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## ETHNIC RELATIONS IN ESTONIA, 1991

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On 14 December 1990, as some newspapers in Moscow talked about ethnic strife in Estonia, I went to Sillamäe, an overwhelmingly Russian town in northeastern Estonia, in the company of the leaders of the Estonian Committee. The Estonian Committee represented the radical wing of the pro-independence movement. Sillamäe is a uranium purification town, and the Soviet occupation authorities had decreed it off limits to most Estonians, not to mention Estonians without Soviet passports like me. Hence the situation was tailor-made for a clash--except that no one was in the mood, reactionary press in Moscow notwithstanding.

### A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT

I had been invited to Sillamäe by Vitali Menshikov who represented the town in the Estonian parliament (the Supreme Council). The Estonian Committee had made their arrangements with the mayor, Juri Jevstigneiev, who is another MP for the town. We first had a question-and-answer session with the all-Russian city council. Jevstigneiev was delighted in quizzing the Estonian Committee about their infighting with the centrist Popular Front. Trivimi Velliste, the Committee's vice-chair, complimented Jevstigneiev on his knowledge of intra-Estonian politics. Later I walked through the town, all the way to the beach, said to be too radioactive for children to play in the sand. No one paid attention to my obviously non-Russian presence.

Our public meeting attracted 120 people, mostly Russians. My Estonian was translated, sentence by sentence, while the Estonian Committee leaders spoke in Russian. They said the Russians had

unwittingly come to the Republic of Estonia as illegal immigrants. Once independence was restored, no one was going to oust them, and they would have the opportunity to apply for Estonian citizenship. But the present decisions must be left to those who were citizens of the Republic of Estonia in 1940, prior to the Soviet occupation. I flipped out my Green Card (U.S. permanent immigrant document) and described my rights and duties as a Canadian citizen living in the United States for the last 30 years, assuring the audience that I have full health care, pension, and property rights. A woman, then a man rose in heated anti-Estonian diatribe, but sensing a lack of support in the hall, both left.

Most questions reached the podium in written form. Maybe the most disturbing was an excessively modest plea: "We will settle for anything. Just do not turn us into your slaves." We assured the audience that the Estonians were not in the business of being slaves nor having slaves. The overriding worry seemed to be retirement pensions. "Will the Republic of Estonia be willing to pay our pensions, and if so, where would it find the money?" It felt as if the inquirer imagined a mystical till in Moscow, dispensing benefits irrespective of people's own toil. I said that to my best knowledge pensions in tiny Luxembourg were as high as in the neighboring West Germany, since the worker-to-retiree ratio is the same. Throughout the meeting, I sensed no ideological or ethnic rift but negotiable bread-and-butter issues.

After dinner in a local restaurant, I was cornered by some inebriated youths. Estonians were a rarity here, and one from California even more so. How did I like Sillamäe? I said its center should be preserved as a museum of Stalinist architecture at its purest. They argued it was built after Stalin's death. And so on. If *in vino veritas*, then curiosity without hostility was it.

Two days later in Tallinn, Estonia's capital, I attended a rally of Intermovement, the organization of the Russian empire diehards. Out of the city's quarter million non-Estonians, some 4,000 attended, most of them in their forties to sixties. "*Natsionalisty-separatisty*" was a recurrent expression in the speeches, but delivery was mechanical and applause spotty. As I tried to climb up toward the microphone, a uniformed paramilitary guard stopped me, asking something in Russian. I said in Estonian that I wanted to have a better view of the crowd, and it was his turn not to understand. The point is that a speaker of Estonian in the midst of an Intermovement rally did not evoke hostile action; nor did I observe any hostility toward speakers of Russian in predominantly Estonian surroundings. The claims of ethnic tensions in Estonia seemed a bit overrated.

I have dwelled on this first-hand account to present a contrast to reports of strife, which invariably dealt in broad innuendo but lacked any verifiable detail. The atmosphere in Estonia is very different

from that in Caucasia, where speaking Armenian in the midst of an Azeri rally--or vice versa--could be deadly and arms seem to be the means of first resort. It takes only one side to start a fight, but it takes two to maintain peace. Hence the credit for arguing instead of scuffling must go both to Estonians and to the Russian immigrants in Estonia. The latter may have adopted the Nordic political culture more extensively than some Estonians may dare to think.

This said, ethnic relations do remain among the toughest sociopolitical issues Estonia faces, and the historical background of the present situation will be reviewed next.

### DEMOGRAPHIC LEGACY OF SOVIET OCCUPATION

The independent Republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were occupied and annexed by Stalin's USSR in 1940, as part of a deal with Hitler. After a brief German occupation (1941-1944), the Soviet occupation resumed. It was felt to be an occupation by the overwhelming majority of the Balts. Soviet political liberalization since 1987 led first to cautious pleas for meaningful autonomy and then, lacking adequate Soviet response, to demands for an end of Soviet occupation and reestablishment of full political independence. At the same time, the Balts obviously wish to continue trade relations with Russia and are aware of its security concerns. On both accounts, the USSR/Russia is better served by "four Finlands rather than one Finland and three restive provinces." On their part, the Balts cannot mistreat their Russian minority without impairing crucial trade relations with their eastern neighbor.<sup>1</sup>

Pre-occupation Estonia was 88% Estonian. Cultural autonomy for ethnic minorities (Russians, Germans, Jews, Swedes) was exemplary and still serves as a model for non-territorial autonomy for dispersed minorities.<sup>2</sup> Wartime repatriation of Germans and Swedes, Nazi murder of Jews, and transfer of mixed-population border areas to the Russian SFSR left the territory within the present administrative borders about 94% Estonian. However, Soviet deportations, flight abroad, and low birth rates (partly induced by housing discrimination against Estonians) left a demographic void. It was filled by Russian-speaking colonists who did not learn Estonian. Like the French in Algeria, the Russians expected the subject people to communicate with them in the language of the colonizers. Thus the present ethnic problems in Estonia are of recent making, in contrast to some other countries where they go back for many centuries.

Estonia's population in 1991 was 62% Estonian and 30% Russian; the remaining 8% most often knew Russian better than Estonian. Only 14% of the Russians considered themselves fluent in Estonian, in the 1989 census. About 95% of the non-Estonians were immigrants of the last 45 years. The colonists were overrepresented among the engineers

and industrial managers, and also the blue collar workers. They were underrepresented among the non-technological professions and farmers. Territorially, they were concentrated in Tallinn, where they formed one-half of the population, and in a northeastern coastal strip, which has oil shale mines and where the colonists outnumbered the Estonians. Colonization was encouraged by construction of labor-intensive industries and discriminatory hiring practices against Estonians. Jobs in Estonia often were advertised only in Russia, complete with promises of housing, while local residents remained on the waiting lists for years and even decades. Estonians were gradually squeezed out of the merchant navy, railroads, and civil aviation, not to mention the extensive military industry. Language discrimination hit the Estonians also in public services where Russian gradually was made mandatory while Estonian became optional. At times, it took racist overtones, when a colonist salesperson would snap at an Estonian customer: "Speak a human language!"

This *Herrenrasse* attitude on the part of some of the colonists and the resentment against it by the Estonians is the worst legacy of Soviet occupation that independent Estonia has to cope with. During my stay with a family in Tallinn, my host required urgent medical care. The telephone operator was unable to take down even the street address in Estonian, and the paramedics never came. Thus linguistic colonialism was still a reality in the capital city of Estonia in 1990. In a parliament committee I attended, all Estonians knew Russian, but the two Russian members depended on a translator.<sup>3</sup>

In a corrective affirmative action against anti-Estonian discrimination, the Estonian language was symbolically declared the official language in 1989, and all public servants and service personnel were to become reasonably bilingual within one to four years. Taking their earlier language privileges for granted, some of the Russian colonists called such parity "discrimination."

The individual immigrant cannot be blamed. Some of them were brought to Estonia involuntarily, around 1950. Many others followed attractive job offers without any thought of Estonia being anything but another Russian province. Until recently, they never were told they should learn Estonian. They were told that the Russians had liberated Estonia and helped the Estonians to overcome their backwardness, so that Estonians were--or better be--thankful to the Russians for their presence. When the actual historical facts became mentionable in the late 1980s, they were hard to accept by the Russian immigrants, and adjustment to their new less glorious status was understandably slow. Not surprisingly, a few reacted like the French *pieds-noirs* in Algeria. *L'Algérie française* finds a parallel in an "Estonie russe" that the empire diehards would like to establish in northeast Estonia. While France was able to reabsorb the *pieds-noirs*, Russia is in such a poor economic shape that repatriation is difficult to arrange

and is unattractive even for those Russians who feel uneasy in an Estonia they no longer dominate.

On the other side, the Estonians cannot be blamed either for wishing to preserve their language and culture in a land where this language (or its earlier forms) has been spoken for 5,000 years, and which is the only corner of the world where this language can survive. Soviet Russification practices brought the Estonian language dangerously close to forced extinction. Not surprisingly, the Estonians wish to retreat from the brink and increase the Estonian component in their country. The question is how the basic needs of the immigrants can be integrated with the legitimate national needs of the Estonians.

### ISSUES AND ATTITUDES IN EARLY 1991

The relations between Estonians and the immigrants were complicated by the Kremlin's attempts to weaken and control Estonia by fanning ethnic strife. Much of industry and mining in Estonia was still subordinated to Soviet ministries in Moscow. The Russian managers dispatched by those ministries to Estonia tended to think in imperial terms and were encouraged by their superiors to exploit the fears and uncertainties of their Russian workers. Recurring activities aimed at separating northeastern Estonia from the country were especially fraught with danger. Fortunately, such attempts were repudiated by President Boris Yeltsin of Russia and were not encouraged by the leadership of the Leningrad region that adjoins Estonia.

There was also an information gap. Busy as they were making up for 45 lost years in innumerable aspects, Estonians had not always found the time and personnel to work with the immigrants. Interaction between the capital and the northeast was especially spotty. During the aforementioned outing to Sillamäe we were reproached for coming so infrequently. The local Russian newspapers, controlled by empire-minded administrators and industrial managers, did not make it any easier, by all too often using scare tactics and misrepresenting the Estonian goals and motives.

The most acute issue in Estonia was restoration of independence, an independence that never stopped existing in a legal sense. In a nonbinding referendum (3 March 1991), the turnout was 83%, and 78% of those who participated confirmed their preference for independence. Table 1 indicates that about 30% of the non-Estonians desisted from taking a stand; among those who participated the pro-independence vote may have been close to 40%--less than a majority but sufficiently high to debunk the claim of a chasm between Estonians and non-Estonians.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1

## Referendum of 3 March 1991: Intentions and Outcomes

*"Do you want restoration of the independence  
of the Republic of Estonia?"*

	<u>Estonians</u>	<u>Others</u>	<u>Combined</u>
<u>Participation (%)</u>			
Intended to participate <sup>a</sup>	93	71	85
Actually participated <sup>b</sup>	(92?) <sup>c</sup>	(68?) <sup>c</sup>	82.9
<u>Pro-independence votes (%)</u>			
Intended to vote "yes" <sup>a</sup>	100	68	90
Actually voted "yes" <sup>b</sup>	(97?) <sup>d</sup>	(36?) <sup>d</sup>	77.8
<u>Actual % of total population</u>			
Vote "yes" <sup>e</sup>	89?	25?	64.5
Stay home	8?	32?	17.1
Vote "no"	3?	46?	18.4

<sup>a</sup> Poll carried out on 16 February 1991 by EMOR, a private market research corporation. The sample was about 62% Estonian, in line with population composition (61.5% Estonian). EMOR typically uses around 1,000 respondents.

<sup>b</sup> For results of the referendum, countrywide and district-level, see *The Estonian Independent*, 7 March 1991, p. 3.

<sup>c</sup> The actual turnout was remarkably close to the poll responses, but ethnic breakdown was not available. The figures with "?" are my estimates, subject to the constraint that the weighted totals must add up to the known combined turnout. Thus any reduction in the estimated Estonian turnout must go with an increased non-Estonian turnout, and vice versa. Actual turnouts usually are lower than declared intentions, and this is likely to be more the case for non-Estonians.

<sup>d</sup> The actual "yes" vote is appreciably lower than in the poll responses. It is possible that some non-Estonians who said they would vote "yes" stayed home, while some others who said they would abstain came out and voted "no," or responded "yes" when face-to-face with pollsters. The figures with "?" are again my estimates of ethnic breakdown of the actual "yes" votes, subject to the same constraints as in the previous note. For Estonians, a 97% "yes" vote is plausible, since the record was 98.9%, in a 93% Estonian rural district.

<sup>e</sup> If the Estonian turnout and "yes" vote were both 100%, only 11% of the non-Estonians would have to vote "yes" in order to obtain the observed total. A model based on this assumption predicts the district-level results quite well, but it is subject to the well-known "ecological fallacy." On the other hand, Raul Mäik, spokesman for the Estonian Electoral Commission, probably overestimates the non-Estonians: 30% for, 30% abstain, 40% against (*The Estonian Independent*, 7 March 1991, p.4), because then the Estonian pro-independence stand would have to be appreciably lower: 86% for, 9% abstain, and 5% against.

However, this table also shows a worrisome discrepancy between the pre-referendum opinion polls and the actual referendum results. An appreciable fraction of non-Estonians seem to have voiced preference for independence in the opinion poll but voted against it in the referendum. This was the case even in the northeast, where the militia and the local press were in the hands of Russians so that the immigrants should have felt utterly safe to express pro-empire views. A similar discrepancy occurred at the March 1990 elections to the Estonian Supreme Council: Russian moderate candidates did reasonably well in opinion polls but lost to more reactionary candidates in actual elections. I am reminded of the California governor's elections in the mid-1980s, where the black mayor of Los Angeles won by the polls but lost the elections. There seemed to be people among the immigrants in Estonia who knew they ought to support independence but in the safety of the election booth gave vent to primordial fears and antipathies.<sup>5</sup>

Many non-Estonians probably sensed that independence would improve the country's economy but wondered whether they would be allowed to share in the new well-being. The immigrants widely saw Estonian citizenship as the only guarantee of economic equality. However, most of them would have preferred also to preserve their Soviet or Russian citizenship, as seen in Table 2. Such dual citizenship was opposed by an overwhelming majority of Estonians. Most Estonians wanted to make citizenship available to post-annexation immigrants, but subject to some requirements regarding residence time, pledge of allegiance--and giving up former citizenship. These were, essentially, the types of conditions for citizenship that prevail in the United States.

While the immigrants in Estonia understandably would have liked to have their cake and eat it too, dual citizenship for one third of the population was something few countries could accept. It should be noted that the intermediary option--that of unconditional Estonian citizenship for all residents willing to give up other citizenships-- had little support both among Estonians and non-Estonians, for opposite reasons. Visibly, the issue of citizenship was an emotional one for many. On the other hand, a notably high 12% of the non-Estonians had no opinion at all on this matter, suggesting mental detachment from the country in which they happened to reside.

Regarding political preferences among various parties and groupings, Table 3 shows appreciable separation along ethnic lines, but also some overlap. Over 60% of Estonians preferred groupings that attracted little non-Estonian support, while nearly 50% of non-Estonians preferred groupings lacking any Estonian support. Still, over 30% in both ethnic categories preferred groupings that had almost equal support among Estonians and non-Estonians, indicating appreciable avenues for cooperation. The groupings with bi-ethnic

support included the Women's League, the Social Democratic Party, and "Free Estonia," a loose grouping of reform communists. It was ironical that the Estonian-led independent Communist Party was shunned by the Estonians, although it is at odds with the pro-Moscow Communist Party, and found most of its meager support among the non-Estonians. Once more, 11% of the non-Estonians indicated no

Table 2

## Attitudes Toward Citizenship in Estonia, February 1991

*"Which solution do you prefer for the issue of citizenship in Estonia?"*

	<u>Estonians</u>	<u>Others</u>	<u>Combined</u>
All permanent residents of Estonia should have the option to become citizens of the Republic of Estonia, while also maintaining Soviet (or Russian) citizenship	7%	66%	29%
All permanent residents of Estonia should have the option to become citizens of the Republic of Estonia, provided that they give up Soviet (or Russian) citizenship	13%	8%	11%
Only former Republic of Estonia citizens and their descendants should get automatic citizenship; others should satisfy some preconditions (length of residence, pledge of allegiance)	69%	10%	47%
Only former Republic of Estonia citizens and their descendants should get citizenship	8%	1%	5%
Some other solution	1%	1%	1%
No opinion	3%	12%	6%

Source: Public opinion poll, February 1991, by EMOR.

Table 3

## Electoral Preferences in Estonia, February 1991

"Imagine that the following groupings run for the Estonian Parliament, with separate lists. For which party or movement would you vote?"

	<u>Estonians</u>	<u>Others</u>	<u>Combined</u>
<u>Estonian-supported</u>			
Estonian Liberal Democratic Party	8	1	5
Popular Front of Estonia	30	6	21
Estonian Entrepreneurial Party	11	3	8
Other mainly Estonian groupings	<u>12</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>10</u>
Total %	61	12	44
<u>Bi-ethnic support</u>			
Estonian Women's League	8	7	8
Estonian Social Democratic Party	9	8	8
Free Estonia [reform communists]	10	9	9
Other bi-ethnic groupings	<u>7</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>6</u>
Total %	34	30	31
<u>Russian-supported<sup>a</sup></u>			
Estonian Democratic Party	0	8	3
CP of Estonia (ind.)	1	6	3
CP of Estonia (pro-CPSU)	0	9	3
Joint Council of Work Collectives	0	16	6
Other mainly Russian groupings	<u>0</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>4</u>
Total %	1	46	19
No opinion	2	11	5

<sup>a</sup> The Estonian Democratic Party was Russian-led, favored cooperation with Estonians, but attracted no Estonian votes. The independent Communist party was Estonian-led but attracted almost no Estonian votes; it overlapped to some extent with the "Free Estonia" grouping which appealed to some Estonians. JCWC was effectively a front for the imperialist Intermovement which, under its own label, appealed to only 4% of non-Estonians (and 0% on Estonians).

Source: Public opinion poll, 20 February 1991, by EMOR. In all, 21 groupings were listed. (For detailed data, see BATUN, *Baltic Chronology: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, April, 1991* [New York].) It was unlikely that all of these would run separate lists in actual elections; thus some of the fractionalization seen was artificial, but some of it was real enough. I have rearranged that order of groupings and have not listed separately those groupings that failed to reach at least 5% support in at least one of the ethnic categories.

preference, while only 2% of the Estonians did so. The aforementioned discrepancy between polls and voting results should be kept in mind, but it probably was less salient here than it was in the case of a stark yes-no question about independence.

### OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE: "FINLANDIZATION"?

Relations between the age-old Estonian population and the mainly Russian immigrants of the last 45 years remained problematic, but there were grounds for a peaceful settlement. The *positive factors* were the following:

1. Most Estonians recognized that most of the immigrants were in Estonia to stay. About 90% of the Estonians were willing to grant the immigrants citizenship under reasonable preconditions: a moderate waiting time, pledge of allegiance, and giving up foreign citizenship.

2. About 30% of the non-Estonians supported Estonian independence and about 40% expressed willingness to cooperate with Estonians in political groupings. These people supplied a strong bridge between the Estonians and the ethnic minorities.

3. Cultural autonomy for minorities in independent prewar Estonia was exemplary, and this was a strong guarantee that Russian-language schooling and cultural needs would be safe. A further guarantee was supplied by Estonia's need to maintain good trade relations with Russia.

4. President Boris Yeltsin of Russia and the St. Petersburg leaders had a positive attitude toward Estonian independence and territorial integrity.

5. Last but not least, there was appreciable agreement in Estonia that it was better to haggle than fight.

The *negative factors* should not be underestimated. They are the following:

1. Remaining imperial habits and attitudes among the Russian colonists, and their low level of bilingualism.

2. Remaining resentment among Estonians about past oppression and Russification (and its continuation in the colonist-dominated northeast).

3. Attempts by elements in Moscow to weaken and control Estonia by fanning ethnic strife. Recurring activities aimed at separating northeastern Estonia from the republic were especially fraught with danger.

4. Estonian shortcomings in informing and educating the immigrants, especially in the northeast.

5. A disorienting discrepancy between moderate responses by many immigrants in opinion polls and their more reactionary voting behavior.

Over the last 100 years, Finland has worked out a mutually satisfactory deal with its age-old Swedish-speaking minority of 6%. It involves extensive bilingualism on the part of the minority and elaborate protection of minority language rights on the part of the majority, in the context of a general administrative decentralization. Estonia faced a Russian-speaking minority of more than 30%, due to recent imperialist colonization. Both the size and newness of this minority made integration more difficult, compared to Finland. One could not expect instant solutions in Estonia, when it took many decades even in Finland. Still, there were good reasons to believe that the end result might be somewhat similar--a "Finlandization" of ethnic relations.

"But how long will that take?" I was asked by the Russians in Sillamäe. When I said "Thirty years" they smiled and asked: "What shall we do meanwhile?" Meanwhile, one could either fight or try to cooperate, with the goal of "Finlandization" in mind.

#### NOTES

1. For background, see Romuald Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1980*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1991); and Walter C. Clemens, Jr., *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).
2. Cf. Arend Lijphart, *Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 183-4.
3. For ethnic relations within the Estonian Supreme Council and its commissions, see Rein Taagepera, "Building Democracy in Estonia," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 24:3 (September 1991), 478-481.
4. The referendum question was: "Do you want the restoration of the independence of the Republic of Estonia?" Countrywide and district-level results are given in *The Estonian Independent* (Tallinn), 7 March 1991, and are analysed by Tiina Raitviir in *Postimees* (Tartu), 9 March 1991, p. 2. Out of a voting population of 1,150,000, about 950,000 participated; of these, 203,000 voted "no" (*The Estonian Independent*, 21 March 1991, p.1).
5. The Estonian parliament refused any participation in Mikhail Gorbachev's fuzzily worded Soviet referendum (17 March 1991), but private commissions of Soviet citizens were not prevented from organizing it. These commissions reported a civilian turnout of 250,000, i.e., 22% of the total voting population or 57% of the non-Estonians (assuming that practically no Estonians participated); of these, 95% reportedly voted pro-empire (*The Estonian Independent*,

21 March 1991, p.1). However, multiple voting was easy; journalist Stepan Karja had himself photographed while casting a vote at six different locations (*Postimees*, 18 March 1991, p.1). In Tallinn, where 53% of the population is non-Estonian, reported turnout was 30%, with 96% pro-empire votes. Assuming that no Estonians participated, 54% of all the non-Estonians in Tallinn supposedly voted for the empire. In the northeastern border city of Narva, the corresponding figure was 62%, and in Sillamäe it was 78%. (Based on figures in *Rahva Häääl* [Tallinn], 20 March 1991, p.1). The reported total pro-empire vote of 250,000 civilians exceeded the anti-independence vote (203,000) in the Estonian referendum by 47,000. Multiple voting and other fraud accounts for some of the difference, but also many non-Estonians who abstained in the Estonian.