

Identity Problems in Present-Day Estonia

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Identity is one of the catchwords in modern ideology. Politically, the most important identities are the national and regional identity. The article discusses the problem of these identities in Estonia, after its newly regained independence in the collapse of the Soviet Empire. It is hard to understand the new developments without knowing their historical background. For this reason, the big changes in the political situation and national composition of Estonia during the 20th century have been brought forward. As a result of these changes, the identity feelings in Estonia have greatly changed in a quick succession. The same processes are broadly going on in whole Europe, causing quite a lot of difficulties.

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Estonia is one of the Baltic states that regained its independence in the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1991. Like all other former East-European socialist countries, it has to fight with manifold difficulties. One of them is the ethnicities problem. In the 1990s, a lot of research work has been done to clear up the development of national identities and the integration and assimilation processes going on in the population. Making use of the results of the investigations by my fellow scholars, I try in the following to give some picture of the present identity problems in Estonia.

In order to understand better the situation in Estonia we have to begin with a short historical survey. First of all it is important to remind of the transitional position of the Baltic countries between Europe and the European-Asian Russian empire, which has brought about their double peripheral situation. Looking from the West, they constitute the eastern periphery of Europe. For Russia, they belong to its western periphery. This dual situation has greatly determined the historical destiny of Estonia.

World War II and its results have thoroughly changed the composition of Estonian population that took root in the Middle Ages when at the beginning of the 13th century the German crusaders conquered in the far north-east Estonian and Latvian territories. For the next seven

centuries, including the time when Estonia was under Russian rule in the 18th and 19th centuries, the local administration remained in the hands of the Baltic German minority (never more than 5 % of the population) and culturally, the land belonged more to Germany than to Russia. Changes began in the middle of the 19th century when the Estonian national movement gathered momentum. As a result, after World War I, Estonia, like Latvia and Lithuania became an independent republic.

The Republic of Estonia between the two world wars was nearly a one nation state with small minorities. According to the 1934 census, the 993,000 Estonians constituted 88.2 % of its population. The biggest minority were the Russians (93,000 – 8.2 %). It is important to point out that in 1897, when Estonia belonged to Russia, the number of Russians on Estonian territory was only 38,000, nearly three times smaller. Their much larger number in 1934 was caused by the fact that in accordance with the 1920 Tartu peace treaty the centuries old Estonian-Russian frontier line was moved considerably eastwards. Other minorities were: 16,300 Germans (1.5 %), 7,600 Swedes (0.7%), 5,400 Latvians (0.5 %) and 4,400 Jews (0.4 %).

In accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the Baltic Germans left Estonia in October 1939. The land was occupied by the Soviets

in June 1940. During the following German occupation (1941–1944), the Estonian Swedes departed to Sweden in 1944 on the basis of a German-Swedish agreement. Only a small part of the Jews survived the Nazi Holocaust in Estonia, mostly those who retreated with the Soviets in 1941. When in 1944 Estonia was conquered again, the Soviet government pushed the frontier line between Estonian and Russian Soviet Republics back to the west. So, in a few years most of the old minorities in Estonia had disappeared or greatly diminished. For a short time in the winter of 1944/45 Estonians made up 97 % of the country's civilian population. Nevertheless, the losses in the population of native Estonians during the war and the following Stalinist terror amounted to 200,000 (for the reasons of mass deportations, prison camps, Soviet and German mobilisations, fleeing to the West to escape from the Soviets), i.e. to one fifth of the nation.

After the war, Estonia, now as part of the Soviet Union, was for almost half a century an object of the russification process directed by the central government in Moscow. The aim was to develop an integrated Soviet nation. For this purpose some hundreds of thousands of Russians and other, mostly Russian speaking Soviet peoples were settled to Estonia and the other Baltic countries. This development is well characterised by the all-Soviet censuses. In 1959, the number of Russians in Estonia amounted to 240,000 (20.1 % of the population), in 1989 – to 475,000 (30.3 %), the number of Ukrainians accordingly to 16,000 and 48,000, of Belorussians to 11,000 and 28,000, of Tatars to 1,500 and 4,000 etc. Also most of the Jews came to Estonia from Russia (1959 – 5,400, 1989 – 4,600). The decrease of their number has been caused by their settling to Israel. A special position in Estonia have the Volga Germans and the Ingermanland Finns. The approximately 360,000 Germans, whose ancestors were settled on the Volga river in the times of Catherine II, were deported during the war-time to Siberia and Central-Asia. When in the 1960s they got a possibility to go back to Germany, a part of them used Baltic countries as an intermediate stop on their way. In 1959, there were only 670 Germans in Estonia, in 1970 their number was

7,850, in 1989 – 3,470. Part of the Ingermanland Finns, banished from the Leningrad oblast, found their new home in Estonia from where in the 1980s they started to resettle to Finland. This development is revealed in their number: 1959 – 16,700, 1970 – 18,500, 1989 – 16,600.

The number of Estonians in 1959 was 893,000 (74.6 %) and in 1989 – 963,000 (61.5 %). Thus, the independent Estonia, regenerated in 1991, has to face a very complicated minorities problem. The Soviet “mixing up” politics resulted in turning the pre-war one nation state into a multi-ethnic country.

Until 1997, approximately 80,000 (14.5 %) of Russian and other minorities had returned to their homeland. Nevertheless, in present Estonian population there are more than one hundred different nationalities, most of them small groups (under 50 individuals). Besides more than 400,000 Russians there are three nationalities (Ukrainians, Belorussians and Finns) which are represented by 10,000–50,000 persons. Ten nationalities (Tatars, Jews, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Germans, Armenians *et al.*) are represented by 1,000–5,000 persons and 20 nationalities by 100–1,000 persons. Nearly all of them are Soviet time newcomers of the first or second generation from the other parts of Soviet Union. Some of them belong to “continuously on the way” groups, e.g. Koreans (first generation born in Korea, second – in the Soviet Far-East, third – in Kazakstan, fourth – in Estonia) and Rumanians (first generation born in Rumania, second – in Ukraine, third – in Estonia). In their mutual communication they use predominantly Russian, which was the lingua franca in the Soviet Union. Together with Russians they constitute the so called Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia. They form the majority of the population in the north-eastern Estonian industrial region. In our capital Tallinn half of the population is Russian-speaking.

Thus, more than one third of present day Estonian population is still made up by Russian and Russian-speaking (foremost Slav) minorities. About 120,000 of them have officially Russian citizenship. Still more, 160,000–170,000 have no citizenship at all, from them about

30,000 are living in Estonia illegally. In such a confused situation, the question arises, what is more important in Estonia, either national complexity or regional identity.

The main result of the Soviet assimilation politics in Estonia was a hastened russification of non-Russian minorities. Coming from Russia, they knew Russian but not Estonian. Their work was conducted in Russian, their children went to Russian schools. According to 1989 census 52 % of them (66,000) marked Russian as their mother tongue.

A sudden change in the situation was brought about by the quick collapse of the Soviet empire at the end of 1980s and the Estonian "singing revolution" in the summer of 1988. In a few years, during the Estonian struggle of independence 1988–1991, over 20 national minorities (Ukrainians, Belorussians, Ingermanland Finns, Chuvashes, Tatars, Gypsies, Germans, Jews, Poles, Moldovians, Latvians, Lithuanians *et al.*) formed their cultural societies. Very quickly the old national religions, suppressed for a long time, began to play an important part in social life. In September 1988 the first Estonian Forum of Nations was convoked and in the next year Estonian Union of National Minorities as a central organ for the ethnic societies was founded. Both organisations were tightly connected with the Estonian Popular Front and their most important task was to fight against Russian domination in Estonia. Respectively, in the beginning, it was Estonians who played the leading role in their activity.

Therefore, some of the ethnic leaders avoided co-operation with these organisations, being afraid that instead of assimilation to Russians it could lead to another assimilation – to Estonians. In 1995 a parallel, more independent union of ethnic societies, called *Lüüra* ("The Lyre"), was founded. They are lead by the idea that of principal importance is not the Estonian-Russian difference, but the cultural difference of every nationality. The leaders of *Lüüra* emphasize the integration into Estonian community, i.e. the need of local/state identity. They rightly find that in Estonia besides Estonians only Russians have all opportunities to realise freely their national needs – they have their

Russian schools, their radio and telecommunication, press, literature, theatre etc. The small minorities lack these opportunities and *Lüüra* tries to help them, founding Sunday Schools for national education, trying to mediate between Estonian officials and the national societies.

To promote mutual understanding and dialogue among different ethnic groups, in 1993 under the aegis of the President of the Republic a permanent round-table consultative body was founded. Five representatives from each – the Estonian Parliament, the Russian organisations and the Union of National Minorities – were delegated to it. So far, the work of this round-table has had few positive results.

In 1993, the Estonian Cultural Autonomy Law from the year 1925 was restored. According to this law every national minority exceeding 3,000 individuals has the right for cultural self-government. Before the war, only Estonian Germans and Jews fully used the possibilities offered by the law. Today, the minorities, except the Ingermanland Finns, have showed little interest to the opportunities opened by the law. The large Russian minority has no need for such a special law to protect its rights. Most of the Ukrainians and Belorussians in Estonia have not yet sufficiently differentiated from the Russians. Their national identity is unstable. The Jews have integrated into Russians or Estonians. They have founded their own school, but this is a Russian-language school.

We reach to a conclusion that the differentiation of the Soviet time Russian-speaking minorities has advanced very slowly. As before, they belong more to the Russian community in Estonia than make up separate groups between Russians and Estonians. The reasons are clear. Generally, they live scattered all over the country. For most groups the historical distance from Estonian culture is too great for an easy integration. Traditionally, their children go to Russian schools. The everyday life problems have to be solved. The cultural societies have few active members and their resources are small. They find little support from the state power that in its own turn has to grapple with many difficulties. Practically, the russification of most non-Russian minorities continues.

The Russians, by far the biggest non-Estoni-

an group in Estonia, have serious difficulties in reshaping their identity in new conditions. In the Soviet Union they unconditionally were the leading nation and their main identity could be characterized rather as political, "soviet", than Russian. Of course, in the Stalinist period, especially during World War II, a particular emphasis was laid on a continuous progressive development of the Russian history and the greatness of the Russians as a nation. Thus, following the example of the Napoleon time Patriotic War in 1812, the Soviet-German war was called the Great Patriotic War. But later on, the predominant ethnicity in the identity of the Russians was more and more replaced by political leadership.

After the collapse of the Soviet empire the Estonian Russians found themselves in an unexpected situation, being a minority group in a tiny republic ruled by a nationality of no importance, the Estonians. The leading role of Russians had faded away. Now they once more became aware of belonging to a great nation, living just behind the frontier. But this nation was in a chaotic situation and struggled with enormous difficulties. There was not much help to be expected from that direction. Nor did most of them want to return to Russia. The younger generation would more readily go to America if there arises need to leave the country.

Most of the Russians in Estonia are industrial workers, coming from many parts of Russia. Culturally they are heterogeneous, belonging primarily to the vanishing Soviet culture. They feel clearly different from the old small Russian minority (ca. 38,000 individuals) in Estonia that is not "soviet". On the other side, they feel that they belong to the Baltic. In a few decades they have turned into Baltic Russians, different to other Russians. Consequently, they have their regional identity.

Now, the identity problems of the Estonians themselves are also rather complicated. In characterising the Estonians' identity it is suitable to turn once more to the history. For many centuries in Estonian history the outpost situation of the Western Catholic-Lutheran civilisation against the Eastern Orthodox civilisation has been the crucial moment. The Estonian national movement in the second half of the

19th century, the scene of which was a western Russian province dominated by Baltic Germans, was supported above all by a cultural identification: the Estonians were an old nation with its own culture which became apparent in its rich folklore and old pagan religion. In the beginning of the 20th century a slogan was launched: "Let us be Estonians, but let us also become Europeans!" It is a good illustration to Christian Giordano's thesis that typical to peripheral nations is their twofold self-conception that culturally they both belong and do not belong to Europe. In the short independence period between the two world wars the political identity rose to the first place: the Estonians had their own state. Unity with the neighbouring Finns and other Finno-Ugrians was also stressed. Via Finland, the Nordic ties grew important. Much less the Estonians apprehended their belonging together with the other Baltic nations – the Latvians and Lithuanians.

During the 50 years period of occupation officially the Soviet socialist identity was stressed. Among the Estonians it found little resonance. On the other hand, the regional Baltic identity moved into the forefront, the more so that from the Russian side the Baltic countries were seen as the "Soviet West". We can also speak of a Baltic-Caucasian (Georgian and Armenian) identity in the sense that the peoples of the Baltic and Caucasia felt themselves belonging together as the representatives of the antiquity-rooted European civilisation who had fallen victims to a foreign occupation. In the last decades of the Soviet power the Estonian-Finnish identity rose again, thanks to the possibility of personal contacts and Finnish television, widely watched in Estonia. Of course, most important was the Estonian national identity, fed by cultural traditions and historical knowledge, regardless of the efforts of the occupying power to annihilate their sources (destroying the literature published in independent Estonia, rewriting of the Estonian history, physical liquidation of the politically active part of the population etc.). Especially vital were the traditional all-Estonian song festivals, notwithstanding the striving of the Soviet authorities to turn them into a feast of "friendship of brotherly Soviet nationalities". These

festivals were the initial base of the "singing revolution" in 1988.

After the radical revolutionary changes the Estonians' national identity once again was connected with political (state) identity. It is accompanied by concern about the future of the nation, mostly because of the negative birth rate of the Estonians and the large numbers of minorities. The Estonian-Finnish identity and even more the regional Nordic identity have gained in strength. The latter is the result of very active political, economical and personal relations between Estonia and the Scandinavian countries. The European identity is also quickly rising, stimulated by the fear of the recent occupying power, the enormous Russian neighbour. The Baltic community has again fallen into the background like in the first independence period, notwithstanding the common historical destiny of the three countries in the 20th century.

At the same time, among Estonians some local identities that were latent during the Soviet occupation are vigorously developing. One is the Võru movement in South-Estonia. We must remember that for a long time there were two Estonian written languages: North-Estonian and South-Estonian, based on substantially different dialects. From the mid-19th century North-Estonian has been in general use and South-Estonian was used only in dialect poetry. In the beginning of the 1990s a South-Estonian identity sprang up, with a centre in the district town Võru. A special Võru Institute was founded, every summer a so called Summer University is organised to rise the self-consciousness of the South-Estonians and to fight for the rights of a South-Estonian literary language. Quite a lot of books in South-Estonian have been published.

Another local movement is the Setu movement in the uttermost south-east of Estonia. The Setus are a small group of Estonians that for many centuries have been living beyond the Estonian border in the Pskov province of Russia. In their culture old Estonian features are mixed with strong Russian influences. Therefore they considerably differ from other Estonians. Their habitation area was united with Estonia in 1920. The new frontier line from the

year 1944 divided the Setu territory into two: most of the Setus in Estonia, a small part, approximately a tenth of them, in Russia. During the Soviet time this division had no importance.

But since 1991 the Setus have been living in two separate states, their internal intercourse hindered by the border that is a typical *Reichsgrenze* in the proper sense of the word. The Setu movement's aim is to unite all Setus. Essentially it is an active political movement in which their local identity is strongly accentuated. But the aspirations of Setus can hardly be realised. As a countermove, the Russian side undertook an ethnological investigation among the Setus living in Pskov area and declared these Setus an ethnographical group of Russians.

The described processes and shifts in the identity are – as far as I know – in varying degrees broadly happening all over Europe, being caused first of all by the colossally increased human mobility in the modern times. Is it possible to direct them so that there would be no danger for normal social life – that is the question. Up to now, life has shown that it is far from being an easy task.

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