international friendship and brotherly aid they tried to turn us into a minority in our own country and then assimilate [us] into the Russian-nation" (Arujarv 2).

Estonians are afraid of such a significant presence of what they consider a colonizing people and their laws reflect this desire to prevent domination by Russians or any other ethnic group. This history feeds Estonian demands since the re-establishment of independence

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that only those Russians with a genuine commitment to Estonia be provided Estonian citizenship. Estonians want to preserve their unique culture and to expand the population of ethnic Estonians. Russians must either naturalize and join Estonians, or leave the country.

These concerns have given rise to organizations such as the Estonian Decolonization Foundation. This group is devoted to purifying Estonia of the ethnic Russian population by any means. (Estnm) It is private organizations such as EDF that have prompted the Russian government to accuse Estonia of ethnic cleansing and practicing apartheid (Hough 12).

Deep down, the Estonians would like the Russians to just "go home." This sentiment prevents Estonians from realizing that the Russians who were going to leave have already done so while the remaining populace wishes to be integrated into Estonia. Russian fears are exacerbated by Estonian nationalists, newspaper editorialists, and government officials who thaw around the terms "colonist" and "illegal immigrant" with respect to the non-citizen Russian population while making it clear that as many as possible should leave. One organization, the aforementioned "Decolonization Fund," claims that unless the Estonian population rises to at least 80 percent, Estonians will lose grip of their government and culture. Cartoons are published in major Estonian newspapers such as a recent one published in the Tallinn daily, *Rahva Haal*, showing a heavy Russian army general seated on top of a pile of skulls, claiming "my human rights are violated," while an Estonian figure tries to push him out with a stick saying, "Go home Russky!" Such an approach will not encourage tranquillity.

RESIDENCY, CITIZENSHIP, & STATELESSNESS

Russia's primary demand is that Estonian citizenship law toward ethnic Russians in Estonia be changed. Estonian citizenship law is based on the premise that the current government of Estonia is a restoration of the Estonian republic that existed from 1918 to 1939. Therefore, all

citizens of the pre-1939 republic and their descendants are automatically guaranteed citizenship regardless of ethnicity. The disagreement arises over the law's requirement that those moving to Estonia during the Soviet occupation meet naturalization tests for citizenship. Russia's claim that this law is unreasonable in principle and its refusal compromise divert intentional attention from the real problem in Estonia's approach to its Russophone population. While Estonian citizenship laws have been amended to conform to international guidelines and pronounced legitimate by the CSCE and other international organizations, the international community has failed to properly examine Estonian laws on alien passports and permanent residency.

This crucial neglect occurred, in part, because Moscow's publicity campaign accused Estonia of violating human rights. When Estonia passed a citizenship law that provided all residents of Estonia prior to July 1, 1990 with residence permits, the first and most important step on the road to citizenship, Europeans applauded their liberality. Russia, however, charged that language requirements for Estonian citizenship were too difficult for an average Russian worker who cannot devote time to study. Because the Director of the UN Center for Human Rights, Ibrahima Fall determined that the "level of proficiency required would bring citizenship within the reach of most of the Russian speaking population," the fight over language requirements and other prevarications have discredited the Russian government on human rights issues.

Now, however, the international community has uncovered several serious problems. Since they are not yet citizens, Russophones do not have Estonian passports. Their situation is complicated by the fact that their existing passports are for the USSR and are not recognized outside of Estonia because the USSR no longer exists. The system is so complex and complicated during the transition, that it is not certain that all Russophone permanent residents can get back into Estonia if they choose to leave. Because this problem was addressed neither through publicity nor through direct accusation, once Estonian laws were formally recognized as meeting western democratic standards, the Estonian government lost interest in special concessions on the issue of alien passports and permanent residency (Hummikuleht 2).

Estonia ostensibly addressed this problem in Article 8 of the Law on Aliens by providing alien passports to permanent residents "who do not have the possibility to obtain the passport or other equivalent document... of any other state." This question has been complicated, however, by the Russian Federation's deci-



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sion to provide any citizen with a passport from the former USSR, the option of accepting Russian citizenship. This has effectively precluded many Russophone residents of Estonia from obtaining alien passports. Technically once they have their Estonian residency permits, Russophones can accept Russian citizenship for a few years until they are granted Estonian citizenship. Approximately 40,000 out of 550,000 the Russian-speakers in Estonia have done so. The vast majority, however, suspect that if they accept Russian citizenship that fact will be used against them to deny them Estonian citizenship. Given the proclivity of the Estonian Foreign Ministry to use euphemisms such as "people of foreign origin" rather than the more common "stateless persons" (only Russians deprived of their Soviet Citizenship on political grounds meet the "stateless persons" criterion of the Estonian government) to refer to people who moved to Estonia during the Soviet era and their descendants, their fears are not altogether unfounded.

There are many reasons for ethnic Russians in Estonia to desire Estonian citizenship. To persons born and raised in Estonia, the Russian Federation has little appeal as a homeland". The fact that over 90 percent of the Russophones living in Estonia have elected to forego international travel rather than put their hope of attaining Estonian citizenship at risk is a poignant testament to their commitment to their new country.

Further exacerbating Russian concerns, is the failure by Law on Aliens to specify the status of aliens that apply for citizenship and are refused citizenship or are unable to pass the citizenship requirements. Tangling this

imbroglio even more are sunset provisions on the offer for Russian Federation citizenship. As noted above, most Estonian Russians do not want Russian citizenship because many consider Estonia their home and their future. Yet, 32 percent of the population of Estonia faces a possible failure to obtain Estonian citizenship after the deadline for Russian citizenship has expired. Such potentially stateless persons comprise an ominous 90% of cities such as Narva in the northeast of Estonia. Residency is precariously bound to citizenship in Estonia. Those provided with temporary residency permits must wait three years before applying for permanent residency permits. Citizenship then requires two years of permanent residency, a language proficiency exam, an oath of loyalty, and a permanent source of income. There is a further one year wait from the date of application before citizenship is granted (Helsinki Accords 11). Since Russophones are not guaranteed permanent residency permits, there is the possibility that some may wait for six years before receiving citizenship.

Furthermore, Estonians see career members of the Soviet/Russian armed services and employees of intelligence and security forces as peculiarly culpable for the oppression that occurred under Soviet rule. They acknowledge that many were conscripted into the Red Army and forced to serve against their will, but this law is directed at those who chose to embrace a career in an organization that was the iron fist of a totalitarian monster. Therefore, the Law on Aliens denies them, their families, and other military officials, permanent residency status (Helsinki Accords 16).

ECONOMIC PRAGMATISM AND INTERNATIONAL OPINION

Counteracting extremism is the famous Estonian pragmatism. Many Estonians recognize, however, that those who are denied citizenship will eventually become a burden on the Estonian culture and economy. These leaders support cultural preservation, but do not want it to impede Estonia's access to foreign investment and total integration into Western Europe. When economics are brought into the equation, cultural chauvinism ceases to be a purely Russo-Estonian question. Some Estonians are concerned that they may be driving Germans, Finns, and Swedes elsewhere with privatization restrictions" on land ownership that prevent international business people from diving into Estonian business and buying out Estonian land and industries.

In terms of international relations and world opinion, Estonia is also pushed by Russian politics. The continuous attacks on Estonia through press by President Yeltsin and other Russian officials, have effectively, if not always accurately, tarred Estonia with human rights violations. British Foreign Office Secretary of State, Douglas Hogg, on March 25, 1994 in an interview with the Estonian Puhapaevaleht newspaper said that in his opinion,

"Non-integration of Russians into the Estonian society may bring about an extremely dangerous situation. Estonia needs to map out a policy to promote the integration of all people who want to live here into Estonian Society. No society that wishes to remain stable can afford to keep a considerable part of the population deprived of political rights."

Hogg considered the relations between Estonia and Great Britain to be very good and continued to say that he would like to see Estonia more firmly integrated into West Europe as its partner in free trade; however, he believes that Estonia needed to work out its domestic conflicts before such integration could occur.

CONCLUSION

Whether the Russian community is successfully integrated into Estonia with a reasonable degree of tranquility, or Estonia becomes another area of ethnic tensions in Europe depends on several factors. The first is the implementation and application of the Law on Aliens. Whether that law is directed toward inclusion rather than exclusion will define the direction taken by Estonian relations with Russia and the Russophones inhabiting their land. The

Estonian government must do a better job of informing non-citizens about future regulations to avoid the rumors that become a medium of misrepresentation, within the Russian community and outside the country.

Recent developments show that Estonia is recognizing the danger of not integrating a large percentage of the population into government. They include such moves as permission for non-citizens to vote in local elections and the integration of the Russian Party of Estonia into the official political infrastructure. The recent elections placed six Russian speaking members into the Parliament who represent three different Russian political parties, creating an opportunity to integrate ethnic Russians into the government mechanism. The new Citizenship Law, which is active as of April 1995, is not supposed to effect Russophones who are currently residing in Estonia. However if the new law is applied to these people, Estonia will be plagued with many complications and problems. The recent agreement to review each military personnel case individually also has to be further defined. Although the general direction leads toward compromise, much remains to be worked out. As a specialist with the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe noted, "Russia optimistically thinks that very few officers will be deported, while Estonia intends send back most of the military personnel after giving them an official chance." In reality, ethnic Russians are less concerned with the question "will I be able to vote next month," than the question "will I have a job next month." The Estonian government can do much to reduce the chances of economic frustration turning into anti-government ethnic politics by providing conditions for increased employment and productivity. Economic stability will release the tensions between Estonian and Russian workers, decreasing the possibility of conflicts sparked by ambitious politicians seeking power by discrediting the democratic government. It is essential that the international community continue to monitor events in Estonia, criticize unfit policies and legislation, and condemn harsh propaganda or actions inconsistent with the principles of the Helsinki Final Act and CSCE commitments on both sides. If these conditions are met, Estonia will achieve domestic harmony and international approval thereby further stabilizing their role as a novel player in the international community. IB

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