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## **ETHNIC RUSSIAN MINORITY IN ESTONIA**

**ABSTRACT:** The article examines the position of Russians in Estonia and their relation with ethnic Estonians. The author analyzes models of the society integration introduced by Tallinn after 1991. The results raise questions regarding language education in Estonia, the proficiency level of Estonian is getting widely known by Russians, but on the other hand, there is still a significant part of the population that cannot communicate in Estonian. Those who have a good command of Estonian tend to be better integrated and to coexist with both Estonians and Russians. Russians living in Estonia are supposed to be equally involved in social and political life of the state. The potential of all residents has to be effectively and considerably used, especially when the number of population is decreasing. The position of Russians in Estonia is a major domestic and bilateral issue in the relations with the Russian Federation.

**KEYWORDS:** Russians in Estonia, integration programs, language education in Estonia, Estonian society, Estonia after 1991, division of the Estonian society, democracy in Estonia

After annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russian Federation in March 2014 Ukraine has become in the centre of the biggest crises between Russian Federation and today's European Union since the times of Cold War. Therefore, it is a really noteworthy fact that the majority of the Crimean society is made up of ethnic Russians who are the majority of the population but with significant Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars. Apart from Ukraine there are other countries in Europe that were the members of the Soviet empire in the past and the number of Russians living there is quite high. The examples of those countries are the Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Today's international policy of the Russian Federation towards Estonia and two other Baltics States seems to be an element of the deliberate strategy and it can thought to be an analogous situation to Russians in the Crimea.

Moscow claims that has to take responsibility to protect ethnic Russians regardless their place of living. Additionally Russians living in Estonia follow Moscow's instructions supporting separatism and unrest in the country. Despite being a member in the European Union and NATO and an organizer of fully successful actions of society integration Tallinn has to be alerted and observes Putin's actions. For some countries in the European Union that Ukrainian crises can be seen as a pretty faraway one but there are countries as Estonia that feel it is knocking to their doors.

The Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania endured a lot of pain and hardship, from 1940 to 1991 this part of Europe was strongly dominated by Soviet Union. The Soviet and the following German occupation influenced the situation in the Baltic States and changed them dramatically. There counties were chosen as a place of migration by many Russians who were encouraged to settle down and start their work there. It was a direct reason why the number of ethnic Russians living in this area increased so dramatically by the time of the fall of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, the countries opened a new chapter in their history. From 1991, the Baltic States have made rapid progress in establishing both a democratic political system and a free market economy. Since regaining their sovereignty the Baltic States have to deal with the issue of national minorities and try to enrich their multicultural societies. In Estonia and Latvia, citizenship is determined by the citizenship of parents not by place. In Lithuania, right of the soil, not right of blood, was introduced and it helped to integrate national minorities groups with Lithuanian society (Best 2013).

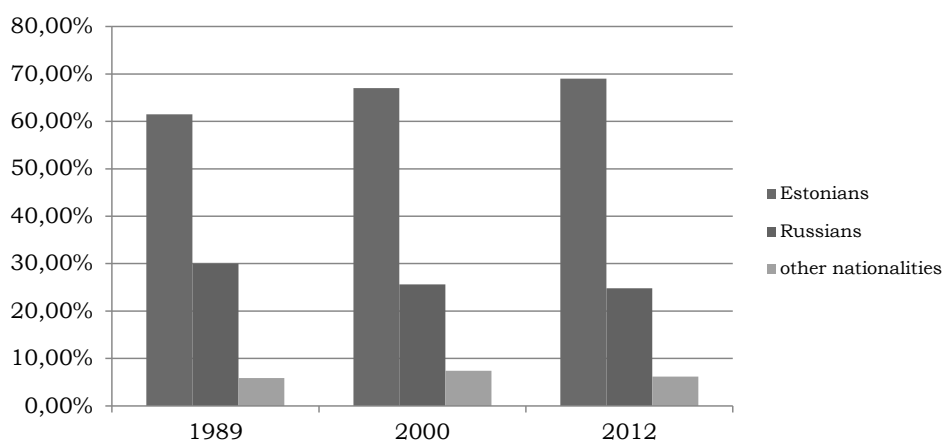
**Table 1.** Enumerated permanent residents by ethnic nationality and sex, 31 December 2011

<b>Ethnic nationality</b>	<b>Males and females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
Estonian	889.770	416.301	473.469
Russian	321.198	143.165	178.033
Ukrainian	22.302	10.531	11.771
Belarusian	12.419	5.258	7.161
Finnish	7.423	3.334	4.089
Tatar	1.945	869	1.076
Jewish	1.927	1.031	896
Latvia	1.716	726	990
Polish	1.622	659	963
German	1.490	795	695

Source: Population and housing census, <http://www.stat.ee>

Estonia is the smallest of the Baltic States taking into consideration the size of the country (total area: 45,226 km<sup>2</sup>) and the number of population (total population of Estonia – 1,294,455 permanent residents in 2013). In the early 1990s, the number of Russians living on its territory was 30.3% of Estonian population. Ethnic tensions increased due to citizenship and language requirements. It was a basic reason of disintegration in Estonian society. In 2000, the number of Russians decreased to 25.6% and today it is at the level of 24.8%. There are permanent residents of 192 ethnic nationalities in Estonia, based on the preliminary results of the 2011 Population and Housing Census but the biggest ethnic groups are Estonians and Russians that strongly determines the relations in the Estonian society. This ethnic division caused many problematic issues and disintegrated the county. Ethnicity and national minorities groups still stir emotions in the country. Russian people want to protect their heritage, language and culture, they demand equal rights and a fair chance for a good life in Estonia.

**Chart 1.** Composition of Estonian society 1989–2012



Source: Population and housing census. <http://www.stat.ee>

The number of Russians in Estonia has not significantly decreased simultaneously the number of ethnic Estonians has increased about 7%. Non-Estonians living in Estonia still seek their identity, their position in the Estonian state is not equal to the ethnic inhabitants of the country. Thus, the integration of the country into Europe and the global world is taking place, Tallinn aims at

creating one society that is open and multicultural. The integration of Estonian society has been introduced as one of the priorities and it is commonly regarded to be a two-way process. It means that involves both a majority and a minority in the country. The goal is to create a secure and agreeable coexistence based on mutual respect and understanding. The government's policy was to introduce integration programs that were expected to consolidate the society.

### **Estonian Models Of Integration**

There are three possible models that can be distinguished in the case of Estonia. The standard integration process should be two-way action. The minority agrees to adopt and implement culture, tradition, and what seems to be the most significant language of a dominant group, meanwhile the majority group accepts and tolerate the cultural, traditional, and linguistic practices of the minority group. A form of integration is assimilation, non-dominant group agrees to accept and introduce cultural and traditional practices of the dominant group. Two-way action is not taken and any forms of cultural practices of the minority group adopted by the majority are not discernible. The third distinguished model is segregation. Both groups live separately and not accept each other's cultural practices (Laitin 2003). Apart from those three models of integration, a fourth model can be found: a model of constant conflict. Both dominant and non-dominant groups do not accept their own tradition and culture that consequently leads to conflict between those groups. Estonian society was very deeply divided and the rapid integration process was seen to be a chance to consolidate the members of the Estonian state. In 1997, the first integration program in Estonia was launched. It was the first step to start building one Estonian society. The range of this program was not very spectacular and in 2000 Estonian government managed to introduce the national Integration Program aiming at strengthening relations between Estonians and Russians in the country. There were several motives that can be numbered as a direct reasons of introducing the first Integration Program in the state. The party competition tends to change its program towards bigger integration and cooperation with the Russian speaking group that was seen as a good direction and gaining more supporters (Brosing 2008). Secondly, there was tremendous pressure from international organizations, the

European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and other institutions that were strongly involved in Estonian policy. The High Commissioner on Ethnic Minority Affairs, underlined that *integration is a mutual process, where both language communities of Estonia should participate*. Rolf Ekeus underlines that dialogue is the key to further development of social cooperation and integration between dominant and non-dominant groups in the state. During his visit to Tallinn in March 2004, the High Commissioner encouraged the government of Estonia to take the integration process forward, expert assistance could be also provided by his office to speed up naturalization process and reduce the number of stateless residents, holding the alien's passports. *The key to further social integration is a dialogue*, underlined OSCE High Commissioner after his visit in Estonia. The third mentioned reason was the social, economic, and political integration of the state. Estonian nationalists were strongly against to further integration, previously it was believed that the emigration of Russians would be possible, and finally, they had to come to terms with the fact that Russian minority is a part of the Estonian society (Barany, Moser, 2005). The fourth reason that led to deeper integration was a desire of the politicians to provide a public good in the state. The linguistic and communicative integrations become a very important goal in the society. It was a crucial issue especially for all Russian speakers who could not communicate in the Estonian language. Social linguistic hegemony is thought to be a public good for each society. A Russian minority do not openly accept all forms of social assimilation, they prefer to adopt more integration patterns and be a part of the Estonian society.

The first national Integration Program in Estonia was launched in January 2000 till the end of 2007. It was the main strategy integrating the society of Estonia. The program included three levels of action. The first one was linguistic-communication sphere and its primary task was to spread the Estonian language to be considered and accepted as the basic communication tool in the state. The second level was named as legal and political sphere. The most important issue was to increase the number of people obtaining Estonian citizenship that was directly associated with their political rights and political participation that was limited since 1991. The third sphere was named as an economic integration strategy, and it was expected to increase the competitiveness and social mobility for all residents of Estonia. At the very beginning of 2008, a new integrated plan was introduced directly. The new integration program

was planned for 5 years, till 2013. The strategy presented the vision, principles and strategic basis for public institutions and other organizations involved in the main implementation processes in the state. The document was a continuation of the previous integration program and all spheres were compact. The strategy included the further development planes and also the state security policy principles. Adhering the fundamental European values was underlined to be very essential for the integration process. Estonia is a member of the European Union and authorities in Tallinn know that both domestic and European development of the country is significant. This is why the fundamental European values of democracy, rule of law, peace, individual right to self-determination, respect for human rights and cultural diversity were included into the integration program (*Estonian Integration Strategy 2008–2013*).

The Estonian language was also expected to become more popular with Estonian residents belonging to the minority groups as a common tool of public sector communication. One language gives the opportunity to be equally involved in social and political life. The long term objective of linguistic-communication sphere in the integration strategy is a situation of permanent communication in the official language by all permanent residents of Estonia. The Estonian state puts a huge impact on strengthening the identity and deepening the common understanding of the country among the permanent residents. Every person living in Estonia should have contribute in the life of the society and cultural differences should be commonly accepted in the democratic state under the rule of law. The potential of all residents has to be effectively and considerably used. Especially when the number of population not only in Estonia but also in other European countries is decreasing, people have to have opportunities for self-realization and be motivated to become an integrated part of the society. The key to successful integration is freedom of all residents, access to state education respecting the minority language, culture and history. The state has to provide to all permanent residents welfare and security, those methods will help to eliminate separation and exclusion among the members of one society. If ethnic and language barrier are reduced, the isolation of minority group will not take place. The second national integration program in Estonia was finished in December 2013, but it left the open door to further actions strengthening the ties between the residents. Multinational Estonia is still learning how to build one loyal society not divided and disintegrated.

In January 2014, Estonian Ministry of Culture launched a new integration strategy for the next six years. The main goals of the program emphasis multicultural development of the state and support for motional minorities in Estonia underlining that national minority groups living in Estonia are not identical. They have different needs, different expectations and different problems, it means that they cannot be treated according to one key. Residents with different cultural backgrounds have to be more familiar with culture and history of the country. The new integration program names the creation of a common, shared information space in the society involves further development and translation of television and radio programs and online portals (*Estonian Integration Strategy 2014–2020*). All integration strategies include similar goals, but the integration process involving Russian minority groups into Estonian society seems to be not so effective as it is expected to be. There are still groups of residents who are excluded from the rest of the society, mostly those whose command of the Estonian language is not good enough to communicate in Estonian.

### **Estonian Language Education**

Education is considered to be one of the central areas of social integration and it is strongly connected with the acquisition of the state language. Young people especially have to be included into society to become its members. Comparing the year 1989 with the present situation the number of Estonian residents speaking Estonian has increased significantly. At the very beginning of 1990s, only 15% of Russian speaking group could speak Estonian, not differentiating the levels of language acquisition. In the last few years, the level of Estonian language proficiency has remained stable among the adult population whose mother tongue is not Estonian and has increased among the young. It is also important to note significant differences in command of the state language from region to region. In 2005, in Tallinn, 16% of Estonian Russians, according to their own assessment, could not speak Estonian while in Narva this number was 62%, or four times as big. A better command of the Estonian language provides a number of benefits. Firstly, growth in the social capital of individuals belonging to different social groupings, as well as a decrease in social differences in Estonian society between Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking

residents, old and young residents, residents with higher and lower income. Secondly, cultural openness and tolerance among different ethnic groups living in the state has increased. Thirdly, greater enterprise and mobility among individuals, which is required if they and the state are to be competitive. And last but not the least is greater cultural awareness among the residents of the state as different ways of life develop and flourish in society (*Estonian Foreign Languages Strategy 2009–2015*). Estonia has introduced language strategies in the field of Estonian dedicated to its protection and further development among all residents. However, there is no national document dealing with foreign language policy as a whole. The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia and the Language Act are the most important documents including the general principles of Estonian language. Education laws and other acts regulate teaching and learning of languages for both primary and secondary language education. The Estonian language is recognized as the only official language in the state. The strategies introduced in the country promote development of multilingualism in the Estonian society. Non-Estonian residents of the state have been encouraged to study Estonian as a part of national programs and others activities introduced by the Ministry of Education and Research. Promoting the language skills of the residents of Estonia and ensuring the availability of language specialists in different areas of life requires national organization and coordination. The changes in the field of communication in official state language have been visible. Firstly the level of command of Estonian among the people whose mother tongue is not Estonian has improved on all levels. The number of people of who successfully pass the Estonian language proficiency examination has significantly increased. In 2007, 52% of the participants (133 people) successfully passed the basic level examination, the average result was 60.33 points; 43.45% of the participants (643 people) successfully passed the intermediate level examination, the average result was 57.89 points; 52.44% of the participants (472 people) successfully passed the advanced level examination, the average result was 61. Much better results were also found with the self-assessment of the command of the Estonian language in the age group from 15 to 74, good 22%; average 25%; poor 29%; none at all 24%. Secondly, contacts and communication between people with different mother tongues have increased. The other important issue that was thought to be solved was connected with differences in participation in civil society organizations and the public sphere between Estonian and Russian



speaking residents. The third important factor was information that was expected to receive not only in Estonian language but also in their native languages. Estonian television and radio stations offered programs that were transmitted in Russian language but hours of transition and topics were completely not attractive for the viewers (*Estonian Integration Strategy 2008*).

**Chart 2.** Declared knowledge of Estonian language among Russians in Estonia (2008)



Source: Estonian Integration Strategy, Tallinn 2008

The charts presents the number of Russians living in Estonia and their declared level of official state language. According to the chart only 19% of Russians living in Estonia do not communicate in the Estonian language. In comparison with 1991, the number of Estonian users increased, at the very beginning of the 90s only 14% of Russian minority group residents in Estonia declared knowledge of Estonian. More than 80% claimed that they are not able to communicate in that language.

Apart from such good results Estonian authorities continued their language development strategy. At the very beginning of 2011, a new plan was introduced. The strategy was planned for six years till the end of 2017 and it was regarded to be a strategic basic document of the Estonian language domain. The main target is to implement the plan that the Estonian language will meet all the language-use needs of the Estonian state and society. The strategy is supposed to be fully introduced by the end of 2017. The provision of the uniform strategic basis and uniform aims for the sustainable development of all the domains of the Estonian language is seen to be the key objective of further development. Many establishments

and institutions, the positions of which are crucial from the perspective of use and development of the Estonian language, took part in the preparation of the development plan: University of Tartu, Tallinn University, Institute of the Estonian Language, Tallinn University of Technology, Estonian University of Life Sciences, Institute of Cybernetics at the Tallinn University of Technology, Estonian Business School, Consistory of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, National Examinations and Qualifications Center, Language Inspectorate, Integration and Migration Foundation “Our People,” Estonian Land Board, Estonian Public Broadcasting, Estonian Institute, Estonian Literary Museum, Mother Tongue Society, Estonian Terminological Society, Estonian- French Lexicographic Society, Võro Institute, Institute of Mulgi Culture, and others (*Development Plan of the Estonian Language 2011–2017*).

The main goal to develop and foster the Estonian language among non-Estonians is to create wider possibilities for all residents to cope with their Estonian-language proficiency both on the next educational level as well as at work. The planned actions involve creating a favorable atmosphere for the Estonian language learning and providing elementary knowledge of the Estonian language in non-Estonian kindergartens and schools. The first step includes teaching chosen subjects in Estonian and to increase the prestige of the Estonian language in non-Estonian-schools. What is more, developing and organizing further education for teachers of Estonian as a foreign language was seen as one of most important issues, working out relevant courses and curricula. The program is to support the use of language portfolios with models of bilingual education to continue the elaboration of language examination that corresponds to the language proficiency levels of the European Commission. Developing and applying the programs that contribute to drill language trends among all Estonian residents. Since 1991, the Russian language has consequently been thought as a foreign language. Russian residents state that their native language is marginalized and they are touched by linguistic discrimination.

According to the Estonian language strategy all age groups are included into Estonian language learning processes. The main target groups include pupils and students from children’s preschool institutions, primary schools, secondary schools, students from institutions of higher education and young people in employment, in order to boost their levels of professional preparedness and to increase their mobility; working-age people who are interested in using language studies to reinforce the social position and level of

subsistence they have already achieved and older people for whom learning Estonian languages is designed to enable a better understanding of information and a greater level of participation in contemporary media space, politics, cultural life and organizations. High-quality Estonian language teaching must be guaranteed in different educational institutions throughout the country. The strategy is implemented by creating good conditions and equal learning opportunities. Inadequate language skills results in the social stratification and limit the right conditions for economic activity and labor mobility (*Estonian Foreign Languages Strategy 2009–2015*).

### **Conclusions**

The integration of Estonian society is visible in many spheres including linguistic and cultural areas. Russians in Estonia are still trying to maintain their cultural and linguistic identity. Many, especially among the older generations, consider the diminishing of their language tantamount to the loss of equality. On the other hand, Estonians are also stressing their cultural and linguistic heritage, introducing new integration programs and language strategies. Russian residents are often seen to be disloyal to the Estonian state and are not interested in cultivating Estonian culture and tradition. The Russian language, tradition, and culture is regarded to be discriminated against and the voice of the biggest minority group in Estonia is not heard. The Estonian and Russian languages have to coexist in such a small country as Estonia. The question of the Russian language in Estonia is therefore not purely administrative. It points at two different problems, the first one regards the difficulties Estonia faces as a multicultural country, which needs to re-create and protect its own identity, and the second one is the difficulty of reaching agreement on the historical events of the twentieth century between two ethnic groups. The treatment of ethnic Russian residents continues to be a major issue domestically and bilaterally with the Russian Federation. Non-Estonians, especially Russians, allege occupational, salary and housing discrimination because of Estonian language requirements. Those who desire language instruction confront problems stemming from an insufficient number of qualified teachers, lack of funds, poor educational infrastructure and an examination process which some allege is arbitrary.

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