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Is Russian Minority a State Security Risk in the Baltic States?

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Nearly a decade ago Russia took a turn from declarative compatriot protection discourse to a more programmatic approach consolidating large Russophone populations abroad and connecting them more with Russia by employing the newly emerged concept of *Russkiy Mir* as a unifying factor for Russophones around the world. Most academic debates have since focused on analyzing *Russkiy Mir* as Russia's soft power tool. This policy paper looks at Russia's compatriot policy from the perspective of the claimed compatriot populations themselves in Estonia and Latvia.

Russia's compatriot policy

Two processes form the dynamics of the relationship between Russia and the Russophone community in Estonia. One is Russia's practice of claiming the diaspora and its policies of 'diasporisation' vis-à-vis Russophones. Diasporisation in this analysis is perceived as an ethnification of transnational connections, so that communicative, social and cultural relations become organized and even institutionalized across sovereign boundaries (Denemark *et al* 2000). In this specific instance of diasporisation, Russia is the active agent that drives and guides the process. It involves the development of a political concept of compatriots (*соотечественники*), the elaboration of policy tools towards this group and the use of the ideological concept of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) as a unifying idea for all Russophones around the world. With a set of official policy programs, policy structures and political rhetoric Russia has taken the position of being the active kin-state (Brubaker 1996) of the Russophone population in the Baltics and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space.

Under Yeltsin, Russia's actions with regard to the large contingent of Russian speakers in the former Soviet republics remained limited to rhetorical reactions to the harsh social realities and in some cases deprivation of civic and political rights experienced by Russians in the often nationalizing neighboring states. With the rise of Vladimir Putin the compatriot policy attained a new significance in the country's political rhetoric. In his first annual address to the Federal Assembly in 2001, Putin stressed the priority to defend "the rights and interests of Russians

abroad, our compatriots in other countries” (Hedenskog & Larsson 2007, 33). The public rhetoric on the need to protect the rights of compatriots abroad became more visible than before and entered strategic foreign policy documents. In 2008 the protection of compatriots abroad was declared as a natural priority of Russian foreign policy in the newly adopted Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации 2008). In parallel the concept of ‘national interests’ also emerged. The interchangeable usage of ‘compatriot protection’ and ‘national interest protection’ raised questions about the role compatriots might play also in *servicing* ‘national interest’. This left analysts puzzled about the existence of stated and unstated objectives and the dual nature of the targets of the newly prioritized compatriot policy.

After the onset of the Ukraine-Russia crisis, the concept of a ‘divided nation’ and the need for consolidation of *Russkiy Mir* entered the frontline of political rhetoric and was employed in several foreign policy domains (Jurevičius 2015, 125). This has led many scholars to describe *Russkiy Mir* as Russia’s soft power project (Pelnēns 2010; Saari 2014, Zhurzhenko 2014). *Russkiy Mir* remains an instrumental tool and is “deployed whenever the Kremlin needs to penalize a neighbor for its geopolitical or political loyalty” and does not in fact form the driving idea behind decisions in Russia’s foreign policy (Laruelle 2015, 95). The instrumental character is further exemplified by the degree to which its application depends on contextual circumstances (Hedenskog & Larsson 2007, 43; Laruelle 2015, 95). The rhetoric of a ‘divided nation’ and consolidation of *Russkiy Mir* is highly malleable and surfaces in instances where the relationships between Russia and states with significant Russian populations become strained. Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan all have large Russian minorities, both in real numbers and as a percentage of the total population, but nevertheless, Russia has rarely if ever used the concept of *Russkiy Mir* and compatriot policy tools in the latter two countries.

Integration processes in the Baltics

While the vision for *Russkiy Mir* flourished in political rhetoric, the leaders of Russian compatriot policy knew that the people who were imagined to have historic or linguistic connections to Russia did not yet form a consolidated, powerful civilization of *Russkiy Mir* (Chepurin 2009; Baturina 2009). It takes more than just the mere ethno-demographic characteristic of speaking Russian language as a mother tongue, to constitute a strong consolidated diaspora. Equally important in determining the success of Russian diasporisation policy are the perceptions of the Russophones themselves and their attitudes and expectations towards Russia.

Research has shown (Cheskin 2015, Kallas 2016), that the cultural and linguistic connection of Russophones in the Baltics with Russia is maintained through language use in both private and public spaces, including via Russian-language education, through literature and especially through Russian media consumption. The identity of the Russian-speakers shows some signs of consolidating around these cultural preferences, notably the Russian language (Cheskin 2015, 74) and this opens up the possibility for Russia to exert a meaningful influence on identity formation of the Baltic Russian population.

At the same time the surveys testify to a strong territorial identification with Estonia and Latvia among Estonian-Russians and Latvian-Russians where the overwhelming majority of them identify Estonia and Latvia as their only homeland. In case of both countries the territorial identification with home state is noticeably strong among younger age groups (ages 15-24 and 25-34) where, as an example between 70-80% in various survey rounds of Integration monitoring study considered Estonia as their only homeland, and a negligible number identified Russia as their homeland (Integration monitoring 2015).

Territorial identification with Estonia is closely associated with everyday social, economic and cultural practices in the Estonian and Latvian territorial space. Due to long-term residence in

Estonia and Latvia, Russians identify with socio-economic structures and practices, the legal framework and everyday cultural practices of their home countries.

Access to good education, healthcare, social welfare and general public services has all contributed to the often difficult process of better integrating mostly older generations of Russian-speakers into Estonian and Latvian societies. The relative ease of conducting everyday life, the security of state support and the prospect of a European future for their children have bound Russians with Estonia and Latvia over the last three decades.

Exemplary case of identificational processes can be brought from Estonia here. Estonia's Russian-speaking community became irritated by a recent speech of the Estonian president, Kersti Kaljulaid, on Estonia's Independence Day on February 24th, where she emphatically called on fellow citizens "with a different cultural and linguistic background" to understand "(us), Estonians". The way she chose to address Russian-speakers living in the country – paraphrased as "you, who are different, need to understand us, Estonians" – signifies the lack of understanding in the president's office of the sensitivities of "the Russian question" from the perspective of Russian-speakers. However, even more significant is that the mishap of the president's address revealed a shift in self-understanding of Estonian Russians which has happened since Kaljulaid took office in 2016. What has changed with the self-perceptions of Russians in Estonia over the past five years?

To put it simply, they no longer appreciate it if they are addressed as "them". The reaction of the Russian-speaking audience strongly indicated that they prefer to be not addressed separately from "us, Estonians". It is a change from three decades ago when Russian-speakers were barely addressed in Independence Day speeches and their existence in the country was silently tolerated. Then, about a decade ago, a special reference was started to be made to "Russian-speaking compatriots" which generated applause of long-awaited attention. Today, as the reaction demonstrates, being singled out as somebody different has not become appreciated by the Russian-speakers.

The change came with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. At the time when events in Ukraine unfolded with extraordinary speed and caused unprecedented abruptions, the analysts looking at the events used the knowledge to extract the potential conflict spill-over to other postSoviet territories with significant Russian-speaking resident populations. Back then the belief was that Russian-speaking populations in Estonia and Latvia have long-term, overdue grievances towards their governments and that the Russian Federation's regime has applied a rather aggressive compatriots' policy to utilise this grievance. Adding to this, the act of Narva residents demanding linguistic and political autonomy through a 1993 referendum was often treated as a sign of separatism, which could lead one to conclude that events in Crimea and Donbas could be replayed in Estonia and Latvia, if Russia so chooses.

Yet, the reaction of Narva Russians to the annexation of Crimea – or, more accurately, the lack of reaction – surprised everybody. International journalists who travelled to Narva found a community that did not like the idea of being associated with the Russians in Crimea, and did not like questions about their loyalties to Estonia or their relations towards Russia. They did not want to talk because it would mean drawing attention to a group in need of special attention. They wanted to be left alone, to continue working and raising their families. The message they sent was clear: "Leave us alone. Estonia is not Ukraine, Narva is not Crimea and we are not like Russians in Russia".

Thirty-year search of identity

The process of self-identification as Estonian Russians and Latvian Russians, different from Russians in Russia or Ukraine, has been a bumpy ride. The collapse of the Soviet Union plunged the Russian-speaking residents of newly independent Baltic states into a profound identity crisis. One late summer day in 1991, the country they identified with the most – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, non-national centralised ideological empire spanning from the Baltic sea of

Northern Europe to the Pacific coast of Asia – no longer existed. Instead, they woke up to the realities of an aspiring small nation-state, whose political, cultural and social outlook were foreign to them. Overnight they went from being the dominant class to unwanted migrants, a minority group with no social, political or cultural status.

The loss of rights and privileges caused a rebellion against the independent Estonian and Latvian state, especially among the technocratic and political elites of the Russian-speaking community. Narva and Sillamäe, the most Russian-concentrated and most industrial Moscow-connected cities, conducted referendums in 1993 to declare special status zones in cities where the Russian language would continue to hold primary status. This was the last attempt to hold on to the status quo. The political power shifted quickly from the hands of the old Soviet ruling class to the new Estonian elite, backed by the western powers and not heavily resisted by Boris Yeltsin. Russians in Estonia had to choose their adaptation strategies: to resign and leave; to stay and resist, but risk marginalisation; to stay and try to get by; or, perhaps, to stay and to integrate.

All four strategies were tried. An estimated 100,000 Russian-speakers left Estonia and more than twice of that Latvia in the early 1990s, including Soviet army personnel and family members. At the same time, many tried to integrate – they passed language tests and acquired Estonian and Latvian citizenship. National language skills have been slowly but steadily improving among Russian-speakers and, together with this, a better understanding of history and culture of their home states.

Identity formation is a prolonged process influenced by a myriad of factors. The most significant factor in the adaptation of Russians in Estonia (and equally so in Latvia), has been economic growth and the delivery of public services. Access to good education, healthcare, social welfare and general public services have all contributed to the difficult process of integration and association with home country. The ease of conducting everyday life, social security, and the prospect of a European future for their children have bound Russians more with Estonia than Russia over the

last three decades. This is the major difference between Baltic states and Ukraine: the state delivers relatively good quality public services in return for the taxes that citizens pay.

Soviet-era generations, while not fully content with the situation they were thrown into, have nevertheless adapted fairly well. Even if there are still significant inequalities in terms of income, access to top jobs and opportunities in politics, the life which most Russians have built in Estonia and Latvia is stable. They have a lot to lose from sudden disruptions of the regime. There lies the reason behind the lack of response to events in Crimea – Russians have as much as Estonians or Latvians to lose from rocking the boat. There are still cultural and linguistic dividing lines – partly inherited from the essentialist approach to nationality from the Soviet era, and partly caused by the linguistically separate schooling. The plea not to be considered as outsiders is a view loudly represented by younger generations of Russian speakers and the reaction to the president's mishap reflects this clearly.

Pal Kolstoe, a researcher of post-Soviet Russia and surrounding states, forecasted back in 1995 that the development of a “new cultural self-understanding” of Russians in post-Soviet countries is the most probable trajectory (Kolstoe 1995). This trajectory is most evident in the democracies of Estonia and Latvia. While Kolstoe did not dare predict which form this cultural self-understanding would take, observations from Estonia and Latvia allow me to claim that the self-understanding of Estonian and Latvian Russians, rooted in their respective countries, integrated into the mainstream national cultures and societies is taking shape with younger generations. Having said all that, it is important to note that structural inequalities and citizenship issues remain unresolved. It is also important to note that Russia continues to have leverage on the identity formation of Russian-speakers via language and cultural projects, especially via informational operations using Russian-language social media and television. However, belonging to European common economic and political market together with economic growth and political stability in Baltic states, increase in national wealth have nevertheless weakened this leverage with each passing decade.

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