

The Russian Minority in Estonia

by William Hernád

Estonian history since 1939

In August 1939, when Moscow and Berlin signed the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that placed Estonia under Moscow's 'sphere', the Estonian's fate was sealed. Hitler called for all Germans to repatriate and they left along with 'Germanised' Estonians.

Moscow forced Estonia and its neighbours to accept Soviet military bases, as Moscow accused Estonia of not being able to maintain its neutrality. Eventually, an ultimatum was issued and the occupation began in the summer of 1940.

The Soviet occupation

During the year long Soviet occupation, thousands of Estonians were deported and killed. The occupation forces staged a bogus election, after which the puppet regime 'asked' Moscow for membership of the USSR, this was an illegal incorporation. The United States and other Western governments then announced that they would not recognise the move.

By the time Hitler and Stalin faced off in combat, the people of the Soviet-occupied lands - Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, etc - were faced with the question of survival. Therefore when the German army came through, it was viewed more as liberation from Soviet forces rather than a German occupation. However, the ensuing three years of German occupation in Estonia ended these hopes, with more brutal crackdowns by the Nazis. The Nazis even forcibly mobilised Estonians into combat units under the SS, though many joined voluntarily as well. Tragic situations developed when brothers fought brothers during the period, as forcibly conscripted Soviet and Nazi forces faced off in bloody battles.

The Soviets reclaimed Estonia and the Baltics in 1944 and bombed parts of the countries. Historic Narva was almost destroyed. Ruins still dot the landscape, even in central Tallinn. The Soviets re-established control in Estonia, though armed resistance fighters - called *metsavennad* (the forest brothers) - fought bravely in the following years. Despite involvement by Britain's SIS and others, there was little assistance from the West except the 'non-recognition' policy (the lack of Western response to the Hungarian 1956 uprising all but ended the movement).

Sovietisation progressed during the fifty years of occupation. Tens of thousands of Estonians fled to the West, were shot outright, or were deported to inhospitable parts of the Soviet Union. Moscow pursued early discriminatory policies by not allowing Estonians to move back to certain places, such as Narva; instead, replacing them with workers from other parts of the USSR, who were also victims themselves in many ways.

The population of Estonia dropped from 88.2% Estonian in 1934 to 61.5% by 1989. Farms collapsed due to collectivisation, businesses were nationalised, Russian replaced Estonian as the official language of communication and everything associated with independent Estonia was quashed by censorship.

After decades of occupation, the seeds of the 'national reawakening' were planted in the 1970s. One manifestation of public anger - in the form of youth angst - came in the punk movement and the banning of the band 'Propeller'. The new generation, born after the death of Stalin, played a major

role in the movement. Through the latter half of the 1980s, protesters supporting issues such as the environment and historical accuracy filled the streets. Using the shield of *glasnost*, movements for national issues were formed.¹

The Estonian policy towards the Russian minority

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Estonian has been the sole official language of the country. However, the state provides its inhabitants with some cultural services in Russian too. In some municipalities, where the majority of inhabitants are ethnic Russians, the local administration is legally obliged to offer services in both languages.

Recently, there has been a lively debate over the needs and possibilities of protecting the national language from foreign influence. Exposure to foreign cultures is sometimes seen as having an adverse effect on the structure and vocabulary of the spoken and even the written language. The State Language Office is responsible for enforcing the *Language Act* through activities such as organising exams in the Estonian language and giving practical advice on linguistic matters. In the south-eastern Võru region, there have recently been attempts to revive the local language, a dialect of Estonian.

Russian speakers comprise about 31% of the country's population, but the language has no official status. There are some cultural institutions operating in Russian, notably the state-owned Russian Drama Theatre and the municipally run (since 2001) Russian Cultural Centre in Tallinn. One radio station of the public broadcasting company broadcasts in Russian. Non-governmental organisations of ethnic minority groups regularly receive grants from the Estonian Ministry of Culture and also from the local governments.

In practice business organisations and municipalities with a large number of Russophone inhabitants offer services both in Estonian and Russian, and occasionally in other languages, such as English. With regard to cultural policy, the stress has nevertheless been on the development of Estonian-language cultural services, while cultural life in minority languages has been more dependent on non-governmental initiatives.

Even in other municipalities, basic public services and information are usually also usually available in Russian. As for other minority languages, the state or the municipalities do not provide any language services. However, there are a number of societies, which help to promote the cultures of other national minority groups e.g. Armenians, Latvians, Swedes, Finns. These societies receive state financial support from the Ministry of Culture; the granting of state support is not dependent on citizenship.

Since 2000, state policies towards non-citizens and ethnic minorities have been formulated in a general action plan entitled *Integration in Estonian Society 2000-2007*. The programme is coordinated by the quasi-governmental *Non-Estonians' Integration Foundation*, established in 1998. The programme discusses integration in Estonian society as being shaped by two processes: firstly, the *social harmonisation of society*, around 'a strong common national core', based on knowledge of the Estonian language and Estonian citizenship; and secondly, *the opportunity to maintain ethnic differences*, based on the recognition of the cultural rights of ethnic minorities. The objectives have been classified under four sub-programmes, which include education in Estonian language within the elementary and secondary schools, education about minority cultures and languages, teaching of Estonian to adults, and the strengthening of the social competences of members of the minorities.

Transition to studies in Estonian in mandatory subjects takes place according to the schedule below:

- One course in Estonian Literature was taught to pupils in Estonian starting in the 10th grade in 2007/2008.
- One course in Estonian Literature and either two courses in Social Studies or three courses in Music (selection is made by the school) are taught to pupils in Estonian starting in the 10th grade in 2008/2009.
- One course in Estonian Literature, two courses in Social Studies and three courses in Music are taught in Estonian to pupils starting in the 10th grade in 2009/2010.
- One course in Estonian Literature, two courses in Social Studies, three courses in Music and two courses in History of Estonia are taught in Estonian to pupils starting in the 10th grade in 2010/2011.
- One course in Estonian Literature, two courses in Social Studies, three courses in Music, two courses in History of Estonia and three courses in Geography are taught to pupils in Estonian starting in the 10th grade in 2011/2012 and thereafter.

Each subsequent stage of the transition has concerned pupils who have started studying in the 10th grade from 2007. Pupils who start in the 10th grade in 2011 or later must study 60% of subjects in Estonian.ⁱⁱ

All upper secondary Russian schools in Estonia were already teaching Estonian Literature in Estonian in the 2007/2008 academic year. In the 2007/2008 academic year, 49 Russian schools (79%) were teaching Music in Estonian, 30 Russian schools (48%) were teaching Social Studies in Estonian and 17 Russian schools (27%) taught both transition subjects in Estonian.

In addition to the compulsory Estonian Language and Literature, 31 Russian-medium schools were already teaching 23 subjects in Estonian, e.g. Music (in 18 schools) and Physical Education (16 schools). 41 upper secondary Russian schools are planning to teach more subjects in Estonian than compulsory in the 2008/2009 academic year (a total of 30 different subjects).

The Ministry funded the purchase of Estonian textbooks and gave 70.000 kroons per subject to schools that teach other subjects in Estonian apart from the compulsory Estonian literature. Payment will continue in the 2008/2009 academic year.

Headmasters of Russian schools and teachers of Music, Social Studies, Estonian Literature, History and Geography have passed teacher training courses that include improving their Estonian language skills and introducing methods for teaching in another language. Training for teachers of different subjects teaching in Estonian will continue in the next academic year.ⁱⁱⁱ

Among the practical issues, the most crucial is the future of Russian-language secondary education. According to the official policy, Russian-language secondary schools should adopt Estonian as the language of instruction, for at least 60% of the lessons.

Within minority organisations, the future of secondary education in Russian is actively debated; even for people with non-Russian ethnicity, the Russian language and culture may (sometimes, but not always) be closer to their own experiences than those of the Estonians. The minority activists sometimes express their stance by saying that the integration process should be 'two-sided, implying that the Estonians should pay more attention to the Russian language and culture.^{iv}

These objectives should be accompanied by the spread of a positive attitude towards integration among both the minorities and the majority population. When the programme was assessed, the very fact of its elaboration and implementation has been regarded as a significant achievement in itself. However, certain shortcomings have been raised; firstly, the implementation has concentrated on the education and language sectors, which have received three-quarters of the total financing of

the programme (approximately 14.4 million euros for the period 2000-2003), leaving the fields of legal-political and socio-economic integration dependent on their inclusion in other government programmes. Although the programme stresses the objective of combining integration with the maintenance of strong minority identities, and the minority citizens' competence in their ethnic cultures, its implementation has been accused of being rather assimilationist in practice. There is no present definition of 'integration' which is shared by the government, the general public, and the representatives of minority organisations. In 2007, the government appointed a working group with the task of preparing a new action plan for the years 2008-2013.^v

The big issue between Estonia and its Russian minority in 2007

The issues of inter-ethnic relations and immigration became a hotly debated issue in Estonia during the revolutionary development of the late 1980s that eventually led to a restoration of Estonia's independence in 1991. At that time, immigration meant the influx of work force and retired military officers from other parts of the USSR had already led to a major change in the population's ethnic composition. Along with a growing linguistic 'Russification' of public life, the independence activists interpreted immigration as a threat to the future existence of the Estonian nation. The discourse on immigrants and migration has so far been intertwined with the debate on issues such as the integration of minorities, citizenship policies and language policies.

The number of immigrants to Estonia from countries outside the former Soviet Union has, until now, remained almost insignificant. In fact, the need to develop a policy towards new immigrants has become apparent only very recently, partly due to Estonia's membership in the European Union. Accordingly, the discourse on migration related issues has, until recently, been primarily concerned with the Soviet-time settlers to the country.

Some problems have remained unsolved and continue to be debated. They are related both to symbolic and practical aspects of the relations between the majority and minorities. In 2007, the symbolic controversies showed their latent conflict potential. A Soviet monument for the victims of the Second World War that was located in the centre of Tallinn occasionally became the subject of heated public debate. During the parliamentary election campaign, Prime Minister Andrus Ansip and his reform Party made a promise to relocate the monument to the Military Cemetery. After the elections, and the appointment of Ansip's new Government Cabinet, this line of action was followed. However, removing the monument triggered protests by Russian-speakers, which eventually degenerated into violent street riots on 26-27 April, 2007. The press discussion following these events has shown that widely differing views about the goals and possibilities of policies towards the Russian-speaking minority still exists.

Police clashed with Russian demonstrators for two nights in downtown Tallinn, where protests over the removal of a bronze statue of a Red Army soldier turned violent, leaving one person dead and 153 injured. Many members of Estonia's Russian-speaking minority, which makes up a third of the country's 1.3 million people, opposed moving the statue. Ethnic Estonians say it is a reminder of decades of Soviet occupation.

On January 5, 2009, an Estonian court acquitted four men of organizing the country's worst riot in 2007. Dmitri Linter, Maksim Reva and Dimitri Klenski, the leaders of an informal local group called the 'Night Watchmen', and Mark Siryk, the local head of 'Nashi', a Russian youth group loyal to the Kremlin, were cleared of the charges of "organizing mass disturbances" in Tallinn on April 26-28, 2007, as the Harju County Court said in an e-mailed statement. Prosecutors said they will appeal the decision.^{vi}

Thus, Estonia's medieval fortress at Narva glowers at a corresponding fort over the border in

Russia, a symbol of tensions between the nations and for some, of friction between Estonians and their big Russian minority. In this town on the far north-east fringe of the European Union, surrounded by flat countryside in a region pock-marked by slags of oil shale, 85 percent of the population are Russian speakers. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, they and others in the 300,000-strong Russian-speaking community of the tiny Baltic state of Estonia faced a choice: integrate and become Estonian or, in the eyes of the law, remain a non-citizen. Their status has long been a source of contention with Russia, and relations soured overtly after April 2007 when Estonia moved a Soviet-era Red Army war memorial, sparking riots in the capital Tallinn and anger in Moscow. Saying Estonia's action showed disrespect to the fighters of fascism, Russia retaliated with steps that dampened trade flows and knocked Estonia's economy.^{vii}

The moving of the statue has strained ties with neighbouring Russia, where Estonian exporters have suffered boycotts. It also led to protests by Russian youth groups, including Nashi, at the Estonian Embassy in Moscow in May 2007. Russian oil shipments through Estonia have fallen by a third since May 2007.

Cultural diplomacy in Estonia concerning Russia and the Russian minority

One of the missions of the Ministry of Culture is to support the cultural life of ethnic minorities and to contribute to the preservation and development of their languages and cultural originality. In accordance with the regulations, the Ministry of Culture supports the activities of cultural societies of ethnic minorities by assisting the promotion of their cultural life in compliance with legal acts currently in force.^{viii}

Cultural contacts between Estonia and Russia are intensive and thriving, free of complications. There is even a noteworthy institutional framework created for this purpose. The cultural ministries of the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation signed a cooperation agreement back in 1992, which has been solidified through cooperation programmes.

Since 1997, the David Oistarrhi Festival has taken place annually in Estonia, with 2009 seeing the twelfth festival. The international festival of orthodox sacred music 'CREDO' has regularly taken place in Estonia since 1994. Soloists from Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre and St. Peterburg's Maria Theatre have performed in Tallinn. In both 2005 and 2007, the Russian theatre festival 'Zolotaja Maska' was held in Tallinn in October.

These are the highlights of the events that took place in recent years in towns in Russia and Estonia:

In January 2006, Andres Mustonen gave a concert in Moscow Conservatory. The embassy assisted in finding sponsors for the event.

In May 2006, an exhibition was opened in the National Library of Russia called 'The 25 Most Beautiful Estonian Books and the 5 Most Beautiful Children's Books in 2005'.

On 30 May 2006, the lead conductor of St. Peterburg's Maria Theatre Valeri Gergiev was given an Eduard Tubin medal for his outstanding presentation of Symphony number VIII at the Tubin Anniversary Festival in Tallinn in May 2005.

Another noteworthy event of 2006 was the opening of an exhibit of collections from the Pskov Museum in Tallinn.

On 20 October 2006, an exhibit by glass artist Ivo Lille was opened in Moscow.

Starting in the 2006-2007 season, Eri Klas is the new lead conductor and musical director of the Moscow Theatre's 'Novaja Opera'.

In May 2007, an exhibition displaying a diverse selection of high-level contemporary Russian art, 'The return of memory / New art in Russia', opened in KUMU Art Museum.

In March, a delegation from the Estonian embassy in Moscow participated in the opening of Setu culture days in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, Russia. The Setu culture days began on 20 March at Kazan State University of Culture and Arts, with a joint concert by Seto ensembles and students of the university.

On 11 April 2007, an exhibit of rugs made by the Estonian Academy of the Arts instructor Anu Raud opened in the embassy in Moscow.

The 87th anniversary of Georg Ots's (an Estonian baritone) birthday was celebrated with a concert on 12 April, which was organised by the Estonian Embassy in Moscow. The concert took place in Moscow's 11th art school, with which the embassy has very close ties and where a bust of Georg Ots, a gift from Tallinn, has been displayed since 2005.

On April 22nd, 2007, an Estonian animated film day took place in Moscow. Well-known Moscow theatre critic and expert on puppet and animated films Dina Goder helped organise the event.

From 19-20 July 2007, the international folk culture festival "Shumbat, finno-ugrija" was held in Mordovia's capital Saransk. It included an Estonian display, presented by the director of the non-profit organisation Finno-Ugria Kersti Sepper.^{ix}

Overall, it can be observed that the Estonian government has made a lot of effort to integrate minorities and in particular, the Russian minority, although issues which need to be overcome still remain. Thus, there is a need for Cultural Diplomacy in Estonia since it helps people from different cultural backgrounds to interact better with each other.

Culture concerns languages, religion, attitudes, social organisation and education. Maybe the best definition of the term is from Hofstede. He wrote that 'culture is the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another.'^x

The word diplomacy relates to tact and skills in dealing with people. It helps us to interact better with others without interfering with their fundamental rights.

The word Europe is commonly used when speaking about the European Union. However the term 'Europe' also refers to Belarus, Croatia and Georgia etc. Thus, it probably depends on where people come from. Most Western Europeans speak about Europe in the sense of the European Union whereas people who come from Eastern Europe would probably think of geographical Europe on hearing the word 'Europe'. Europe, either the European Union or Europe in general, is based on politics, business and arts. The EU's core project is to create a federal union that celebrates the plurality of the continent's many nations. However there are still tensions within minorities and citizens of countries. The EU's motto is actually 'unity in diversity'.

It is accepted in most countries today that cultural relations are an essential third dimension in relations between states: 'third' in the respect that they accompany politics and trade. It was no less a figure than Willy Brandt in 1966 who said culture was '*the third pillar of foreign policy*'. Willy Brandt made efforts to build peaceful relations with the Eastern Block, i.e. the former Soviet Republics. Before that date, John F. Kennedy had already spoken in this sense when he stated 'Ich bin ein Berliner' on June 26th, 1963. He wanted to show Berliners that he was supporting them during the time of the Cold War. He wanted people around the world to be concerned with the citizens of West Berlin's problems. Both of those former political leaders were dealing with cultural

diplomacy. They were convinced that cultural diplomacy was the best way to improve relations between nations.

References

-
- i http://www.ce-review.org/00/27/estonia27_history.html
- ii <http://www.hm.ee/index.php?1510030>
- iii <http://www.hm.ee/index.php?1510030>
- iv <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/estonia.php?aid=423>
- v <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/estonia.php?aid=423>
- vi <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=a3wwwI19xdwQ>
- vii <http://www.reuters.com/article/inDepthNews/idUSL2329670720080424pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=0&sp=true>
- viii <http://www.kul.ee/index.php?path=0x1377x1496>
- ix http://www.vm.ee/eng/kat_176/1430.html#culture
- x *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations*, 2nd Edition 596 pages. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 2001, hardcover only. ISBN 0-8039-7323-3.