

Integration and divide: security aspects of the integration of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia in the light of Crimea

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Russia's annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine have roused many questions about the loyalty, political role and societal position of the Russian-speaking population in the states of the former Soviet Union. For many of those countries, Russia's use of indirect force, in combination with information warfare and mobilization of the Russian-speaking population, are threats that they have been warning of. For Estonian society, the question of the citizenship, loyalty and connection of the Russian-speaking population with Russia has been of domestic and international significance since Estonia's independence, in 1991.

Of Estonia's population of 1,4 million, the Russian-speaking portion constitutes slightly less than 30 %. The segment is not uniform, but fragmented; they have various origins, social and economic status, and relations to the rest of Estonian society, and reside in different parts of the country. About half of the Russian-speakers live in the Tallinn area and a third in Ida-Virumaa district, mostly in Narva, near the Russian border. Today, 53 % of the Russian-speaking population has Estonian citizenship, approximately 20 % have Russian citizenship, and another 20 % lack citizenship in any country, but reside in Estonia in possession of so-called "grey passports."

The position of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia has attracted considerable domestic and foreign attention and has clear implications for the country's security. The Estonian government has sought to integrate the Russian-speaking population in order to reduce societal tension. Meanwhile, the Russian government has been attempting to foil the integration measures, so as to be able to use the Russian-speakers both to influence Estonian society and as a tool in its own foreign policy. Russia's commitment to the Russian-speaking group has varied over the years and has been linked to its relations with Estonia and other EU countries.

In addition to its use of its influence over Russian-speakers in the Baltic states, Russia's main methods for gaining influence over those states have been through its attempts to control their economies, supply of energy and the media. In the case of Estonia, Russia's control of the media and its influence over Russian-speakers are most important. Moreover, Russia has systematically discredited the Estonian state and society in its desire to make the Russian-speaking population in Estonia loyal to Russia. Broadcasting Russian media in Estonia and seeking to influence the Russian-speaking associations, not just individuals, in Estonia, are two of its methods. Although the Russian

influence over the voluntary sector is limited, its influence via the media is significant. The majority of Russian speakers in Estonia mainly consume Russian-produced media, while only half also follow Estonian-language media. The Russian-speaking population's levels of confidence in Russian- and Estonian-produced media are equally high. The result is that Estonian- and Russian-speakers live in separate media spheres and thereby receive most of their news and their entertainment from sources that neither share the same values nor view of society. This division is the greatest single obstacle to deeper integration in Estonia.

Since the 1990s, plans to increase the supply of Russian-language media produced in Estonia have been attempted several times. In connection with Russia's annexation of Crimea, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have also discussed launching a Baltic, or European, Russian-language TV channel, in cooperation with the EU. None of these plans, however, have been realized, since the costs have been judged as very high and the possibilities for competing with the Russian media as minimal.

Estonia's integration policy of the 1990s was centred on the Estonian language and the dominant role of the Estonian culture in society. The individual was given a great responsibility for integration, even though the state provided education in Estonian. The objectives were to increase the knowledge of the Estonian language among the Russian-speakers and to increase the proportion with Estonian citizenship in the population. The policy was successful in the sense that the number of citizens in the total population has increased from 68 %, in 1992, to 84 %, in 2014, and the number of stateless persons decreased from 32 % to 6.5 %.

The integration policies, resulted in tension between the monocultural principles of the Estonian society and the multicultural character and values that guided the EU. This



tension increased with the increasing economic globalization, as an increasing number of Russian-speakers felt integrated into the Estonian society. At the same time, the number of Estonian-speakers who felt that the Russian language and the Russian-speakers posed a threat to the Estonian society decreased. The integration plan adopted in 2008 was therefore based on multicultural principles. The idea of personal responsibility and cultural domination was replaced by the idea of cultural pluralism and accompanied by an increase in support for Russian-speaking culture in Estonia.

Alongside public policy, most Estonian- and Russian-speakers also gather around the values of personal fulfillment, market economy and the rule of law. These values have also found support because of the lack of serious corruption in Estonia, especially in relation to the corruption and lawlessness experienced in Russia. Developments in Estonia and Latvia during the economic crisis of the early 2000s also show that the integration policies and market economic values were not seriously affected by the economic decline. The values and developments in the Russian society, in this situation, were not an option for the majority of Russian-speakers.

The Estonian integration policy has suffered two major setbacks, the social unrest that occurred in central Tallinn after the relocation of a Soviet monument, in 2007, and the disagreement over the requirement that 60 % of the teaching in Estonian schools should be conducted in Estonian. Both issues have divided the Estonian- and Russian-speaking groups, but none of the setbacks have seriously affected the positive direction of the integration.

According to the Estonian *Integration Monitoring* studies, which weighed linguistic, social and political aspects of integration for 2011, 21 % of the Russian-speakers in Estonia were well-integrated in all of those aspects, while 16 % were socially and politically well-integrated, but had poorer language skills. 13 % had good language skills, but were less integrated, and had a critical attitude towards both the Estonian and Russian political institutions. 28 % had limited language skills and participated in politics only at the local level, whereas 22 % were not at all integrated. These figures show the fragmentation among the Russian-speakers. Surveys among the Russian-speaking population, however, tend to show a higher level of integration. On average, 60 % of the Russian-speaking population answer that they feel moderately or well integrated into Estonian society, while only 10 % feel that they are not integrated at all. The majority

of the Russian-speakers' also feel that discrimination against Russian speakers' has declined, and that Estonia is their only homeland. In general, the Russian-speakers' accept the status that Estonian has as the official language in Estonia, even if they would like to see more Russian used in public. About half of the Russian-speaking men also claim that they would defend Estonia if the country was threatened.

In surveys performed after the Russian annexation of Crimea, almost 23 % of the Russian speakers' in Estonia supported Russia's annexation and the Russian policy of defending Russian interests, and the Russian-speaking population abroad, with all means. 25 % of the Russian-speakers did not support Russia's actions, while the majority could not, or did not want to, take sides. These figures should not be interpreted as claiming that the Russian-speakers would support similar actions in Estonia. They should, instead, be judged as a sign of the Russian and Estonian media's impact on Russian-speakers. It is worth noting that the opposition to Russia's actions was larger among older people and people in eastern Estonia, who often are less integrated, but most probably would be more affected, if Russia were to take action against Estonia. During the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, the resistance to Russia's involvement has increased to almost 50 %, which is most probably a consequence of how the conflict has developed, while the support of Russian policies is unchanged.

Currently, the Russian-speaking group in Estonia lacks a clear leadership that could represent its interests. Politically, the majority of Russian-speakers have voted for the Estonian *Keskerakond* party, which has its roots in the movements that struggled for Estonian independence from Soviet Union. But even if *Keskerakond* still holds its grip on the Russian-speaking voters, it has begun to lose to other parties that campaign in areas dominated by Russian-speakers and that nominate Russian speakers to prominent positions. In addition, a new generation of representatives of the Russian-speaking group has emerged in the media. These are most often young and well-integrated women, and often promote integration-friendly ideas. Even if they see problems with the Estonian society and the integration policies, they claim that the Estonian society has the resources to manage those problems by itself. The rise of this group is a clear sign of the ongoing split in the Russian-speaking community, between the integrated and the less integrated, but also to some extent between the generations.

The increased integration of Russian-speakers has caused a polarization in the group. While the majority of Russian speakers feel that Estonia is their only homeland, a small number do not feel that they are a part of Estonian society at all. Among them number are also those who primarily identify themselves with Russia and Russian society. This group may be regarded as particularly susceptible to the worldview and social order that is mediated by the Russian media.

The ability to mobilize those people for pro-Russian protests and actions should not be underestimated, especially in Ida-Virumaa district, where the Estonian state presence is weak and the surrounding society's opposition to the pro-Russian actions is smaller. The experience of the Russian annexation of Crimea, but also of ethnic-based separatism in Western Europe, such as in the Basque country, or Northern Ireland, shows that the group is large enough to form a core that is capable of organizing social and armed disturbances. The core can also be expected to have enough support among the Russian-minded population to be able to obtain functioning logistics and places to hide, between campaigns.

Although a large portion of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia says that they are prepared to defend Estonia, many would also stay passive in a conflict between the State and those involved in the unrest.

In the current situation, the Estonian society lacks political conflicts that are tense enough to spark such unrest or rebellion, and Russia has not managed to create them. Estonian- and Russian-speaking groups on the same social level have suffered about as much from the recent economic crises. The most prominent differences in social and economic development can be seen particularly in the regional differences between Ida-Virumaa district, which is dominated by Russian-speakers, and other Estonian cities. However, the differences in social and economic development, between the east and other parts of Estonia, are less than they are between eastern Estonia and the bordering parts of Russia. This should weaken the ability to create protests around social issues. In recent years, the Estonian government has also improved the infrastructure and business climate in eastern Estonia, in cooperation with the EU and commercial interests.

In conclusion, the situation of the Russian-speaking groups in Estonia does not differ significantly from that of many groups of labor immigrants in other Western European

countries. That is with the exception that the Russian-speakers in Estonia have become a tool in Russian foreign policy, and that the international attention to the Russian-speakers' situation in the Baltic countries has led to greater political awareness, and a more active policy of integration, than has been the case in most other European countries.

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This briefing is based on the report *Integration och splittring Säkerhetspolitiska aspekter på den ryskspråkiga befolkningens integration i Estland* FOI-R--4004--SE , and has been produced by the FOI project on Security in the Neighbourhood, which is the nucleus of the Baltic Sea region security programme at FOI Defence Analysis