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Dominant Ethnicity and Integration: The Estonian Case

A well known theorist of nationalism, Rogers Brubaker, argues in his article “The Return of Assimilation”, that integration and assimilation have both returned as important concepts in academic and centre-Left discourse since the 1990s, displacing some of the previous emphasis on multiculturalism and difference. (Brubaker 2001) Multiculturalism’s emphasis on difference and its preservation is increasingly questioned in academic circles in Europe and the United States. More stress has been placed on integration and less on preserving difference. Why is this the case?

One reason is connected to my topic theme of dominant group ethnicity. Most western societies have an ethnic majority, a dominant ethnic group which sees the state as an extension of itself. The dominant group (i.e. the English in Britain, French in France) wants to see itself reflected in the state. Yet multiculturalism often portrays 'diversity' as everything that is different from the 'bad' old majority group. In North America, this means that any ethnic groups which are not white, Anglo-Saxon or Protestant can lay claim to being part of a spicy new 'diversity' that is unfolding to replace the bland old monoculturalism. The new groups should be celebrated, and the old group derided as boring and oppressive. This arose, somewhat understandably, from a left-wing determination to supersede shameful episodes in the national past in which dominant groups stole land from aboriginals and excluded or repressed minorities. (Kaufmann 2004) In addition, a strongly conformist culture like the puritanical Protestant America of the 1920s or the Catholic conformity of Ireland in the 1950s have been viewed by liberals as limiting the potential for individual self-expression.

Naturally enough, many members of ethnic majorities do not identify with multiculturalism because they don’t see themselves represented in it - indeed they often see themselves criticised by it. This is one of the forces that led to the increasing success of far-Right parties in Western European societies like Norway, Italy, Austria and France. The centre-Right sought to win back these voters by appealing not to a *völkisch* ethnic nationalism, but rather to civic nationalism. (Bale 2003) The debate over integration was further magnified by 9/11, the Madrid bombings, the 7/7 bombings in London in 2003, the Van Gogh murder in Amsterdam, the Danish cartoons controversy and the rise of the so-called 'war on terror'.

Where does integration lie as a concept? According to Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry, integration is a policy for regulating ethnic conflict that stands between assimilation on the one hand, which involves immigrants or minorities melting fully into the dominant group, and multiculturalism on the other, whereby ethnic groups maintain their own distinctiveness. (O’Leary and McGarry 1993)

An extreme form of multiculturalism is found in societies where politics is primarily organised on the basis of group rights. A current example is Northern Ireland. If you are a politician in the Northern Ireland assembly, you must declare yourself either a Unionist, a Nationalist or Other. The composition of the Northern Ireland assembly mirrors the composition of the Northern Ireland population. Schooling is entirely separate – Protestant schools and Catholic schools. In addition, sports, media and associational life is lived apart while residential segregation is the norm. There is

integration in Northern Ireland at work and in the commercial centres of towns, but not beyond that.

Integration then, is something between assimilation and the full-blooded multiculturalism that we see, for example, in Northern Ireland. In addition, integration is linked to the idea of civic nationalism – immigrants should become like natives, but only at the level of economics, politics and mass culture, not at the level of private beliefs and behaviour.

I want to go back to a work which is referenced often – Milton Gordon's book *Assimilation in American Life* (Gordon 1964). Gordon broke up the assimilation process into a number of steps which I've simplified here into cultural, structural (economic and political), marital and identificational assimilation. Assimilation typically begins with the cultural level, i.e. immigrants come to the United States and learn to speak English. This helps them to succeed in the economy, to participate and vote in civic life at the local and federal levels, leading to structural assimilation. That is what I think we can call civic integration, the new mantra of most modern western governments. But one cannot so easily maintain private diversity when public unity is on the march. 'Unity in diversity' thus contains contradictions which cannot be held back any more than Canute could command the tides.

When people are getting along so swimmingly at work and in public, chances are they are also going to start interacting in private. When you have good civic integration, you also have intermarriage, which starts the process of marital and identificational (i.e. ethnic) assimilation. A lot of people are finding that white Americans in particular are becoming an intermarried group – some 50 percent of Catholics, Protestants and Jews marry out and are creating what Richard Alba coined a new 'Euro American' group. Asian, African and Hispanic Americans are also melting in at the edges of this new group. There are still quite clear Jewish American communities and there always will be. Everybody is not melting in, but there is definitely a process of voluntary assimilation, which Brubaker remarks upon. (Brubaker 2001) The same is true in Canada: like most young Canadians, I am of multiple ethnic origin, and this tends to weaken the discrete 'cultures' of multiculturalism, leading to more of a melting pot. Thus Canada, despite its multiculturalism policy, is actually an excellent example of a successful melting pot, albeit one in which newcomers or their descendants voluntarily (rather than coercively) blend into the mainstream English or French-speaking national cultures.

The last stage of this process is identification with the host society. I'm not saying that this is the way things *should* unfold, but it is what has tended to occur, at least in English-speaking societies. This happens voluntarily, and must be distinguished, as Brubaker notes, from coercive assimilation policies such as Franco's ban on the use of minority languages like Catalan in Spain, or a policy of forcing ethnic minorities to declare themselves a member of majority, i.e. the way Kurds in Syria must declare themselves Arab in order to get citizenship rights. Clearly these are negative policies to be condemned.

That said, what we find in most western countries are statist policies aimed at cultural and structural assimilation, i.e. integration policies. These have taken on an almost formulaic quality: citizenship ceremonies, as in the United States, national holidays

(i.e. Bastille Day in France), 'sacred' constitutions, such as the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights, and statements of national 'values' and common institutions and projects as found in Gordon Brown's recent pronouncements on Britishness. If we look at the Estonian integration policy document, we find similar phraseology – “the strong common core of the Estonian society consists of the following elements: general humanistic and democratic values, common information space, the Estonian language, importance of being a citizen, common institutions”. From this perspective, the Estonian integration document is very similar to what we find in other western societies: a list of common denominators that won't ruffle too many feathers. The big question is whether this actually makes any difference on the ground when it comes to interaction between ethnic groups?

For example, the aforementioned components of Estonian identity are held to furnish a “strong common core”, yet this may be viewed quite differently by Estonia's main ethnic groups. Estonian-Estonians will see nothing of their long history of resistance to the Russian 'Bear' or their linguistic connections to the Finns and Hungarians. Ethnic Russians will consider the Estonian 'common core' as an Estonian imposition that fails to recognise the country's bicultural character. They would desire instead to have some of the rights that the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland or Flemings of Belgium have. Separate schools and a guaranteed share of the legislature, civil service and police force jobs, not to mention official language status and recognition of Estonia as a bicultural society.

At this point, it behooves us to briefly consider terminology. I'm not a huge fan of the word *nation*. I'd rather talk about the *state* and *ethnic groups*. The *nation* is sometimes used to mean the former, and sometimes the latter, so let us bypass it here. The *state* tries to promote its own community of solidarity and identity. Civic nationalism – I prefer the word the *state community* - is the result. The state wants to create a community based on the land, flag, constitution, welfare state, values, and an official language. In many ways this can seem a bit abstract for an ordinary citizen in terms of their daily life. It may just be the official culture that surrounds them 'out there' but fails to reflect their deeper attachments. The question is: will this construct satisfy a true Estonian nationalist on the one hand, and ethnic minorities on the other? Most likely it won't satisfy either, which does not, however, mean it should not be promulgated.

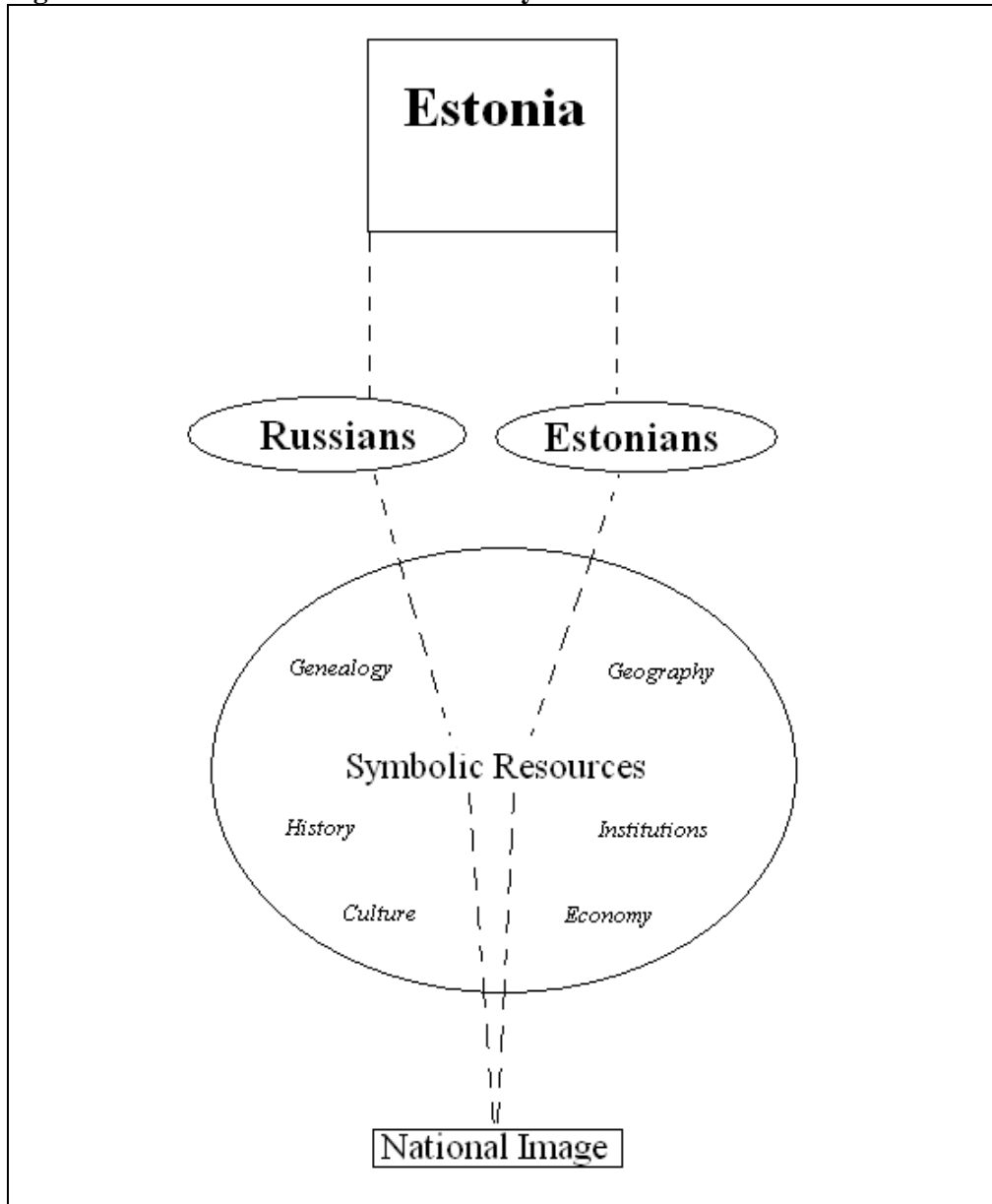
The ethnic group is a creature of a different stripe to the state community. We can think of the Estonian state as promoting one identity project, and the Estonian ethnic group as advancing another. If the two projects overlap - as they did in the interwar period - you get ethnic nationalism. Today, however, the state and ethnic projects are much further apart. Ethnic groups consider themselves to be of shared genealogical descent, with a specific language, ethno-history and sometimes religion. We came here, we had great battles, suffered great losses, we resisted, and we got our freedom.

Thus the state identity - shaped by political considerations - and the dominant ethnic identity, more driven by spiritual and cultural concerns, diverge. For instance, in Quebec, the nationalism of the *Parti Québécois* (PQ) is about the French language and the integration of immigrants into this civic culture. However, in reality, there also exists a French-Canadian ethnic group largely descended from 10,000 settlers in the early 1600s that has 250 years of what it calls 'la survivance' *vis á vis* the English.

That narrative of resistance is distinct to the French-Canadian ethnic community and does not transmit as easily as language. The alienation of many ethnic French-Canadians from the PQ's abstract civic nationalism is one of the factors behind the recent rise of the populist ADQ, which has cut deeply into the PQ's vote share. Similarly, in Estonia, the Estonian ethnic group maintains a collective memory stretching back hundreds of years, and mainly oriented against Russian/Soviet aggression. This is very different from the statist idea of being part of Europe, doing well economically, and so forth. So the Estonian state community and the Estonian dominant ethnic community are not the same.

One of the ways of thinking about Estonians and Russians within Estonia is to use an optical metaphor of identity based on the way the human eye operates. Light from objects is refracted through our lenses and is filtered through the mental Ideas we have learned to recognise. We construct our sense of national (read: state) identities in the same manner. Different interpretive lenses will distort the light of reality in different ways to produce different national images. Thus ethnic Russians and Estonians look at Estonia (land, state, people) differently. The ethnic Russians look at Estonia and say, 'we came here and saved Estonia from the Nazis, we have a long history going back to the Russian empire', etc. The ethnic Estonians peer through a different interpretive lens, seeing a history of resisting the Russians, recently culminating in freedom - but a freedom which is precarious and must be zealously defended. The Bronze Soldier episode neatly encapsulates the different perspectives on what are often the same events - but which are nonetheless interpreted differently because of different, distorting, ethnic lenses. (See figure 1)

Figure 1. Two Lenses of Estonian Identity



Dominant ethnic groups see themselves as the indigenous population, and the Russian population as interlopers: a fifth column introduced by a hostile foreign power. They view the Estonian state as an extension of their ethnic selves. As the integration report states: 'Estonians regard Estonia primarily as a society that belongs to the dominant group, i.e. Estonians, and assume that non-Estonians should have a lower social position in that society' (p. 39). Ethnic Russians see the Estonian state as a state for ethnic Estonians and not for them, and wish for it to be more of a neutral, and, ultimately, bicultural state. One of the most important factors for dominant groups is thus the idea of indigeneness – we were here first, we are the natives.

The Estonian ministry of integration clearly wants to move towards the direction of being neutral, civic state. But can it ever be neutral? Will Kymlicka makes a clear distinction between immigrant groups and national minorities. National minorities see

themselves as indigenous, whereas immigrant groups do not. Indigenousness is crucial - it is part of the logic of international law and informed decolonisation and ideas about indigenous land rights. French *colons* in Algeria were held to be non-natives, foreign settlers who should rightly leave. For Kymlicka and other political theorists, indigenousness makes a big difference as to whether a group should be recognised and given a whole series of rights - including self-determination. The Russians are a bit ambiguous in this respect: on the one hand, they are more of an immigrant group since their past largely dates from 1940. On the other hand, there were Russian communities in Estonia (such as Old Believers) going back hundreds of years. So perhaps ethnic Russians are an indigenous minority in which case they can make a case for collective rights, biculturalism, etc. This is a difficult question, not easily resolved.

So what to do - are there any suggestions? Whatever the status of the ethnic Russians, in reading the Estonian draft integration policy, I was struck by the low rate of naturalisation among ethnic Russians. Survey evidence showed that those who are Estonian citizens have more positive attitudes towards the Estonian language and the state. So perhaps the rate of naturalisation should be increased, and the language requirement perhaps replaced by a loyalty oath - because it seems that higher rates of naturalisation would lead more ethnic Russians to have a stake in the society, and see it as their own. If the ethnic Russians had much higher fertility or were still immigrating, a more cautious approach could be justified in the name of responding to the legitimate demands of the dominant Estonian ethnic group. But Estonians are no longer ethnically or culturally threatened, so can ease requirements like the Lithuanians have.

I would make the same argument for French in Quebec or Catalan in Catalonia. Policies concerning language and street signs should be based on trends in hard numbers rather than exaggerated fears. The number of speakers of Estonian in Estonia is rising which would suggest that the country could be more relaxed about assimilation and afford more rights to the Russian minority on the linguistic front.

The Estonian state is right to promote a relatively abstract and thin concept of national identity, but there remains the question of the Estonian Estonians – the dominant ethnic group. They need to be recognised in any multiculturalism policy, they have to be mentioned explicitly as the root of the state upon which diversity has been grafted. The lessons of the West show that multiculturalism cannot simply be about minorities and how wonderful they are: the ethnic Estonians have to be mentioned as part of the story so they can see themselves reflected in multiculturalism. Otherwise, multiculturalism comes to be seen as an imposition of urban cosmopolitans, minorities and the EU, a foil for ethnic nationalists. Estonian ethnicity is a valid identity and it needs to be recognised, but the state should not be an Estonian state promoting the Estonian ethnic group the way Israel is a Jewish state. There has to be a bifurcation between state and ethnic group.

Assimilation should be voluntary and not coerced. The Russians and Estonians should be competing for members just like religious denominations like Lutherans and Catholics compete for communicants. Some ethnic groups are more open, some are more closed. In Northern Ireland, intermarriage is a taboo. However in the US or Britain, it is common. Elsewhere, I have coined the term *liberal ethnic group* to

describe the way ethnic groups should handle their boundaries. I stress that ethnic groups can be very exclusive when it comes to guarding their traditions from foreign cultural influence, but should be open to new members. (Kaufmann 2000) The English as an ethnic group are thus more liberal than the Ulster Protestants are. The Estonians should emulate the English rather than the Ulster Protestants – it would make a lot of sense for ethnic Estonians to be open to intermarriage and association with ethnic Russians and others. At the same time, ethnic Estonians should continue to reproduce their collective memory going back hundreds of years. But I think ethnic Estonianism should use private associations, churches and families to promote their identity rather than the Estonian state. Ethnic Estonians would merely comprise one ethnic lobby among others whose interests must be balanced by Estonian state policy.

What does the future hold? If integration proceeds, I envision a Gordon-like scenario of assimilation in the private sphere. The future of the Estonian melting pot could involve a fusion of ethnic Estonians and Russians into something entirely new. However, absent a huge volume of non-European immigration, this outcome is unlikely. Instead, the most likely scenario will be a slow assimilation of much of the Russian minority through intermarriage, with more ethnic Estonians carrying Russian surnames as can be seen in Catalonia or the Basque country. We even find this in Northern Ireland - Catholic nationalists like Gerry Adams (English surname) and John Hume (Scottish surname) clearly have non-Irish ancestors. That said, the Russian minority, unlike the Baltic Germans, will survive into the future as a vibrant, albeit smaller, minority. But there are caveats. The quickest route to preventing and reversing assimilation is to securitise the Russian minority by threatening to coercively assimilate them or withdraw their state benefits. In the absence of sustained evidence of Russian demographic growth or declining Estonian language proficiency, policy should be readily relaxed. If ethnic Russians feel comfortable in Estonia and are welcomed into the dominant culture with open arms, they are much more likely to embrace their new home and ultimately - over generations - their new identity.

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