

The Integration of the Russian Minority in Estonia

Jaak Kangilaski
Tartu Ülikool



Venekeelse vähemuse integreerimine Eestis

Riikluse töid Eestisse saksa ja taani ristsõdalased 13. sajandil. 16. sajandist võitlesid Eesti valitsemise pärast Poola, Rootsi ja Venemaa. 18. sajandi algusest kuulus Eesti Vene impeeriumi koosseisu, kuid 20. sajandi alguseni jäid Eesti ülemkihiks balti-saksa aadlikud. Esimene maailmasõda ja Vene revolutsioon võimaldasid Eesti vabariigi väljakuulutamise 24. veebruaril 1918.

Uus riik võimaldas kodakondsuse kõigile kohalikele elanikele ja kindlustas mitte-territoriaalse kultuuriautonomia mitte-estlastele. Eestlased moodustasid kodanikest umbes 88%.

Teine maailmasõda tõi kaasa dramaatilised muutused Eesti etnilises koosseisus. Nõukogude Liidu poolt annekteeritud (1940-1991) Eestisse rändas osalt majanduslikel, osalt Moskva poolt suunatult vene keelt kõnelevaid inimesi. 1980. aastaks oli eestlaste osa elanikkonnas langenud 64 protsendini. Nõukogude Liidu keskvalitsus soosis ja surus peale vene keelt. Eestlaste eneseteadvuse peamiseks aluseks on nende oma keel. Seetõttu tundsid eestlased oma identsust ohustatuna.

1991. aastal taastasid eestlased oma iseseisvuse toetudes oma riigi õiguslikule järjepidevusele. Seetõttu loeti kodanikeks ainult need residendid, kes ise või kelle vanemad olid Eesti kodanikud 1940. aastal. Teistele on antud võimalus taotleda kodakondsust naturalisatsiooni korras või elada püsiva elamisloaga välismaalasesena.



Born in Viljandi, Estonia, Jaak Kangilaski graduated from Tartu State University in 1963 and received his PhD in 1969. His research interests are in 19th and 20th-century art in Western Europe and the United States. He has written widely on history and art history, for example in *Üldine kunstiajalugu* [A World History of Art] and *Lühike eesti kunsti ajalugu* [A Concise History of Estonian Art] (with Sirje Helme), used as textbooks in Estonian higher education. *Norra maa, rahvas, kunst* [Norway: Country, People, Art] contains an analysis of the problems of 20th-century history and art history. He is now Clloh/Cliohnet coordinator and vice rector of University of Tartu.



The East Coast of the Baltic Sea remained pagan and without statehood until the 13th century, when German and Danish crusaders conquered the territory of contemporary Estonia and Latvia, introduced Christianity and established a feudal order.

From the 13th to the 16th century there was a confederation of small states governed by German nobility. The Baltic-German upper class remained in power later too, when in the 16th century Estonia became part of Swedish kingdom and in

the 18th century a province of the Russian empire. Russian tsars increased the privileges of the nobility and the 18th century was extremely hard for Estonian peasants. Russian central government ruled only foreign and military policy and the Lutheran church, local administration and education remained under the control of the German nobility. Nevertheless at the beginning of the 19th century serfdom was abolished, but all land remained in the possession of manor-owners until the middle of the century, when Estonian peasants started to buy the farms they rented. Still, more than a half of the land belonged to the nobility until the Russian revolution in 1917. The economic advance of some peasants and the beginning of urbanization helped to create self-confidence among the Estonians and encouraged the development of a national ideology. The Estonians followed the ideas of the German *Sturm und Drang* movement, especially that of J.G. von Herder, based on the importance and value of the national language and folklore. These ideas were partly introduced by German intellectuals, living in Estonia, the so-called Estophiles. Estonians also took their example from the Finnish model of nation-building. Estonian professional culture developed rapidly. When at the end of the 19th century the Russian central government initiated the so-called Russification policy, aiming to restrict the German cultural hegemony in Estonia, the Estonians became even more self-reliant. "We are not Germans, but we would not like to turn into Russians either, let us be Estonians" was their attitude.

Such ideas formed the basis for the Proclamation of Independence in February 1918 during the period after the flight of the Bolsheviks and before the arrival of the troops of the German Empire. The German military command ignored the Estonian Declaration of Independence and neutrality. In Estonia the nobility wanted to create a Duchy under the protection of Germany, hoping to maintain its privileges. Revolution in Germany put an end to such plans, but the Estonians now had to fight and win against the Russian Red Army in the War of Independence. In the peace treaty in 1920 Russia recognized the independence and sovereignty of Estonia.

A new political entity was born. In the Declaration of Independence all permanent residents regardless of nationality were declared citizens of the new state.

For the Estonians who had been citizens of the multiethnic Russian empire it was evident that political unity is something completely different from ethnic unity. Not citizenship, but culture and first of all the mother tongue defined nationality for the Estonians. Language had and also has today the primary role in the creation of ethnic (= national) identity. So in the population of the new republic the Estonians dominated (about 88%), but there were also ethnic minorities (Russians 8%, Germans 3%, Jews, Swedes, etc.). Estonia granted them non-territorial cultural autonomy almost like the plans proposed by Otto Bauer in the Habsburg Empire before World War II, and from 1920 to 1940 there were schools in Estonia where teaching was done in different languages.

World War II brought dramatic changes in the ethnic composition of the Estonian population. The number of ethnic Estonians in Estonia decreased more than 15%; Estonians were victims of war and deportations and were exiled before the arrival of the Soviet army. However, in terms of ethnic composition their quota actually increased (in 1945 ethnic Estonians comprised more than 95% of the population), because all the Germans left for Germany in 1940/41 after the Stalin-Hitler treaty; almost all the Swedes fled to

Sweden in 1944 and some small territories bordering with Russia and having predominantly Russian speaking population were separated from Estonia and added to the Russian Federation in 1945. Ethnic homogeneity did not last long. Under the Soviet occupation immigration from the other parts of the Soviet Union started. It was partly unorganized and came about because of economical reasons (the standard of living in Estonia was slightly higher than in the other parts of the country), but partly it was organized by Moscow with the aim of creating a more loyal population in an occupied Estonia. These immigrants were not all Russians, but they spoke predominantly Russian, because they could use this language in all institutions and services in all parts of the Soviet Union. As people were not citizens of a specific Soviet republic, but rather citizens of the Soviet Union, in general they did not think of themselves as immigrants, but saw themselves as people moving around within the same united country. At the same time the Soviet system confirmed that citizenship did not mean nationality. Soviet Union was officially a multinational state and in Soviet passports, the nationality (for example Russian, Estonian, Georgian, Polish, Tartar, etc.) was mentioned. Estonia started to become more multinational as well. The quota of the Estonians in Estonia started to decrease (in 1960 they comprised 73% of the total population, in 1980 only 64%). The Estonian-speaking community lived side by side, but linguistically isolated from the newcomers. The Russian language was favored by Moscow and by some local officials, especially from the end of the 1970s. The Estonians on the contrary felt that the continuation of Soviet occupation threatened the survival of their identity. Protection of the Estonian language was one of the main issues for the national movement of the late 1980s which lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of independence of Estonia.

Baltic states re-established their statehood basing themselves on a legal continuity (*restitution in integrum*) which found support in most Western countries. Some of these (especially the United States of America) had never recognized the annexation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union. For the Estonians this meant a restoration of their nation-state, and also the restoration of autonomy for the minorities as it had been before 1940.

But by 1991 the Estonian ethnic structure had changed radically. Legal continuity meant also continuation of citizenship. Newly independent Estonia considered that only those residents who were citizens in 1940 and their descendants were citizens. Only about 10% of Russian speakers had been Estonian citizens in 1940 or had one or both parents who had been citizens. The legal position of the others was not clear. For many Estonians Russian-speakers were like illegal immigrants or colonists, who came as a result of the military occupation and therefore had no right to citizenship. At best, it was thought, they should return home.

Russian-speakers in Estonia are not a homogenous group. Amongst them we find representatives of more than a hundred nationalities or ethnic groups, although the largest group was and is Russian. There are the so-called newcomers, who came in the 1970s and 1980s, but also people who (or whose parents) had arrived in the 1940s and 1950s. Their political orientation was different as well. About 30% of them supported the Independence of Estonia, others opposed it or were confused. Some of them started to apply for Russian citizenship but remained in Estonia. The majority of Russian-speakers did not see themselves as immigrants, but identified themselves as a national minority.

A national minority can exist in different forms. Will Kymlicka has observed three forms of national minorities in Western countries:

1. national (homeland) minorities, whose historical homeland has been incorporated into a larger state against their will;
2. legal immigrants;
3. illegal immigrants (metics).

W. Kymlicka believes that Russian-speakers in Estonia do not correspond to any of these types of minorities, but they have something in common with all of them. They do not have a historical homeland in Estonia, but a part of them have been born here or have lived here for almost half a century. They are illegal immigrants if we stress the legal continuity of the Estonian state, but legal if we admit that the international community recognized Estonia as a *de facto* part of the Soviet Union.

The Estonian state has recognized equal rights to all permanent residents except the right to elect the parliament, in which only the citizens can take part. Side by side with the Estonian schools there are also state-financed schools where Russian is the language of studies. Citizenship can be obtained only through the naturalization process, where the knowledge of Estonian language is a precondition. Many Russian-speakers have accepted this solution and have obtained citizenship. Today more than 40% of Russian-speakers are citizens of Estonia. There are still many who have not succeeded in getting or have not wanted to apply for Estonian citizenship. Some of them have complained that the language exams are too difficult. So about 40% of Russian-speakers in Estonia are still stateless and about 20% of them are Russian citizens.

During the period of Estonian Integration there have been no violent clashes between the language groups and even elements of mutual understanding have appeared. Both sides have given up their most optimistic hopes. Nationalists have given up the hope that denying full citizenship will encourage Russians to leave. Russian-speakers seem to understand that there will not be citizenship without naturalization or territorial autonomy for Russian-speakers in Estonia.

The Estonian government has launched an Integration Program for 2000-2007, which promotes the teaching and learning of the Estonian language for better communication. As regards its legal and political aims they are to form a population that is loyal to the Estonian state and to lower the number on residents that do not possess Estonian citizenship. As to socio-economical conditions, it guarantees equal opportunity for members of Estonian society irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. The Estonian Government has made it easier to obtain citizenship for graduates of Russian schools who have studied Estonian language at school. The majority of Russian-speakers have learned to appreciate the stability and relative economic success of Estonian society. Some Russian political leaders are members of the Estonian parliament, but they do not represent a politically united Russian minority. Parliament is not divided on the basis of ethnicity.

Professors M. Heidmets and M. Lauristin have stressed in their research that the idea of collective minority rights appears unattractive in the fragmented and highly individualis-

tic social climate of Estonia. There are different choices for self-identification. In this sense there are few differences between Estonians and non-Estonians. There are also no big differences in living standards. Many Russians have complained that when they have visited their relatives or friends in Russia that they are not recognized as Russians anymore.

Despite the relative success in integration policy, Estonian society is still divided and there are elements of mutual mistrust. The Russian-speaking journalist L. Sokolinskaja has accused the Estonians, saying that the political rhetoric of the nation-state has damaged Estonia and a lot of talented young Russians have left the country. Many non-Estonians feel themselves cut off from the life of the country. Still, she adds that many nationalist slogans in fact have remained only part of the political discourse and that the real life of Russians in Estonia has turned out to be better and more peaceful than could have been expected in 1991.

Language maintains the border between communities and therefore it is a key to integration. Teaching of the Estonian language has not been successful enough. Young people with inadequate skills in the Estonian language have faced difficulties in obtaining higher education in Estonia. Unemployment among non-Estonians is slightly higher than among Estonians. The number of permanent residents who are not citizens is still very high.

There is also debate about the final aim of integration and how much it differs from assimilation. According to the former minister of Education Tõnis Lukas, Estonia is not interested in turning non-Estonians into (ethnic) Estonians and Estonia has created good conditions for all the ethnic minorities to develop their cultural life and communicate in their mother-tongue, but nonetheless, it is necessary for a citizen to learn the Estonian language to take part in society and also to know the history and culture of Estonia. A clearer distinction between integration and assimilation is proposed by Will Kymlicka. He differentiates between “thin” and “thick” citizenship. The aim of integration can be common language and social institutions (“societal culture”), but not necessarily assimilation into “culture” in an ethnographic sense, which means similar habits, folk costumes, life-styles, rituals and also views on history. Estonia faces the challenge preserving its identity while transforming its ethnic nationhood into civic or “societal” nationhood.



SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Järve P., Wellmann C. (eds.), *Minorities and Majorities in Estonia. Problems of Integration at the Threshold of EU*, Flensburg 1998.

Kymlicka W., *Estonia's Integration Landscape: From Apathy to Harmony*, Tallinn 2000.

Lauristin M., Heidmets M. (eds.), *The Challenge of the Russian Minority. Emerging Multicultural Democracy in Estonia*, Tartu 2002.



Citizenship Act (consolidated text October 2002) –
<http://www.legaltext.ee/text/en/x40001K2.htm>

§ 6. Tingimused Eesti kodakondsuse saamiseks

Välismaalane, kes soovib saada Eesti kodakondsust, peab:

- 1) olema vähemalt 15-aastane;
- 2) olema viibinud alalise elamisloa alusel Eestis vähemalt viis aastat enne Eesti kodakondsuse saamise sooviavalduse esitamise päeva ja üks aasta pärast sooviavalduse registreerimisele järgnevat päeva;
- 3) oskama eesti keelt vastavalt käesoleva seaduse paragrahvis 8 sätestatud nõuetele;
- 4) tundma Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadust ja kodakondsuse seadust vastavalt käesoleva seaduse paragrahvis 9 sätestatud nõuetele;
- 5) omama legaalset püsivat sissetulekut, mis tagab tema ja tema ülalpeetavate äraelamise;
- 6) olema lojaalne Eesti riigile;
- 7) andma vande: "Taotledes Eesti kodakondsust, töotan olla ustav Eesti põhiseaduslikule korrale."

§ 6. Conditions for acquisition of Estonian citizenship by naturalisation

An alien who wishes to acquire Estonian citizenship by naturalisation shall:

- 1) be at least 15 years of age;
- 2) have stayed in Estonia on the basis of a permanent residence permit for at least five years prior to the date on which he or she submits an application for Estonian citizenship and for one year from the day following the date of registration of the application;
- 3) have knowledge of the Estonian language in accordance with the requirements provided for in § 8 of this Act;
- 4) have knowledge of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia and the Citizenship Act in accordance with the requirements provided for in § 9 of this Act;
- 5) have a permanent legal income which ensures his or her own subsistence and that of his or her dependants;
- 6) be loyal to the Estonian state;
- 7) take an oath: "Taotledes Eesti kodakondsust, töotan olla ustav Eesti põhiseaduslikule korrale. " [In applying for Estonian citizenship, I swear to be loyal to the constitutional order of Estonia.]

