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The Russians of Estonia: Twenty Years After

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I was born in Kohtla-Järve, in northeastern Estonia, a city with a chemical plant, an oil shale plant, and several mines. My Russian parents, who had come to Estonia when they were children, had moved there in the 1960s from the capital, Tallinn, to help build the socialist future. My peculiarly named hometown was, and still is, located quite close to the Russian border, but at a time when the radio constantly played the popular song “Moi adres ne dom I ne ulitsa, moi adres Sovetski Soyuz” (My address is not a house or a street, my address is the Soviet Union), the meaning of the border between Estonia and Russia was something completely different for me than it is now. Most ordinary people at the time believed the Russian propaganda, reflected in everything from education to interior design, that all fifteen republics joined the Soviet Union voluntarily. To doubt this—or worse, share your doubts with someone—was a punishable crime. Later I also realized that for us, as Russians, it was easy to believe in the friendship of nations because our ethnic group was clearly in a privileged status in the vast Soviet family.

The Baltic states are commonly considered a single entity due to their small size and similar recent history, but the traditional cultures of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, their experiences during the Soviet occupation, as well as their subsequent development after their independence was restored in 1991, have been very different. Unlike other Baltic states, Estonia, in terms of geography, culture, and linguistics, belongs more to northern rather than eastern Europe. One of the most important factors that shape national identity is language. The Estonian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric grouping of the Uralic language family, which is completely separate from the Indo-European languages, a fact that brings Estonians closer to Finland than to their southern neighbors whose languages are related, albeit distantly, to Russian. This is confirmed by the fact that during the Soviet era, both Latvians and Lithuanians spoke better Russian and used it more frequently than Estonians. This was also a reason why the Russification policy that the Soviet leadership persistently implemented in all its republics was one of the toughest in Estonia and differed substantially from their decisions with regard to Latvia and Lithuania.

The extensive introduction of migrant workers, as well as deportation of locals to areas of different ethnicity and the mixing of cultures, was one of the primary tactics of the Soviet Union for reducing the influence of ethnic groups on their own homeland and thus preventing resistance to the central authority. Another tactic was drawing borders that split ethnic groups administratively: this happened to many ethnicities in the Soviet Union, including Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, but this was also played out in Central Asia and the Caucasus, with populations in northern regions speaking small Finno-Ugric languages, and elsewhere. Many of the current borders do not account for the linguistic locations at all, and this is still causing conflicts today. The Baltics have kept relatively peaceful, but this has not been the case in Nagorno-Karabakh (in the South Caucasus), Georgia, or Ukraine.

After World War II, the Soviet power brought massive numbers of workers into Estonia (mainly blue-collar workers) from all across the Soviet Union, most of whom were ethnic Russians. My grandparents moved to Estonia from Russia around that time, and that is how my mom and dad, who were both born outside Estonia, met, fell in love, and created a family. This is how most Estonian Russians settled down here.

Today, parts of the Russian community in Estonia remain quite isolated because many ethnic Russians have stronger links to their historic homeland than to their country of permanent residence. Considering the fact that more than three hundred thousand Russian-speaking people (including Ukrainians, Belarusians, and others) are living in Estonia, accounting for approximately a quarter of the whole country's population, it's no surprise that the reluctance of some of them to integrate into Estonian society has caused a number of socioeconomic and political problems, most visibly in major industrial areas of the Soviet era like Ida-Viru County, bordering Russia in the northeast, and the capital, Tallinn. More than twenty years after the restoration of Estonia's independence, the opinion that time would automatically resolve the integration issue of non-ethnic Estonians, and that the younger generation born here would blend into Estonian society, has not been confirmed in practice.

It should not be forgotten, however, that the Russian-speaking community of Estonia is not as homogeneous as it was at the start of the 1990s. Differences have arisen over time, demonstrated in attitudes toward the Estonian state and the Estonian people, and in terms of the ability to cope and adapt. According to a study conducted in 2011 by Marju Lauristin, a professor of sociology at the University of Tartu, the

Russian-speaking population is split into two: approximately half are successfully integrated, the rest much less or almost not at all. In particular, five main integration patterns emerge.

1. *Successfully integrated* (twenty-one percent of non-ethnic Estonians). This group comprises the younger people who were born and educated in Estonia. They have a good command of Estonian and they can cope economically. Most of them are Estonian citizens and consider themselves part of the Estonian community. They trust the Estonian state and authorities, live and work in an Estonian-speaking environment, and follow Estonian media and prefer it to Russian channels. They live in Tallinn and other larger cities, and are underrepresented in Ida-Viru County in the northeast.
2. *Russian-speaking patriots of Estonia* (sixteen percent). This group comprises people who are middle-aged and over who do not cope very well economically and whose attitudes are rather pessimistic. Most of them are Estonian citizens and they consider Estonia to be their only homeland. Despite their poor command of Estonian, they appreciate communicating with Estonians and participate in the activities of various cultural groups, and religion is important for them. They live in Tallinn and cities of Ida-Viru County.
3. *Estonian-speaking active and critical* (thirteen percent). This group comprises the youngest and most active people who are economically secure, and speak Estonian but use it very little. Their identity of citizenship is weak; only half of them are Estonian citizens, and others name another country as their homeland, including Russia. They follow Estonian media but distrust it. They do not vote and they are ready to leave Estonia at any moment.
4. *Little integrated* (twenty-nine percent). This is the lowest-income group, comprising mainly blue-collar workers but also retirees and the unemployed. All age groups are represented here. Their language skills are poor and their citizenship is mostly undefined, which means that they were unable or unwilling to pursue any country's citizenship after the collapse of the USSR. Members of this group attribute their lack of citizenship to inadequate learning ability that prevents them from learning the official state language. They are distinguished by their distrust toward state authorities, the lack of a sense of security, and pessimism. They are active consumers of both the local and Russian media, and mainly reside in the cities of Ida-Viru County and Tallinn.
5. *Unintegrated passive* (twenty-two percent). This group mainly comprises older people who do not speak Estonian, most of whom reside in Ida-Viru County. They are distinguished by their inadequate level of education and low self-esteem. Many of them have Russian citizenship and many of them consider Russia their only homeland. They are socially passive, cannot speak Estonian to officials, are not interested in Estonian life, and their main source of information is Russian television channels.

The results of this study can seem somewhat unexpected to many people, but this division displays recognizable patterns that I can personally see without difficulty in myself, my family members, and my non-Estonian colleagues and acquaintances.

The study clearly shows that command of Estonian and loyalty to the Estonian state, as well as desire to affiliate with it, are not proportionally connected among the local Russian-speaking population, as one might have thought. (This shows that Estonian integration policy has been rather narrow, as it takes language skills as the main criterion for integration.) The small country's not particularly small ethnic minority is divided into two categories: pro-Estonian, or at times more broadly pro-Western, and pro-Russian. Russian media channels and Estonian political groups exploit these contradictions, escalating tensions even more. I have noticed in recent years that the contact between the first two and last two or even three groups highlighted in the study is becoming almost nonexistent. Instead, opposition and estrangement has grown stronger, further exacerbating the isolation of the unintegrated groups and pushing them deeper into Russia's sphere of influence. In connection to the recent events in Crimea, this divide has started to show very clearly, in everything from social media postings and public demonstrations to ruptures in families and old friendships.

Lauristin's study also shows that the victims of Russia's propaganda are mainly people of the older generation whose level of education and social status are low and whose command of Estonian as well as other languages is insufficient to consume foreign-language media. However, many young and educated Estonian Russians have also, for whatever reason, embraced the spirit of Russian nationalism that started to spread quickly after Vladimir Putin came to power.

As I remember it, the first signs of danger started appearing close to ten years ago, when, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, many people in Russia and in former Soviet republics started expressing their discontent about the poor economic situation, social inequality, and political chaos. The post-Soviet emphasis on developing democracy gradually started to fade, replaced with other concerns, above all a critical attitude toward the United States and the West in general, which was considered to be responsible for the decline of Russia. The message of the Russian powers had changed, and everything from television and large-scale events to daily interactions and personal attitudes reflected this. The Soviet Union and its World War II victory became more hallowed; red flags, red stars, and portraits of Lenin and Stalin reappeared. So too did the glorification of the Russian Empire. Drivers in Ida-Viru County, for example, decorated their cars with the orange-and-black Ribbon of St. George, a symbol of military valor in czarist Russia. In an attempt to show pride in their Russian heritage by supporting both czarist and Soviet imperialism, these patriots seemed to forget that the Bolsheviks oppressed recipients of the Order of St. George and executed many of them.

In the context of all of this, the sharp increase in importance of the Russian Orthodox Church was more or less expected. People who identified as atheists during the Soviet era turned to the church after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and in particularly large numbers after Putin came to power. Many of them started using Orthodox insignia, such as small icons or cross necklaces, as others used the St. George ribbons, to highlight their Russian heritage and pro-Russian-ness. By itself, there is nothing wrong with such religious beliefs and practices, but in the context of Russia, where the church has for ages been a political instrument of state power, religious expression is often fundamentalist and exclusionary. This was illustrated by Russians' intense reaction to the punk band Pussy Riot, whose performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, in Moscow, was first and foremost critical of the regime in power. This is also reflected in most religious Russians' homophobic and xenophobic declarations and actions.

On top of all of this, it is evident that Russians' attitudes toward representatives of other nationalities in Russia and elsewhere had become more negative. In Estonia, it was noticeable how the reluctance to use the Estonian language grew among many local Russians. This mainly manifests itself in the wish to communicate with officials and service staff only in Russian and a condescending attitude toward

those who for whatever reason do not speak Russian. At a higher level, it shows itself in insistent demands to make Russian Estonia's second official language.

The role of Russian media in inciting such ethnic hatred cannot be underestimated, even more so because the standards of official Russian media have sunk back to where they were during the depths of the Cold War. With a few cosmetic exceptions, Russian television news today resembles Stagnation Era propaganda: the nightly program transmits an exaggerated and biased picture of an evil and threatening Western world that now includes the Baltic states, Georgia, and Ukraine. As a counterweight, authorities present a glorified picture of Russia, on display most recently at the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in World War II is another favorite theme of Russian programming, and one particularly useful for Putin during his misadventure in Ukraine. Indeed, the victory is evidently the only achievement in recent history that not only upholds Russians' national pride but also helps justify current military intrusions into neighboring countries that are still portrayed to the people within the Russian sphere of influence as peacekeeping missions undertaken to defend the Russian people. Ironically, Russia's actions in Ukraine today are very much like those of Nazi Germany in Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938–39. In this light, Putin's assertion that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the last century sounds especially ominous.

Estonian media have repeated the accusations that the government in Tallinn has not placed sufficient emphasis on the situation of the local Russian-speaking population, leaving them no option than to belong in Russia's sphere of information and influence. This may be true in the sense that there have been few projects directed at resolving this problem. But it is also true that no matter how much Estonia does, it will always lose to the Kremlin's far more experienced and efficient propaganda machine. We simply do not have the resources to fight it. At the same time, there are also political powers in Estonia who ironically have developed from the patriotic movements of the post-Soviet period—Keskerakond (the Estonian Center Party), for example—who have quite publicly positioned themselves today against the Estonian state, having for instance signed a cooperation agreement with Putin's party, United Russia; communicated with Russian leadership more and more frequently each year; and quite publicly taken the side of Russian powers on Ukrainian issues. In a pragmatic political sense, Keskerakond might merely be playing to a constituency that already exists, i.e., Russian-speaking voters under the influence of Russian media. Yet such politics are divisive nonetheless, and restrict the integration of these people into the Estonian society.

For a long time, the advice from the Kremlin to its diaspora in the former Soviet republics, above all the Baltic states, was not to accept the host country's citizenship through the required procedures. Moscow could then use these large numbers of non-citizens to discredit Baltic states in front of large international organizations like the EU, EC, UN, and OSCE. Russian representatives to these organizations reflected this policy, persistently accusing the Baltic states of human rights violations and demanding pressure on them, especially Latvia and Estonia, where the percentage of Russian-speaking population is higher. Along with that, however, Russia has demanded that Baltic states change their citizenship laws to enable people of undetermined status to obtain passports under a simplified procedure, which would perfectly feed into Russia's expansionist policy in the Baltic region as it would increase the people's chances of influencing the politics of their countries of residence from the inside for the benefit of their "historical homeland" (i.e., Russia). At the same time—and despite the fact that Estonia, for example, prohibits dual citizenship—the "compatriots" (the term Russia's authorities use to refer to Russians who live outside Russia) are offered the option to become Russian citizens without restrictions and in an expedited manner. Although this might sound helpful for Russians living in Estonia, it puts ordinary people in a complicated situation in which it is quite difficult for them to cope legally.

Nevertheless, as surveys show, local Russians largely disagree with Russian troops going into Estonia under the label of "protection of their compatriots." Regardless of our different social and ideological backgrounds, we know how little Russia actually cares about Russians. Most of us are convinced that instead of "helping" compatriots outside the motherland borders, Russian authorities should deal with numerous human rights issues inside their own country. Here in Estonia, we do not need to be saved. During the writing of this article, a petition started circulating on the Internet addressed to the Russian-speaking people of Estonia—Memorandum 14, initiated by public figures of non-Estonian background who are in support of Estonia's sovereignty and condemn third-party intervention in Estonia's internal issues. The document mentions that Estonia today is not without its flaws, among them issues related to the Russian-speaking minority, however they must be resolved by adhering to the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia. The petition ends with the words: "Our home is an independent and free Estonia!" My own Russian heritage was very much on my mind as I signed this petition. I was not alone.

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