

ETHNIC ISSUES IN THE BALTIC STATES

The paper is dedicated to the ethnic problems of the modern Baltic States. The ethnic issues in the Baltic States is a problem of all-European importance. It is not only a problem for the Baltic States, but also for Russia, which tries to defend the rights of Russian and Russian-speaking minorities, and the European Union, which intends to include the Baltic States in the nearest future. The reality is that about 27% of Latvia's and 33% of Estonia's populations have no citizenship; it means that these people are disenfranchised and have fewer rights than citizens of these states. This situation provokes the tensions between Riga-Tallinn and Moscow and hinder their entering the European Union. The goal of this paper is to take a "neutral" look at the ethnic problems within the Baltic States' societies (it is clear that Russian and Baltic authors may be prejudiced against each other in evaluating this topic) and to suggest the possible solution of these problems. Solving these problems would lead to creating the real civic societies in the Baltic States, where the confrontations will be replaced by integration.

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were the only former Soviet republics, which had not joined the Commonwealth of Independent States. They managed to build efficient market economies and followed strong Western-oriented foreign policy. The result is well known: the Baltic States were invited to start the accession negotiations with the European Union. Nevertheless, the Soviet heritage produced several serious handicaps on Baltics' way to Europe, democracy and civic society. The ethnic problems in Latvia and Estonia are amongst the most serious ones. The Baltic States insisted that they had restored the independence, not proclaimed it. The concept of

continuation included the resumption of inter-war citizenship laws in Latvia and Estonia, but not in Lithuania.

It means that the citizenship was granted only to those who were the citizens of interwar Estonian and Latvian republics and to their descendants. As a result, most ethnic Russians and representatives of other minorities (also predominantly Russian-speaking) were disenfranchised politically. By now citizens constitute 73 percent of population of Latvia and only about 67 percent of population of Estonia. The non-citizens may become the citizens through the naturalization procedure, which includes obligatory language test. The language problem is also among the most acute, because a lot of

non-native residents do not have sufficient knowledge of state languages (Latvian and Estonian).

This situation provokes the tensions of the Baltic States with Russia, which has consistently maintained that the Russian-speaking populations in Latvia (more than 40 percent) and Estonia (about a third) face severe discrimination. Investigation by the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and other international groups had not verified the charges. Nonetheless, the ground for complaint remains.

Estonian division

On the eve of independence the ethnic situation in Estonia was rather hard for ethnic Estonians: in 1989 they composed 61,5 percent of Estonia's population (compare: in 1935 87,7 percent of population were ethnic Estonians) [1]. Although the percentage of Estonians has increased slightly in recent years (up to 65 percent), their total number has fallen because of negative natural population growth, so the fear for their nation's future remains acute among Estonian politicians.

The parliament of Estonia passed restrictive citizenship law in November 1991 in effect granting citizenship to those who were citizens of the interwar Estonian republic and to their descendants. As a result, the majority of Russians and members of other minorities - almost 40 percent of the population - were disenfranchised politically. At the beginning of 1998 less than a million residents of Estonia (out of a total of about 1,46 million) were citizens. The non-citizens were permitted to apply for permanent residence only on 12 July 1998 [2].

So, a major reason for Estonia's stable politics in 1990s has been the large-scale disenfranchisement of the country's Russian-speaking minority through restrictive citizenship laws passed in 1991 and 1992. By declaring some half a million Soviet-era immigrants to the republic to be "non-citizens", Estonia cut off the vast majority of its Russian-speaking population from the political process (ethnic Russians could become "naturalized citizens" only after passing language and residency requirements). The result of all these citizenship restrictions was that the ethnic Estonian share of the electorate went from an approximate figure of 65 percent in 1990 to well over 90 percent in 1992. Not surprisingly, the first Estonian parliament elected in 1992 was 100 percent Estonian [3].

This situation raged Russia in early 1990s. The Russian approach towards the issue of citizenship in Estonia and Latvia is that all those who were permanent residents at the moment when independence was "proclaimed" (official documents use this word) must have the right to citizenship as well as those who were born in these countries. In various official documents, Russia has expressed its concerns connected with the inequality of rights of the Russian and Russian-speaking population regarding citizenship, state language, and education, and called for elimination of residency requirements and for reducing the language requirements.

The Estonian citizenship law adopted in January 1995 stipulates at least five years' residence; success on examinations in speaking, reading, and writing Estonian; and other conditions. Partly because of that, only 930000, or 63 percent, of all residents of the country were citizens, of whom only 125000 were not ethnic Estonians. Most ethnic Russians have either become citizens of Russia (about 120000) or have remained Estonian residents without statehood, eligible to receive alien passports [4]. The fragmentation of the Russian community into different legal categories has shaped their political cohesion.

It may be a mystery for a person who is not familiar with the situation in Estonia and Latvia what "alien passport" is. In fact, it is a permanent residence allowance issued by these Baltic States for the residents of former Estonian SSR and Latvian SSR, who were not able to receive the citizenship of the restored independent states (as they were not the citizens of interwar Estonian or Latvian republics or their descendants). Latvia was first in July 1994 to issue the alien passports. In January 1996, Estonian government decided to grant alien passports to the 300000 or so Estonian residents who carried Soviet passports, which were to expire on 12 July 1996. But there was hardly an onslaught of applicants. So few had applied by the beginning of July that Tallinn had to extend the validity of the old passports until many eligible applicants had received new ones.

The Estonian government had long been unwilling to grant residence permits to retired Soviet officers and their families. But on 10 December 1996, the government decided to issue alien residence permits to approximately 10000 ex-Red Army personnel [5]. There are about 20000 such people in Estonia, many of whom

have already adopted Russian citizenship. The practice of denying residence permits to retired officers is now seen as discriminatory. But Mr. Tunne Kelam, deputy speaker of Estonia's parliament argues that Estonia has been extraordinarily forgiving towards the Russian minority - even allowing Soviet Army officers to remain in the country. "It is inconceivable that Czechoslovakia would have allowed German Wehrmacht officers to remain on their soil after the Second World War", he says [6].

In order to consolidate the Estonian society, the parliament amended the local elections law (1996), allowing non-citizens to take part in local elections.

In another effort to improve the lot of the Russian minority, on 17 December 1998 President Lennart Meri promulgated amendments to the citizenship law, adopted by parliament earlier that month. Under the amendments, children born in independent Estonia after 26 February 1986, who do not have citizenship elsewhere will be granted Estonian citizenship without a language test. The changes, due to take effect on 12 July 1999, will initially affect about 6500 children. For Estonian politicians it was not an easy task to make this decision. The fifty years of Soviet rule has left a painful wound in people's mind. Perhaps time is the best doctor.

Another ethnic problem in Estonia is a language problem. In November 1997 Estonian parliament passed amendments to Estonia's state language law requiring officials to reach a certain standard of proficiency. Under the amendments, civil servants and others who work with the public must speak Estonian sufficiently well to be able to carry out their duties. At the same time, parliament rejected an amendment to the law on parliamentary elections that would have required members of parliament and local government representatives to speak Estonian to a particular standard.

Split in Latvia

Of the three Baltic States, Latvia has had the most acute ethnic dilemma. Some 750000 Soviet-era immigrants had reduced the share of native Latvian population from 75 percent in 1939 to just 52 percent in 1989 [7]. Now, with the Latvian share of population hovering at around 56 percent and the Russian minority topping 30 percent, the danger of a severe ethnic split is still high. In the country's seven

largest cities, including Riga, Latvians are minority. The Latvian political reawakening of the late 1980s revealed a strong nationalist undertow from the very start. Similar ethnic mobilization among the Russian community raised overall tensions to the point of near deadlock. After independence, however, Latvia followed Estonia in approving a restrictive citizenship policy that denied automatic citizenship to all Soviet-era immigrants.

As well as in Estonia, the citizenship law had a homogenizing effect on the Latvian electorate, in that the Latvian share of the electorate rose to roughly 78 percent [8]. At least 25 percent of the voters were still non-Latvian, but more than 60 percent of the country's Russian had been effectively disenfranchised [9].

The Latvian citizenship law was even more restrictive. Passed in July 1994, the citizenship law included a naturalization quota of 0.1 percent of all Latvian citizens, or about 2000 per year [10]. The law was amended under pressure from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe, but even then strict "naturalization windows" permitted only certain categories to apply for citizenship in any given year. For example, in 1997, only persons between 16 and 20 years of age who were born in Latvia were allowed to apply for Latvian citizenship. Those born outside of Latvia could not apply for citizenship until the year 2000. Permanent residents who arrived in Latvia when they were older than 30 were not eligible for citizenship before 2003. What is more, the overwhelming majority of those eligible for naturalization had not applied (in 1996, of 33000 eligible only 525 people obtained citizenship). The reason for the indifference is a matter of dispute. Russians claim that the language test is too strict and the application fee too high, while Latvians seem to believe that Russian speakers have no interest in integrating into Latvian society.

However, in 1998 the situation had dramatically changed. Following the advice of Max van der Stoep, the OSCE's high commissioner for national minorities, Latvia's parliament approved draft amendments to its contentious citizenship law in early May 1998. And on 3 October 1998 during the referendum Latvian voters rejected an attempt to repeal a liberalized version of the law that was adopted by parliament in June 1998. A referendum on the issue was forced by a petition drive in which more than

230000 citizens demanded a vote on the reforms. Some 45 percent of voters favored repealing the new law, while 53 percent were opposed [11]. The new version of the citizenship law eliminated so-called naturalization windows, which allowed only a portion of non-citizens to apply for naturalization each year - a measure primarily affecting the nation's Russian population. One of the more contentious elements of the campaign centered around a provision of the law - now agreed to by a majority of Latvian voters - that allows children who have been born in Latvia (providing that their parents have been living legally in Latvia for at least 5 years) since the restoration of independence to receive citizenship without a Latvian language test if their parents request it. Proponents (nationalist Fatherland and Freedom party) of the repeal pointed out that all other would-be citizens must demonstrate knowledge of the language, arguing that it would be dangerous to allow some people to become citizens without the test. Opponents (President Guntis Ulmanis and all other political parties), however, argued that the real issue is creating an educational system guaranteeing that no child completes schooling without learning Latvian. They also pointed to strong recommendations from the OSCE and other Western institutions that the repeal attempt be rejected (in the beginning of 1998 a group of European Parliament deputies said Latvia has the poorest human rights record of the Baltic countries).

A month after the 1998 referendum backing a liberalized citizenship law, Latvia's naturalization department was receiving more and more queries from those wishing to become citizens. Interest was especially high in Riga and Daugavpils, where the proportion of non-citizens is greater than elsewhere in the country. About 25000 of Latvia's 646000 non-citizens could apply for naturalization every year, the department estimated.

Another bitter point of ethnic relations in Latvia is the state language law. Even before the Soviet Union's collapse, the country moved to establish Latvian as the official state language. In 1989, as part of the country's drive for independence, the Latvian Supreme Soviet passed a law requiring the use of Latvian in public places - establishing the three-tiered levels of proficiency and limiting the use of foreign languages (i.e., Russian) in public and private sectors. The law also banned the use of bilingual

(Russian-Latvian) signs, except in a few cases, such as tourist establishments and cultural institutions. The language requirements continue to be controversial. At the end of 1999 after the long discussions the new state language law was finally adopted. The law makes Latvian the state language and the sole language of instruction in state schools. Although this requirement will be introduced in schools gradually over the next decade, some classes are expected to switch to Latvian-only instruction as early as 2004. Teaching in Russian will be allowed to continue in private schools and some special-education institutions.

Lithuanian consolidation

The demographic situation has been a crucial factor in determining the nationality policy of all three Baltic States. On the face of it, Lithuania appears to have made the most progress in consolidating a society, partly because of the country's relative ethnic homogeneity. Ethnic Lithuanians constitute more than 80 percent of that republic's population, Russians and Poles account for 8 percent and 7 percent respectively. In 1989, Lithuania passed a very liberal law that granted the right to citizenship to all permanent residents of the republic, regardless of nationality; therefore there is no significant non-citizen residential population (more than 90 percent of ethnic minorities used the opportunity provided by this law) [12]!

But it is not so easy with ethnic tensions in Lithuania. To Poles who know their history and literature, an idealized Lithuania is a part of idealized Polish past. Poles and Lithuanians continue to live as ethnic minorities in both countries. According to 1994 census figures, about 261500 Poles lived in Lithuania (making up 7 percent of the population), and, in 1993, about 9000 Lithuanians lived in Poland (making up less than 0,1 percent of the population) [13]. Both minorities are geographically concentrated: Poles in Lithuania live primarily on the strip of land in the east of the country near the Belarusian border, an area that includes the capital, Vilnius. Lithuanians in Poland live near the Lithuanian border, around Punske. The treatment of minorities was an issue often raised by politicians from both countries. Disputes ranged from minority access to education and the right to use the native language in official contexts to buying land and having property restored. Over the past few years, however, politicians and

commentators in both countries have begun to notice a convergence of interests. So, as supposed, the conflict with the Polish minority is occasionally artificially overstated.

Conclusions

There is no easy solution to the question of the status of the Russian-speaking minority in the two countries (Latvia and Estonia). Certainly, it will continue to hinder the development of normal ties with Russia. The Russian government has consistently accused both Latvia and Estonia of violating national minorities' human rights, while members of the Duma have even leveled accusation of "ethnic cleansing". Russia has made the signing of border treaties conditional on improving the lot of ethnic Russians. Because of the exaggerated nature and political motivation of the Russian accusations, the international community has tended to dismiss Russian claims. There is no doubt that civil rights are respected in Latvia and Estonia. However, the right to participate fully in the political process is denied to those who are not granted citizenship (as well as some other rights and duties).

In fact, the ethnic relations in Latvia and Estonia are the complex of problems and confrontations. These are the confrontation between native Balts and Russian-speakers, the confrontation between citizens and non-citizens and the confrontation institutionalized into party politics. Political nationalism is yet weak. Latvians and Estonians themselves do not feel so much attached to state, as they feel attached to their language and culture. There are few national celebrations, where all the people living

in Latvia could participate. The electorate is divided along ethnic lines, and stereotypes of ethnic character emphasize division between members of ethnicity and strangers. Those are just few, but very important problems Baltic societies must solve.

The world experience shows that confrontation policy does create stability neither in domestic politics nor in international. Opinion of most Baltic politicians is that confrontation has to be replaced by integration, and that the numerous Russian-speaking communities need to be integrated into society. Integration is not aimed to create an ethnically homogenous society, but it can lose its meaning when state institutions become divided along lingual and cultural principles. The state languages of Latvia and Estonia therefore must be a medium enlarging the identity of their non-native residents.

The integration of Russian-speaking population is one of the priorities of the current governments of Latvia and Estonia (for example, in spring of 1999 the conception of the Latvian state program of society integration was publicly discussed). This task is one of the preconditions for these countries' full membership in the European Union. At the same time, efficient integration is once again one of the investments for the country's future and should be seen as a positive preventive diplomacy. Loyal inhabitants, either citizens or foreigners, are clearly one of the assumption of the stable state. One day the Russian-speaking part of the Baltic States' population will be a part of the European Union and certainly, the European Union is interested in to have a loyal Russian-speaking minority.

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ЕТНІЧНІ ПРОБЛЕМИ В БАЛТІЙСЬКИХ ДЕРЖАВАХ

У статті розглядаються етнічні проблеми у сучасних державах Балтії. Напруженість міжетнічних відносин у Балтії є проблемою загальноєвропейської важливості, оскільки у їх розв'язанні зацікавлені Російська Федерація, що має на меті захист прав російського та російськомовного населення у цих державах, а також Європейський Союз, членами якого у недалекому майбутньому можуть стати країни Балтії. На сьогодні близько 27% латвійського та 33% естонського населення не мають громадянства цих держав; це означає, що ці люди відсторонені від формування політичної влади шляхом виборів і мають загалом менше прав, ніж громадяни. Така ситуація провокує напруження між Ригою-Таллінном та Москвою, а також створює перешкоди на їхньому шляху до об'єднаної Європи. Запропоновано можливе розв'язання проблеми, яке сприятиме створенню у країнах Балтії реальних громадянських суспільств, в яких інтеграційні процеси домінуватимуть над конфронтаційними.