

Chronic ideologisation and how to treat it:  
Case study, the Russian minority in Estonia.

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## **Introduction**

The ethnic issue today seems to be one of the most urgent, topical, controversial and often even seemingly unsolvable one, looking at ethnically based differences and conflicts still unsettled: the Balkans with its Kosovo perpetual hot spot, the Middle East with the Arab-Israeli dispute etc. They are characterized by the fact that every party to this type of controversy takes their stand, historically and culturally impossible to change, which makes it extremely difficult to find a unique absolute truth to make the parties come up with the concessions and reconciliation. The hardest dimension here is an intimate emotional layer of a population's psychology involved, with their deepest values and beliefs being questioned by the opponents. When this layer is touched upon, it is no use in calling for a common sense and conscience, needed to find a compromise, emotions – is the only what matters.

Though, the controversy based on the ethnic reasoning may enter its calm phase if the ethnic differences are not emphasized and are even suppressed in the presence of a strong central government for example (Yugoslavia for instance), as soon as the central government is weakened and the local elites coming into power in the ethnic provinces start accenting an ethnic or religious issue, it serves as an oil to the flame and explodes the whole regions, at times turning them into zones of perpetual conflicts (situation in Lebanon today or Iraq).

Thankfully, the EU territory is not suffering from such conflicts as set as examples above. But in order not to keep back the facts, it should be noted, nevertheless, that the EU is not totally free from the mentioned problem. First of all, Kosovo, due to its proximity, have been an issue of a deep concern for the EU, and, the region is still far from being a stable one. But apart from that, the potential hot spots, with a theoretic capacity of a social ethnically presupposed explosion, exist all over Europe, especially given a developing Diasporas societal structure. Potentially, the more ethnic or religious groups are living within the borders of one country, the more explosive material it contains.

This paper is aiming at answering the following questions: what serves as a spark, capable of blowing up the society, how can this be avoided and what could be a solution for the societies with the sparks already flying all around. These are not the simple questions and it would be unwise to pretend to find a universal remedy, a panacea effective everywhere, due to complexity and unique nature of every case. But, nevertheless, the paper tries to propose a common trend, presumably applicable to a certain extent to all the ethnic differences. Namely, the hypothesis may be formulated as follows: when ethnic or religious factors are used in creating ideology aiming at political goals, simply speaking, when people's emotions are being played on for the sake of gaining more political authority among them by opposing 'us' to 'them', this is an effective political tool for some fighting for power, being a bright spark for the vulnerable societal structure at the same time. When the differences are emphasized and used as a part of ideology, instead of being graded, the conflicts arise. So the solution could be the change in elites' strategies from ideologisation of the differences to finding constructive similarities for creating a base of stable coherent societies.

The paper will take a closer look at the situation of the Russian speaking minority in Estonia to check the above mentioned hypothesis.

## **Historic background of the discriminatory policies**

The Russian speaking minority in Estonia can be divided into two main groups: firstly, the descendents of the indigenous Russian minority in the region and secondly, the Soviet time

migration. In total, they constitute about 30 percent of the Estonian population, and their fate has been closely connected with the political fluctuations of the past years.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former social republics were granted independence, Estonia became independent again in 1991. After the fact of dissolution of one state (USSR) and emergence on its place a number of other countries a new legal system and logic was to appear on the space of the former Soviet Union. The fact, that Russia announced itself the successor of the Soviet Union, with all the responsibilities of the former state lying on Russia's shoulders, influenced much many other factors of the life in the former Soviet space, including, the position of the Russian speaking minority.

The legal system of Estonia, shaped in 1991, was based on the fact that from the joining Soviet Union in 1944, a period of the Soviet illegal occupation started. Stalin, the head of the Soviet Union launched policy of approaching and blending nations, the migration programs of socialist industry and infrastructure building were started with numerous Russians being moved to various republics as specialists or constructors. Consequently, in Estonia there were many Russian – speaking since then, who did not need to speak Estonian, as they were involved in the developed from the center industries and were not mixing with the local population, involved in the other industries and activities. Between the two world wars in Estonia there were not more than 10 percent of the Russian speaking population (they represented the indigenous Russian minority existing their for centuries) , while after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it constituted about 30 percent. It is notable that those Russians, given the historic reasons, did not speak Estonian, but some of them were born in Estonia, never been to Russia and considered the country their mother land.

In 1991 the Estonian government, tending to nationalism, and trying to gain more authority using the historically-ethnic grounds (this scheme worked more or less with the same success in all the former republics, as well as in all the multinational states with the weakened central power) announced that the Russians, who came to Estonia during the Soviet Union times, as well as their descendents, were situated on the territory of Estonia illegally, which meant that they were not given citizenship automatically, but were proposed to take special naturalization exams to pretend to get citizenship, or they were proposed another option – to return to Russia.

There were not many people, who decided to return to Russia, since for them it was not 'return', their home was Estonia, with work, family and life. There were some, who took the exams and could get the citizenship (35% of Russian speaking population in 2006), but this option did not work for everyone, as some did not speak Estonian or some argued that the Estonian history test offered unacceptable interpretations, and many decided to take Russian citizenship, which was easier for them to acquire (27%), but a significant part remained without citizenship at all (35% of the Russian speaking population). The special passport was introduced for them: 'Noncitizen'. With this passport, as well as with the Russian passport, without the status of the Estonian citizen, it was impossible for the Russian speaking to participate in the national elections and political life; they could only have their voice in the local municipal affairs. So, without considerable rights, they could not also fight for their rights, since they did not have a political voice.

Furthermore, certain discrimination took place in the labor market as well. Amnesty International considers worrisome the high unemployment — 12.9% in 2005 — among people belonging to ethnic minorities, in contrast to only 5.3% among ethnic Estonians during the same period.

What made the situation worse is that the new international and educational programs were introduced, reducing the Russian language schools and possibilities to get education in the

Russian language, according to the law on the state language (1999), adopting the only Estonian language as a state one, regardless the numerous Russian speaking constantly living in the country. It led to more social exclusion among the Russian speaking minority. The significant part of the young, without seeing prospects for better education, work or life, was marginalized, put out of the society, pushed to drugs or alcohol (Downes, 2003).

This precedent of Noncitizens' passport issuing with considerable limits in the rights of the weighty part of the population in the European country, which became a member of the European Union in 2004, goes counter such sources of the international law, as International Convention on reducing statelessness (1961), European Convention on Citizenship (1997) and others. So, it is a strange phenomenon in the modern Europe. Though, the situation has improved: in July 2007, the Population Registry of the Estonian Ministry of the Interior reported that 8.5% of Estonia's residents have undefined citizenship and 7.8% have foreign citizenship, - the strange phenomenon still exists.

The case has been observed with anxiety by the international community. First of all, the Russian Federation has repeatedly expressed its dissatisfaction with the fact that its 'compatriots' are being discriminated against on the territory of Estonia. But in Estonia those statements are being considered as the desire of the big neighbor to restore its influence in the country and to interfere in interior affairs. So, the Russian pressure does not work, but, it more likely aggravates the situation even more, 'getting on Estonia's authorities' nerves'.

Though, both the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission in Estonia and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities have declared that they cannot find a pattern of human rights violations or abuses in Estonia.

Nevertheless, Amnesty International has expressed concern that ethnic Russians living in Estonia may face official discrimination and enjoy limited linguistic and minority rights.

The European Centre for Minority Issues has also criticized what it sees as Estonia's harsh treatment of its Russian population, and has condemned the ostensible lack of legal protection offered to minorities. The think-tank Development and Transition, which is sponsored by the United Nations, has argued that Latvia and Estonia employ a "sophisticated and extensive policy regime of discrimination" against their respective Russophone parts of the population.

The very lately done comment belongs to the head of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Rene van der Linden. During his trip to Estonia and Latvia Linden called on the governments of these states to better deal with the problem of integration of the minorities, as, by his words, the situation, when the resident in these countries Europeans do not have citizenship, is not acceptable for the civilized countries (<http://news.mail.ru/>, 2007).

### **Legal aspect**

From the legal point of view, the Russian speaking living in Estonia can be divided into three different groups – citizens of Estonia, citizens of Russia, noncitizens. Consequently, different types of laws can be used in three cases. The fundamental international human rights sources are being violated to a certain extent. Hereafter some examples are given of the violations of certain human rights points of international law in Estonia, according to the information given above.

First of all, the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved on 10 December 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations have affirmed the principle that human beings shall enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms without discrimination.

A more specified Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, adopted by General Assembly resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992. The General Assembly, states that "Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life" (Article 2 p.2), that 'states shall protect ... identity of minorities within their respective territories' (A.1 p.1).

Concerning the reforms of educational system and limitations of the education in Russian, Convention against Discrimination in Education, adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on 14 December 1960, may be cited:

'1. For the purpose of this Convention, the term "discrimination" includes any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education and in particular:

( a ) Of depriving any person or group of persons of access to education of any type or at any level;

( b ) Of limiting any person or group of persons to education of an inferior standard...'

Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, adopted on 30 August 1961 by a Conference of Plenipotentiaries which met in 1959 and reconvened in 1961 in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 896 (IX) of 4 December 1954, in the first Article states: 'A Contracting State shall grant its nationality to a person born in its territory who would otherwise be stateless.' In Article 7 p. 1. ( a ): 'If the law of a Contracting State entails loss or renunciation of nationality, such renunciation shall not result in loss of nationality unless the person concerned possesses or acquires another nationality...' Article 9 envisages that 'a Contracting State may not deprive any person or group of persons of their nationality on racial, ethnic, religious or political grounds'. And the Article 10 p.1 adds: 'Every treaty between Contracting States providing for the transfer of territory shall include provisions designed to secure that no person shall become stateless as a result of the transfer', p.2: '... territory shall confer its nationality on such persons as would otherwise become stateless...'

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which was adopted under the auspices of the Council of Europe in 1950, can be also mentioned, as it prohibits discrimination and human rights violations (Articles 14, 17).

Among other convictions against any kind of hostility and discrimination, the OSCE Copenhagen Document of 1990 contains the statement: 'Every participating State will promote a climate of mutual respect, understanding, co-operation and solidarity among all persons living on its territory, without distinction as to ethnic or national origin...'

The Nazi issue is worth mentioning in this aspect, as praising Nazi fighters taking place in Estonia (attempts to set up monuments for the SS-Waffen Nazi fighters): first of all, it runs counter the international law, as the Nazi movement was universally condemned during the Nuremberg process, and secondly, it deeply insults the Russian minority whose fathers fought against the evil of Nazism during the world war two, and consequently, violates the principle of 'promoting a climate of mutual respect, understanding, co-operation and solidarity' set forth in the OSCE Copenhagen Document of 1990.

Thus, the Estonian government seems to have been ignoring numerous internationally accepted principals in order to sustain the national pride of the newly independent state, which represents a purely emotional approach capable of leading only to deeper societal problems.

### **The world war two interpretation problem and the Bronze soldier controversy**

This was vividly demonstrated by the Bronze soldier controversy last year, when a monument of a Soldier-liberator from the Nazi, which had a deep emotional historic and cultural value for the Russian speaking was being moved from the center of the Estonian capital with accompanying humiliating statements by the country's officials (The PM Andrus Ansip publicly reproduced a joke about the Liberators' Army grave: 'remains of executed looters or drunk Red Army soldiers run over by Red Army tank' which was considered sacrilegious by the children of those fallen during the World War II fighting against the Nazi). The groups of the Russian speaking and their advocates, respectful to the fallen in fields of battles with the Nazi, attempted to organize the protest demonstrations which turned into riots and resulted in oppression by the police with the alleged human rights violations and victims, including one Russian dead. It was a dangerous incident which showed the explosive potential of the society with a considerable part being exposed to discriminatory policies. It had serious international fallouts as well.

First of all, Russia, who had repeatedly called upon the Estonian government to respect the rights of the minority and to stop violations of the international law, including the principals elaborated during the post-second world war peace restoration with condemnation of the Nazi movement at the Nuremberg process, expressed its discontent again. Moscow saw the anti-Nazi demonstrations addressing the Estonian government; a number of Russian companies, on principal, stopped their relations with the Estonian partners; the siege of the Estonian Embassy in Moscow by the youth organization 'Nashi' followed. The situation was so tense that there were speculations about cutting the diplomatic ties with Estonia. And this had even further international implications. Among others, it questioned the possibility of signing a new treaty of partnership and cooperation between the EU and Russia, which questions interests not only of the Russian minority in Estonia, but also the vital interests of Estonia itself, the EU in the whole and Russia, being a neighbor and a partner of the EU.

Russian sensitivity is significant in the issue. Here not only the desire to protect the Russian speaking matters, but the very set of Russian values is being threatened. The world war two issue, which turned out to be a national tragedy and an important milestone for the Russian nation (or it is better to say for the Soviet nation, if it is possible to call it so, with various nations in solidarity with the Russians in fighting the Nazi invasion) is worth discussing.

For Russia it was a common national tragedy which united the people in a deep sorrow, as every family has a collection of horrible war time family stories and relatives fallen in fighting. For the Russians this war is 'just', they feel victims of others' aggression, which they needed to repulse at the expense of their lives. In addition, those others were Nazi, the believers in condemned throughout the world Nazi ideology, which makes their war memories even more 'saint', as the Russians participated in freeing the world from this evil. There were many butts in that war, but people do not emphasize them, as the issue is highly emotional, and at times they feel, that to doubt the sanity of that fighting means so to say to betray their grandparents, and those who died for modern Russians to be today free from the Nazi regime which considered Slavic people to be somewhat an inferior race which is to be partly eliminated, partly subjugated to the aryen.

For Estonians it is quite different. First of all, they appeared to be between the two fires, both ruinous for their independence. At that time of the 'real politik' logic, when mainly the power and force that mattered in international relations, this country was a small participant in a game

who did not have much voice but needed to find a way to survive. According to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, and the secret protocol to the pact (1939), Estonia was given to the Soviet sphere of interests. Already that time, in the 1939, the Estonian society was not homogeneous on the dilemma who is better (or may be who is worse) – Soviet Union or Germany. There were those who collaborated with the Soviets and with a certain pressure signed an agreement allowing Soviet military presence in the country. During the short period the Soviets showed to Estonians their terror methods of governing, as they did on all their territory. After Germany attacked Russia, Estonia became a part of the German-occupied "Ostland". According to Rosenberg a future policy was created: germanization (Eindeutschung) of the "racially suitable" elements; colonization by Germanic peoples; exile, deportations of undesirable elements. In fact, Rosenberg felt that the "Estonians were the most Germanic out of the people living in the Baltic area, having already reached 50 percent of Germanization through Danish, Swedish and German influence". Non-suitable Estonians were to be moved to a region that Rosenberg called "Peipusland" to make room for German colonists. So, with the German occupation genocide, Holocaust and terror started.

Ordinary Russians were not fighting for the spheres of interests, as well as the ordinary Estonians. Basically, in that war every one was trying to survive and to save their property, families, their nations' future, after all their countries and sovereignty. Soviet methods and propaganda worked well, and people were massively sacrificing their lives on the battle fields. Those moments of the history are still remembered with sorrow. To be Nazi meant to be worse than devil.

On the Estonian soil it was more controversial. After being occupied by the Germans, many Estonians had an experience of participating in genocide and holocaust, being a part of Waffen-SS battalions, though often not of their free will. So, in Estonia population does not have that emotional feeling towards anything connected with Nazi or SS, while in Russia those symbols remind the veterans of the horrors of concentration camps and atrocities.

So, today, the opinion on the World War II in Estonia is different from the Russian's. They wanted to be sovereign and free from the games of the big powers, no matter, from Germans or from Soviets. That is why, while Russia is proud of being liberator of Estonia from the Nazi Estonians are unhappy of having been deprived of their sovereignty again.

### **The complex nature of ethnic controversy and how to deal with it**

So, this interpretation part illustrates the essence of a historical-emotional ethnic controversy, which is hard to remove, as it touches upon the most sacred and deep feelings and emotions of the populations, having, it so happened, at times incompatible viewpoints.

But what could be the way out? To build the nation-states as in 17<sup>th</sup> century and to observe the national values within the sovereign borders as in the Westfalian age? Undoubtedly, it would resolve a number of ethnic controversies inside the countries, but it would form a pattern of countries opposing each other with their strong armies and central governments (if we recall those old centuries), with states seeking more territory and power, which of course seems so unreal in the era of nuclear weapons, grading the importance of the conventional arms (or even dangerous if all the nation states decide to seek their nuclear bomb), and in the age of globalization with the notion of sovereignty and borders becoming increasingly blurred. So, if one tries to face the today's reality, it becomes clear for them that the diasporas principal, migration, multiculturalism and open-mindedness are the factors present and even needed for a further successful development. As a result, the nationalist policies and reasoning, especially if they run counter international law may only engender backwardness and urge numerous intra-state and international fallouts, in the age when multiculturalism and cooperation could stand a good steed for the populations.

If to assume, that the Estonian government launches a new policy aiming at reaching a consensus and solidarity in the country, departing from emphasizing ethnic differences and with attempts to find common grounds, values and aspirations (not running counter international law), like building a strong partnership with developed cooperation between both Estonian and Russian parts of the population, especially in the fields of science and business (Veerman, Helemae, 2004), a highly successful and innovative region could be built, given the neighboring highly developed St. Petersburg Russian region and the close ties between the Estonian Russian minority with Russia. Potentially, it could be a beautiful techno polis, with high living standards and unique cultural traditions. Moreover, it would blend with the EU North Dimension Initiative, and would also serve as a prosperous gate between the EU and Russia, benefiting to the both economies. If only the ethnic issue is not regarded as of paramount any longer, if the national pride does not interfere in the building of a common happy future, which is to become a main common value and putting the ethnic issue to the back burner.

### **Conclusions**

So, what conclusions can be drawn out of the Estonian case study? First of all, the hypothesis about the ethnic differences *ideologisation and playing on peoples emotions being a spark* with a possible explosive potential was confirmed. These were the ethnically based public policies, public disrespectful steps or statements, which made the societal structure in Estonia so tense at times.

The second question, asked in introduction was *how those explosive sparks can be avoided*. The answer could be shortly formulated as a political or public will to overcome the differences having in mind a better prospect for a future which is possible to build only together in close cooperation and mutual respect. In the paper the shaping of an innovative highly developed cross-border techno polis region, serving as a gate between Europe and Russia at the same time was proposed as this 'better prospect'. It could be also any other project capable of putting the ethnic issue behind a common values or goals, a common will to build a better life.

It is worth saying that the universal remedy can be hardly found, as every case is particular and special. For instance the case of the Russian minority issue in Estonia is specific one, due to a big neighbor of Russia being also concerned about the problem, what gives it an important international dimension, given a subtle structure of the EU-Russia partnership and its vital character at the same time. But, on the other hand, this specificity of the situation may be considered not only as a complicating factor, but rather regarded as a great potential advantage and a chance for Estonia to acquire a special status of a bridge connecting Europe with Russia and an additional weight in the Union.

An excessively emotional approach, in any case, is dangerous due to its ability to make one blind and shortsighted. Policies based on ethnic grounds are useful for certain political forces seeking power in a short run, but they are destructive in a long run. To build a stable society one needs to look for commonness without underlying differences. After all, some comparatively successful examples of ethnic groups coexisting within the borders of one country can be found in Europe and not far away from the investigated case. Namely, Finland with its 6 percent Swedish population whose language enjoys the status of one of the state languages regardless all the complexity of the Swedish-Finnish relations during the centuries.

By way of conclusion, it should be reminded, that the author of the paper, having in mind all the complex nature of an ethnic controversy, nevertheless has a positive optimistic approach, offering possible path as a solution, based on a vision of common future built in atmosphere of mutual respect.

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