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tary elite. In its 2015 election campaigns, PiS prudently shifted the electorate's attention away from these subjects.

PiS's Challenges

In voting PiS into power this October, Poles were not having second thoughts on PiS's xenophobic nationalism. More important was that they had become disillusioned with Civic Platform's seemingly uncritical approach to the EU, in particular at a time when the EU entered into a disastrous series of crisis management fiascos: failing to resolve the Ukraine conflict; disagreeing on common sanctions on Russia; selecting, not electing, three Presidents of the EU (its Commission, Council, and Parliament); contesting the German-imposed formula on solving Greece's debt problem and stabilizing the Euro; and reaching no common policy on the migrant crisis and its takedown of the Schengen system. When Donald Tusk resigned as Poland's Prime Minister in 2014

to take up the post of European Council President, he snubbed the country's liberal electorate. His change of jobs unequivocally symbolized how the EU, not Poland, had become of primary importance to Civic Platform's supreme leader. Distrust of Moscow had become less palpable for Poles, than discontent with Brussels. It is an attitudinal shift that the astute PiS leader Kaczynski caught. Turbulence with Brussels, and Berlin, may well come to the fore under the PiS government.

Polish statesman and strongman Jozef Pilsudski supposedly said that Russia is never as strong as it appears or as weak as we would like it to be. The challenge to PiS today is this. It is relatively easy to take on a Russia whose foreign policy behavior can be characterized as straight from the Dark Ages, and serves as an anti-model in international politics. PiS's more difficult task is to challenge Germany's policies, which are justified in EU terms as enlightened and exemplary.

About the Author:

Professor Ray Taras has authored or edited over twenty books—on the collapse of the USSR, Russia's identity in international relations, the rise of liberal and illiberal nationalisms, the internationalization of ethnic conflicts, the menace of xenophobia, the critique of multiculturalism, and the impact of social fears on European foreign policy. He has served on the faculty of universities in North America and Europe, including Harvard, Stanford, Michigan, the European University Institute, Malmö, Sussex, and Warsaw, where he was Fulbright Distinguished Professor in Politics in 2012–13.

ANALYSIS

A Complicated Three-Cornered Relationship: The Russophone Minority Between Estonian Home Country and Russian Mother Country

By Yves B. Partschefeld, St Gallen

Abstract

Since the second half of the 2000s, relations between Russia and Estonia have been steadily declining. This has also had an effect on the relationship between the Estonian majority and the Russophone minority in Estonia. Additionally, the situation is negatively affected by the influence of the Russian media. The Russian-speaking minority, however, is not to be viewed as a mere agent of Moscow in Estonia, but appears as an independent protagonist in a three-cornered relationship.

Frontline Situation

Over the course of a decade, Russian-Estonian relations have increasingly deteriorated, reaching a new low-point with the ongoing conflict between Russia and the Ukraine. The eastern Estonian border marks the boundary between Russian and NATO territory, a zone where the resurgent confrontation between East and West, as well as the Russia's potential influence on the

"near abroad" (Safire 1994), becomes manifest. An incident along the Russian-Estonian border in the vicinity of Luhamaa that occurred on September 5th, 2014 is indicative of the aforementioned development: According to Estonian media, an Estonian Internal Security Service officer, Eston Kohver, was illegally apprehended by an unidentified group that forced him over to the Russian side of the border. He was on duty at the time,

performing his obligations regarding the prevention of cross-border crime (Niitra 2014). However, Russia officially considered this to be espionage, leading to a conviction in August 2015, with Kohver sentenced to 15 years in prison (Lenta.ru 2015). After international protests and negotiations between Estonia and Russia, an ‘exchange of agents’ enabled the return of Eston Kohver to Estonia. Russia received the former officer of the Estonian security police, Alexei Dressen, in exchange for the return of Kohver. Dressen had been convicted in Estonia of transferring secret documents to Russia (BNS, I 2015).

The Russophone Minority

The fact that up to one third of Estonia’s total population is Russophone (Stat.ee 2012) adds another dimension to the current tense situation between Estonia and Russia. Tensions between the Estonian majority and the Russophone minority have been building since Estonia’s independence in 1991, because of the way the latter group was dealt with by the new state, especially concerning the restrictions placed on the granting of Estonian citizenship to members of the Russophone minority. The increasing influence of Russian media since the 2000s has exacerbated this problem. The result, today, is a partial divided society, even down to the level of separate settlements, with the population centers of the Russophone minority located in the country’s northern and northeastern regions (Partschefeld 2013). This fuels the fear of secession in parts of the Estonian population, particularly following the Ukrainian crisis. This fear was reinforced by a rejected referendum concerning the national-territorial autonomy of the Narva region in the early 1990s. The Russophone minority is viewed as Moscow’s “fifth column”, and its solidarity with the Estonian state is often disputed (Wistinghausen 2004).

Historical Development

The Russophone minority is not just a product of Soviet settlement policy or a relic of the Soviet Union—its roots are much older; they mirror the common history of the two countries.

Since the end of the 12th century, the territories that form today’s Estonia have been subject to frequently changing rule, which led to waves of immigration. At the beginning of the 18th century, Russia managed to become the dominant force in the eastern Baltic Sea area, gaining power over the Baltic States via the “Treaty of Nystad”, until the first Estonian independence in 1918. As 8.2 percent of the population, the Russian minority at that time already represented the second largest section of the population in this Republic of the interwar years, yet it remained in the background. The German

minority, which had formed the local upper-class since the 13th century, was dominant and sought to defend its influence within the Estonian republic. This pursuit led to tensions with the Estonian majority and to anti-German sentiment among Estonians that remained prevalent until the German minority was relocated in 1939 and 1940, according to resettlement treaties between Estonia and the German Reich. These treaties were part of the context of the secret protocol of the Hitler-Stalin Pact (August 23rd, 1939), and assigned Estonia to the Soviet sphere of influence. A pact of collective defense between Estonia and the Soviet Union—exacted via military threats—cemented the political situation. This marked the beginning of a forceful incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union. In 1940, Moscow sent Andrej Zhdanov to stage the “voluntary annexation”. In the wake of purges and mass arrests of up to 10,000 people per day by the “NKVD”, staged demonstrations of the “will of the people”, and a show election, Estonia formally requested admission to the Soviet Union (Garleff 2001).

Dividing Lines

Although the roots of the Estonian Russophone minority reach back many generations, the developments after the Second World War and the Soviet history of the country form the basis of the present-day societal situation. The war and the incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union laid the foundation for patterns that remain relevant today. These include primarily the demographic change in Estonian society. The Russian minority, which formerly constituted around 8 percent of the population, reached almost 40 percent in the USSR due to waves of Russophone settlers, transforming Estonia into a poly-ethnic country. The, hitherto, almost conflict-free relations changed as a result, with the Russian minority filling the negative “vacuum” left by the German minority. The Estonian side blamed the Russian minority collectively for their suffering during the Second World War, as well as for the Stalinist apparatus of repression imposed thereafter (Partschefeld 2013).

The reasons for the remaining dividing lines of today can be found within that timeframe, but need to be differentiated chronologically. A distinction between phases of structural, ethno-national, and socio-economic division can be identified.

The structural separation between Estonians and Russians is rooted in the Soviet political, economic and social system, particularly in terms of the regulations governing education, work and habitation. Estonian society has been (and still is) experiencing the impacts of an earlier division of society along linguistic lines. This separation is created by a subdivision into Russophone

and Estonian education, beginning as early as kindergarten. This may help explain the lack of inter-ethnic contact, given the relatively long time spent in educational institutions. Another divisive pattern in this context was the Soviet working environment, since under Soviet rule (and continuing, in part, today) the fields of work differed between the various ethnic groups. Most workers in heavy industry, for instance, were Russian, while agriculture was an Estonian domain. This was reinforced by a settlement policy that created mono-ethnic regions and territories. Nonetheless, there were also aspects of commonality, despite such structural divisions, characterized by similar educational, working and living conditions. This also applies to the Soviet attempt to instill a supranational identity, above national and ethnic identity, among the USSR's whole population around the idea of the New Soviet man (Partschefeld 2013).

However, this attempt was only partially successful, as it conflicted with Soviet nationalities policy, which institutionalized the nation and established a hierarchy in which certain nationalities enjoyed certain privileges. Thus, Soviet policy did not eliminate nationalism, but simply reinterpreted it and interlinked it with policy and society. Estonians were, thereby, closely tied to their national territory, since they could expect advantages as the titular nation. It was also possible for the nationalities to unfurl, to some degree, within the Soviet-Estonian structures that were created, providing that they adhered to the premise "national in form, socialist in content". However, this situation changed during the 1980s, due to the Soviet Union's obvious decline and the erosion of socialist topics in societal discourse. The second half of this decade saw the rise of an Estonian national movement—enabled by Gorbachev's reforms—that filled those topics with new meaning. Estonian nationalism is, therefore, not to be seen as a new creation or reawakening, but rather as a reinterpretation or emancipation from Soviet topics. It heralded a new phase in societal divisions based on ethno-national awareness. This was not true for the Russian nationality, however, which had yet to take this step. The reason for this was their exceptional position within Soviet nationality policy: Some of the Soviet institutions and facilities were congruent with the Russian ones. The Russian language as *lingua franca*, spoken throughout the Soviet Union, played another important role. Aside from these structural aspects, the propagandized role of the Russian people as the vanguard and elite of Soviet society, and particularly their union-wide importance accounted for their exceptional position.

The Estonian territorial claim that emerged in the course of this rise of Estonian nationalism, especially at the beginning of the 1990s, collided with those sen-

timents. This altered the societal positions of the Estonian and Russian groups in society, involving a loss of reputation for the Russian minority, as their social standing was inverted during this time of change. Once the vanguard of the new Soviet society, they were reduced to second-class citizens in a newly independent Estonia. The loss of the old system, as well as the separation from Estonian nationalism led to uncertainty and disorientation, which were reinforced by the restrictions on granting Estonian citizenship to the Russian minority. These initial conditions combined with a (in some cases total) devaluation of their economic and social capital, became the basis for the socio-economic dividing line that can still be observed today (Partschefeld 2013).

Relations

The aforementioned disorientation and their relationship to Soviet heritage remained formative for the Russian minority in Estonia until the mid-1990s. It was not until the second half of the 1990s, that a diaspora identity emerged, based on a Soviet/Russian interpretation of 20th century history. This identity rests on both viewing the Second World War as a heroic moment, achieved through great sacrifice, and the outstanding role of the Russian language (Vihalemm 1999). This view of history diverges significantly from official Estonian historical discourse, in which the Estonians take on the role of the victims and the Russians represent the offenders. For Estonians, the end of the Second World War does not only mark their liberation from fascism, but also the beginning of a new era of occupation and terror (Zubkova 2011).

This potential for conflict is reinforced by a complex pattern of relationships: Estonia ("nationalizing state"), the Russian minority ("national minority") and Russia ("external national homeland") face each other as independent protagonists with both common and conflicting goals. At first, the nationalism of a rising Estonian national state was met solely by the belatedly cultivated diaspora identity of the Russian minority. However, since the end of the 1990s, particularly since Vladimir Putin's inauguration, Russia has grown more and more into a powerful patron of the 25 million Russian diaspora, who live in other former Soviet territories. As part of a reformulated foreign-policy, Russia has claimed influence on the "near abroad" (Brubaker 1997). The already established Russian media influence on the Baltic States and the Russophone minority in Estonia has constituted a suitable way to pursue these goals. The Russian media's further nationalization across the 2000s, served as a further reinforcement to this trend (Zveleva 2009). Especially since Estonia's declaration of its explicit allegiance to the West and its positioning dur-

ing the Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" in 2004, political tensions between Estonia and Russia have become more apparent. Moreover, their differing interpretations concerning the Second World War have become more and more visible and have been exploited by Russian media. The media conflict regarding the interpretation of history led to the "Bronze Night" in 2007, a controversy surrounding the relocation of a Soviet war memorial in Tallinn that caused the most intense riots in recent Estonian history. The Russian media played a key role in the incident's escalation. Beyond the media exploits of both sides, the riots in Estonia's capital and the north-eastern part of Estonia were only partially fueled by each sides' different interpretations of the Second World War; another issue was the status of the Russian minority and its waning importance in Estonian society since 1991. In this context, the Russian minority is often viewed as first and foremost an agent of Russia, and Moscow's foreign policy goals. However, the majority of the Russophone minority did not take part in the riots, and did not even endorse the events (Münch 2008). This further stresses the independent role of the Russian minority in Estonia, as an autonomous protagonist in the aforementioned three-cornered relationship.

Recent Developments

In the wake of the Ukrainian conflict, particularly in light of the additional military element due to the Russo-

Georgian war (2008) which showed first signs of hybrid warfare (Nass 2015), skepticism towards the Russophone minority dominates headlines again. An attempt has been made to repel the influence of Russian media by launching the public access Estonian TV channel ETV+ in Russian. Up till now, three quarters of Estonia's Russophone minority get their information via Russian channels (Kund 2015). Indeed, the creation of ETV+ is just a small step, compared to the media funding provided by Russia, and its success remains questionable. For now, Estonia's answer to the aforementioned aggravation of the societal tensions by Russian media and the new confrontation between East and West is to a call for an increased NATO presence. Besides the already established protection of Baltic airspace, the deployment of NATO ground forces is now being discussed, with the intention to secure and further stabilize the area (BNS, II). The key to Estonian stability, however, lies not only in its involvement in a strong military, as well as economic and political, alliance with the EU and NATO or the launching a media counter-campaign, but in state and societal treatment of the Russophone minority and the need to increase efforts to integrate them into Estonian society.

About the Author

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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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