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Separatisms and Social Integration Processes on the Example of Estonia

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Abstract

The article seeks to analyze political and social separatisms in contemporary Estonia and to outline integration processes in the country. The Russian national minority has been a factor that has significantly influenced the existing divisions in the interior of the country since the creation of the independent and sovereign Estonian state. Despite the passage of more than 30 years after regaining its independence, Estonia is still struggling with internal separatist mechanisms, whilst strongly developed and strengthened integration processes have significantly influenced its social consolidation. Changes in Estonian society are apparent, the sense of Estonian identity keeps strengthening and representatives of national minorities, primarily the Russian one, have increasingly improved their linguistic competence in Estonian. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to build Estonian statehood, subjectivity and identity in the shadow of the difficult relations with the Russian Federation.

Keywords: political separatism, social separatism, linguistic separatism, integration strategy, contemporary Estonia, Russian national minority

Сепаратизмы и процессы социальной интеграции на примере Эстонии

Аннотация

Статья представляет собой попытку проанализировать политические и социальные сепаратизмы в современной Эстонии и отметить интеграционные процессы в стране. С момента создания самостоятельного и независимого эстонского государства русское национальное меньшинство значительно повлияло на существующие внутри страны разногласия. Несмотря на то, что с момента восстановления независимости прошло более 30 лет, Эстония до сих пор борется с внутренними сепаратистскими механизмами, в то время как сильно развитые и укрепившиеся интеграционные процессы оказали сильное влияние на социальную консолидацию. Видны изменения в эстонском обществе, укрепляется чувство эстонской идентичности, а представители национальных меньшинств, особенно русской, все лучше и лучше владеют эстонским языком. С другой стороны, строить эстонскую государственность, субъектность и идентичность в тени непростых отношений с Российской Федерацией крайне сложно.

Ключевые слова: политический сепаратизм, социальный сепаратизм, языковой сепаратизм, интеграционная стратегия, современная Эстония, русское национальное меньшинство

From the perspective of more than three decades since the collapse of the USSR, one can conclude that Estonia, like the other Baltic republics, has succeeded in creating a modern society that is open to change. Despite many successes, determination and persistence, the process of building Estonia's statehood and independence has continued uninterrupted since the restoration of independence in 1991¹. Estonia continues to strengthen its statehood and independence in the shadow of difficult and tense relations with the Russian Federation. The large number of Russian population living in Estonia remains a factor with a key impact on Estonian society and political, economic and cultural divisions within it. Despite significant events on an international scale, such as Estonia's accession to the EU and

¹ Estonia regained its independence on 20 August 1991, at the same time leaving the structures of the USSR.

NATO that proved the European direction of the Baltic States development as well as the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, Moscow still finds supporters among the residents of the Baltic republics, especially in the territory of Estonia and Latvia. Although Russia does not impress politically or economically, it is attractive culturally to some of the Russians living outside the motherland.

Christian Fridrich argues that social bonding is essential in community building in order for this bond to form, it is first necessary to deal with deeply rooted ethnic and national stereotypes and prejudices and only then can we try to speak of a real community of people (Fridrich, 2007, p. 8). Tallinn decided to initiate integration processes in the country already in the second half of the 1990s. Special attention was attached to the knowledge of Estonian and communication skills of residents as well as to equal educational and economic opportunities. Discrimination against national minorities in the labor market was evident. On the other hand, some Russians, as the dominant national minority, have for many years sought to reinforce the divisions between the Estonians and Russians. Similar sentiments prevailed among some of the Estonians.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the social and political separatisms evident in modern Estonia together with their evolution, and to discuss the attempts at social integration that have been made. Answers to the title research question were sought using a comprehensive systems analysis method. A historical method was also used to show the country's dependencies and peculiarities from the perspective of three decades. Finally, comparative methods were employed to determine identity or difference characteristics for social integration processes.

Social and political separatisms

Social divisions and emerging separatisms have become a natural consequence of ethnic divisions in Estonia. Language divisions were particularly important although over the years an increasing number of representatives of the Russian minority communicated in Estonian at an advanced or intermediate level. Nevertheless, the number of people who did not know the official language remained considerable. Approximately 55% of the

Russians did not know Estonian in the early 1990s while in 2008, 19% indicated that they did not know the official language and 56% described their language competence as very good or communicative (Włodarska, 2014, p. 242). It is estimated that 220 thousand ethnic Russians in Estonia communicated in Estonian in 2017. Therefore, one issue is the divisions created at the linguistic level whereas another one is the national divisions within the Estonian society. Russia has consistently pursued a policy aimed at activating the Russians living abroad and maintaining the strongest possible ties with the motherland (Brubaker, 1996, p. 178–190), which is primarily important for maintaining control of influence. The Russian government sees Russia as the sole and rightful heir to the USSR, continuously striving to preserve Russian culture and language among the Russians living abroad, and the influence of Russian media exerting considerable influence on the ethnic Russians abroad is also not without significance (Vihalemm, 1999, p. 20–21).

The citizenship policy adopted by Estonia in the early 1990s introduced very visible social divisions, which led to lack of stability and balance in the society. Moscow additionally strengthened divisions of Estonian inhabitants, consistently trying to sustain pro-Russian sentiment among the indigenous Russian population (Pettai, 2021, p. 429). The new political reality was a consequence of the new divisions, the indigenous Estonian population being at the time made up 61% of the population. The Russians were the dominant minority group accounting for more than 30% of the population: the subsequent years of systemic transition and consolidating transformation did not change these proportions, while the country's total population shrank. As a consequence of demographic changes, Russians made up a group of 25% of the country's population in the early 2000s, while the number of native Estonians expanded to just under 68% (Włodarska-Frykowska 2017, p. 48–49). Despite growing divisions between Estonians and non-Estonians, representatives of the Russian minority did not form strong and lasting political formations representing Russians in the power structures. This was primarily due to the fact that the vast majority of the Russian population residing in Estonia did not have Estonian citizenship, and thus they could not enjoy the privilege of active and passive voting

rights. After the 1992 Riigikogu elections² no representative of the ethnic Russians entered parliament. The subsequent election years of 1995 and 1999 brought some changes but not for long. Since 2010, the Estonian Centre Party, working with United Russia, has enjoyed fairly strong support among Russians. The ethnic Russians also cast their votes for the Social Democratic Party³ (Pettai, 2021, p. 429–430). The 2015 parliamentary elections, held a year after Russia's annexation of Crimea, brought an electoral victory to the Estonian Reform Party but also showed a slight upward trend for the increasingly Estonian Centre Party⁴: 70% of Estonian Russians supported the Centre Party's program in the parliamentary elections. The liberal and pro-Western Estonian Reform Party was forced to seek coalition partners (Hyndle-Hussein, 4 March 2015). The European choice of the Estonians was confirmed by the results of the recent elections to the Riigikogu, which took place in March 2019. The Estonian Reform Party led by Kaja Kallas⁵ won slightly less than 30% of the electoral vote and increased their number of seats to 34 (Hyndle-Hussein, 5 March 2019). Despite the victory, Kallas failed to form a government, and eventually the Estonian Centre Party leader, Jüri Ratas⁶, was given the mission by the President, Kersti Kaljulaid, to form a cabinet (Baltic News Network, 25 April 2019; ERR News, 17 April 2019). Despite talks undertaken by Kallas with the Estonian Centre Party, no agreement could be reached. The differences on programme issues remained

² The Riigikogu, the unicameral parliament of Estonia, has 101 members.

³ In 2014, Jevgeni Ossinovski, an ethnic Russian, was appointed Minister of Education on behalf of the Social Democratic Party, took over the leadership of the party and became head of the Ministry of Health and Labour in 2015. The Social Democratic Party also became one of the coalition partners.

⁴ The Estonian Centre Party has been headed by pro-Kremlin leader, Edgar Savisaar, since its inception in 1991. It was the only party that did not support Ukraine and supports Moscow.

⁵ Having won the 2019 elections, Kaja Kallas was given a mission to form a government, which ended in failure. She began her political career in 2010 by joining the Estonian Reform Party, from whose lists she ran in the 2011 parliamentary elections and won a seat in the Riigikogu. In 2014, ran for election to the European Parliament and won a seat as an MEP. She took over the leadership in the Estonian Reform Party in 2018.

⁶ Jüri Ratas became the leader of the Estonian Centre Party in 2016, relacing Edgar Savisaar. For more information see: Popławski, 2016.

significant. The Centrists, supported by the Russian national minority, called for relaxing the procedure for obtaining citizenship by permanent residents of the country and maintaining education in schools for national minorities. The Estonian Reform Party was, however, not prepared to compromise on either citizenship or abandoning the Estonian language examinations and maintaining education in Russian (Hyndle-Hussein, 5 March 2019). Cooperation between the two largest political parties was impossible at the time. The corruption scandal involving the Estonian Centre Party that erupted in 2020 consequently led to the resignation of the government and the then Prime Minister, Jüri Ratas, in January 2021. This was another opportunity for Kallas to form a government. The Estonian Centre Party, which was affected by serious problems, was ready to look for compromises, and finally the leader of the Estonian Reform Party, Kaja Kallas, was appointed Prime Minister of Estonia⁷. In the Kallas' cabinet, many women took ministerial positions, hence the term "Estonia is a woman" or "female Estonia" (Ochocki, 8 March 2021). The coalition of the Reformists and the Centrists became a fact, but working out a common political path proved very difficult, and the problems were exacerbated by the Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The lack of shared values and links of the Centrists to the Kremlin resulted in the dismissal of the party's ministers at the request of the Prime Minister, marking the fall of the Kallas' government (EESTI, 3 June 2022). Kaja Kallas was re-elected as Prime Minister with 52 votes in July 2022, this time with the support of the Social Democrats and the Fatherland Party (Jaakson, 18 July 2022). The upcoming parliamentary elections are scheduled for March 2023, therefore the new coalition does not have much time to act, but this is an important test for Estonia's future: cooperation and sensible negotiations may help, while rivalry may undermine Estonia's security. A strong and stable majority government is fundamental to building the country's security in such difficult and unpredictable times considering Russia.

Political divisions and the exclusion of non-Estonians from the decision-making process have strongly shaken social stability, and the complex and demanding process of obtaining citizenship, especially in terms of

⁷ It won the support of 70 out of 101 Members of the Riigikogu.

language, has caused much anxiety and frustration among the Estonian Russians. In addition, subsequent political decisions exacerbated further divisions. Particularly significant was 2007 and the authorities' decision to move the Red Army monuments from the squares of Estonian cities. The Bronze Soldier monument⁸ in the Tõnismägi square in Tallinn became the scene of numerous agitations and riots between supporters of Moscow and Vladimir Putin and those of independent Estonia. Particularly drastic events occurred on 9 May 2006; the subsequent tensions were acutely felt and the polarisation of Estonian society grew increasingly. On the night of 26–27 April 2007, the statue was moved to the Tallinn Military Cemetery (Lehti, Jutila, Jokisipilä, 2008, p. 393–394). The Estonian Reform Party was accused of politicising the issue of the monument, which—according to the Estonian Russians—led to vandalism, fights and street riots. In 2006, almost all the Russians living in Estonia and 29% of the Estonians opposed the plans to remove the monument from the centre of the capital, while 18% remained undecided (Ehala, 2009, p. 142–144).

The Tallinn events showed that it is extremely difficult to build social relations while facing major ethnic and historical divisions. Building a high level of public trust in new public institutions takes time but also requires strengthening social identity and a sense of social participation. It is more difficult to find acceptance for imposed changes, on the other hand, giving new dynamics to state institutions is only possible in a process of change. Feelings of exclusion, disregard and disrespect not only polarise different social groups, but can also lead to further conflicts (Ehala, 2009, p. 146; Hornsey, Hogg, 2000, p. 143).

The Russian attack on Ukraine was an important event for Estonian social relations. Inter-ethnic tensions were evident in all Baltic states: the Russians and Belarusians living in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia often became the target of attacks by other residents. Leading politicians of the Baltic republics spoke up, stressing that the Russian-speaking population is an important part of the societies of these countries, drawing attention to children and schoolchildren who cannot feel excluded and harassed. The war with Ukraine

⁸ In 1947 the monument was erected in Tallinn's central square as a symbol of Soviet ideology; after Estonian independence in 1991 it remained in its place.

imposed many sanctions on the Russians: the reception of pro-Russian media in Estonia was suspended, Lithuanians and Latvians acted in a similar way, and a debate on the presence of the Russian language in the social life of the countries began⁹. On the one hand, the feeling of social solidarity and unity with Estonia, as well as Lithuania and Latvia, increased among all ethnic groups and was definitely higher than in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea; on the other hand, there are justified fears that Russian propaganda will manage the ethnic Russians in a slavish and ruthless manner (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2022). In Estonia, almost 9% of the population still claim that it was Ukraine that oppressed the Russian population living in their country, with 15% indicating that Western countries provoked Russia to take military action inside Ukraine (ERR News, 6 June 2022).

Integration processes

The issue of integration of the Estonian society has been a key issue since the country gained independence in 1991. The main source of information for the Russian-speaking population remained the Russian media, which made it difficult to build bonds with Estonia. It is true that the power of Russia's influence on ethnic Russians living in the Baltic states has definitely weakened in recent months. Currently, this is primarily the result of Russian aggression against Ukraine but also, paradoxically, the positive effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to be fully informed about the pandemic, many Estonian Russians have started to watch Estonian news regularly. Changes are also visible in education, with a growing trend of children being sent to Estonian primary and secondary schools, thus Russian-speakers schools are beginning to lose popularity (Bult, 6 October 2022). Changes in the Estonian educational policy, as well as that of the neighbouring Baltic states of Lithuania and Latvia, were initiated in 2010 and formally implemented a year later, introducing not only compulsory teaching of selected subjects in the official language in minority schools at secondary level but also emphasized civic education (Włodarska, 2014, p. 136–146). Estonian schooling emphasises integrated but also inclusive education, which clearly

⁹ Latvia was the first to start the process of limiting the Russian language in education.

attracts parents of Russian-speaking children. It is worth pointing out that in the PISA assessment¹⁰ Estonian students have been in top positions since 2015.

According to David Vseviov, building and strengthening the loyalty of residents from national minorities to their country of residence is possible by spreading democratic processes and ideas of freedom. But it is also important to think and distance oneself from Russian propaganda and Soviet myths. Education should not be overlooked either, as good education influences the understanding of both commonality and community (Bult, 06.10.2022). Social integration is a very time-consuming process: the first attempts to implement a social integration programme in Estonia were launched in 1997. The concept of a nationwide social inclusion programme was transformed into a regional approach in 2000, with levels defined at national level. The implementation of the integration programme was planned for the period 2000–2007, covering the economic, social and linguistic levels. Emphasis was placed on learning and strengthening competence in the Estonian language (Integration in Estonian Society 2000–2007). Subsequent integration programmes covering the years 2008–2013 and 2014–2020 were a continuation of the solutions adopted, the primary objective consisting in increasing the number of the country's citizens among the national minority group. In the early 1990s, Estonian citizens made up 66% of the country's population and the procedure for obtaining citizenship was very complex. A number of restrictions were intended to protect the state from renewed domination from outside. The Estonian authorities decided that citizenship of the country could be obtained by persons living in the country prior to the USRR domination and their descendants. The legislation in force deprived all people who had settled in Estonian lands after 1940 of the right to apply for citizenship. The only possible way to obtain an Estonian passport was to successfully complete the naturalisation procedure, which involved

¹⁰ The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and is conducted among 15-year-olds in over 40 countries around the world every 3 years. The assessment is carried out in the following categories: mathematics, science, reading comprehension, and creative thinking. The assessment scheduled for 2021 was postponed by a year due to the pandemic. See also: PISA Educational Research Institute, n.d.

not only proving the knowledge of Estonian but also permanent residence in the country (Kodakondsuse seadus, 1938). The changes introduced in 1995 indicated the direction of the naturalisation process and tightened the language requirements. Despite the strict naturalisation requirements, Estonian citizens made up almost 85% of the country's population in 2011. This, therefore, meant that many residents had successfully completed the naturalisation procedure, but there was still a fairly large group, mainly representatives of the Russian national minority, who did not have citizenship. In 2011, the population of Estonia comprised 7% of Russian citizens and 7% of the stateless (Włodarska-Frykowska, 2017, p. 50–53).

Over time, restrictive rules on the procedure for obtaining citizenship began to be relaxed. Stateless persons over 65 years of age have been exempted from the written part of the Estonian language exam since 2015, with another amendment allowing children born in Estonia after 2016 whose parents did not have Estonian nationality to obtain citizenship. A law was passed in 2019, the provisions of which allowed children under the age of 15 to apply for citizenship of the country without their parents having to obtain citizenship¹¹ (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 14 October 2019). The changes in the procedure for obtaining citizenship are gradual: the inclusion of minority groups, and above all Russian people, is being carried out in a multifaceted manner. Estonia's accession to the EU structures did spur further changes but reinforced the course of action taken by Tallinn. The 1992 Constitution of Estonia guarantees a number of rights for national minorities in terms of their right to education, cultural autonomy and obtaining information in the language of national minorities in areas inhabited by a given minority and constituting more than 50% of the community concerned (Carpinelli, 2019, p. 206).

The latest integration programme is a strategy adopted for the period 2021–2030, whose priority objectives are primarily to strengthen the civil society and develop integration processes and a sense of belonging to Estonia. One of the aims of the strategy is to activate all the people of the country

¹¹ The adopted modifications allowed stateless parents or third-country nationals residing in Estonia before independence in 1991 to apply for Estonian citizenship for their children.

regardless of their ethnicity, culture and place of residence. According to the data presented in the Integration Programme for 2021–2030, almost 85% of the Estonian population has the status of a citizen of the country, 5.2% of the population is of undetermined citizenship while under 6.5% are residents with a Russian passport among the Russian-speakers group¹².

The number of Ukrainians living in Estonia has also been increasing in recent years; at the beginning of 2021, Ukrainians made up less than 0.9% of the community (Cohesive Estonia Strategy 2030, p. 8). In an ethnically and linguistically divided country, promoting social unity and strengthening ties is extremely important. New activities aim to initiate social activities involving all ethnic groups regardless of language of communication and culture.

Conclusion

Despite the divisions and emerging separatisms, Estonia has strived to build stable, democratic state foundations and structures of a democratic state under the rule of law. Estonia has become internationally recognisable, but has also, above all, sought to strengthen its image among the country's own people. The focus was primarily on the perception of the country as family-friendly and supportive. It is also apparent that efforts are being made towards cultural cooperation and building civil society in full awareness of the differences, particularly linguistic ones, between the ethnic groups living in the country. According to the Estonian Development Plan for 2021–2030, the awareness of the sustainability of the Estonian population and a sustainable society is a shared responsibility of all Estonians (Sidusa Eesti arengukava 2021–2030). Estonia's approach to language policy among national minorities has been more restrained than that of neighbouring Latvia, where secondary education has been provided in Latvian since 2018, as it has retained the right to education in Russian. Bilingual education, the right of residents with stateless passports to vote in local elections are important social solutions operating in Estonia. It is a fact that Estonia keeps looking towards Moscow

¹² Estonia's had a population of 1,339,361 at the beginning of 2021, citizens representing a group of 1,133,954 persons.

with concern every day, and Kallas, the Prime Minister, strongly criticises Vladimir Putin's policies and Russian aggression against Ukraine. This is a definitely less favourable political situation from the perspective of Russia itself: the government of Jüri Ratas, despite its pro-European declarations, was definitely more pro-Russian. As Vitaly Belobrovstsev notes in the Baltic Review, "in 50 years everything in Estonia will be Estonian". (Otocki, 2017). Estonia is changing, social attitudes are evolving and Estonian identity is strengthening. Every change takes time, and today's Estonian society in no way resembles that of the 1990s, despite many divisions.

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