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National minorities in Estonia – myths and reality.

After collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, Estonia was a permanent target of Russian criticism regarding to the situation with Russian minority. Some Russians, who live in Estonia also believe that they are discriminated. Is it true? And if not, why do they think so? It is not an easy question.

Estonia has created all conditions for naturalization of stateless persons. As a result the number of stateless persons is steadily decreasing. Since the restoration of Estonian independence more than 150 thousand people have received Estonian citizenship. Some people have received also Russian, Ukrainian or other citizenship. Statistic is self-evident - in 1992 there were 32% of stateless persons in Estonia, in 1999 - 13%. Currently, the number of persons without citizenship is less than 8% of the Estonian population.

The other news from 13th of October 2011 states that the number of persons with undefined status has decreased to 98500 persons. And the number of new Estonian citizens has increased by 1072 persons in 2011.¹ In 2010, 1100 persons got Estonian citizenship but the highest number of person 22700 goes back to the year 1996, shortly after the new Estonian Citizenship Act was introduced in 1995.²

There are several practical and non practical reasons why these persons with grey passport³ (persons with undefined citizenship) have not applied for Estonian citizenship.

We believe they are the following:

¹ The available numbers date on 13.10.2011 and the number can increase by the end of the year.

² More about the changes in the Estonian Citizenship Act is available in Järve, P., Poleschuck, V., Report on Estonia, 2010, EUI, Eudo Citizenship Observatory, available from <http://eudo-citizenship.eu/country-profiles/?country=Estonia>

³ Grey passport will be given out to person with nondefined citizenship according to the provisions laid down in §2 p 5 Isikut tõendavate dokumentide seadus, RT I 1999,25, 365.



The first reason - majority of those people who wish to obtain Estonian citizenship, have received it already. Remaining very often simply do not want to get it. In recent years some pragmatic considerations were added. Stateless persons with Estonian residence permit can travel without visas to the Schengen zone countries, as well as to Russia. Very often stateless persons have relatives in Russia, that's why it is very essential for them.

The second reason is imperial mentality which was created by the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union Russians were considered as a leading nation. Although officially all nationalities were equal, in reality Russians were always more privileged. Of course when they were suddenly in a situation where they should be like the others, it was a step back in comparison to their former privileged status. As a result there is a certain collapse of identity. Ca. 86% of the stateless persons said they did not want to get citizenship, as they think it is humiliating to pass the language exam. If you believe speaking the language of the country to which you've moved is humiliating, it is a matter of attitude, not the problem of the country. We believe it is normal to live in a country and speak the language.

The third reason - some stateless persons mistakenly believe that the naturalisation procedure is very complicated, but in Estonia it is easy to get citizenship, if you want. There are two exams: a minimum level language test and basic questions about the constitution (you can consult the text of Constitution which is provided at time of exam) - a normal procedure that is similar in many countries; it is even much easier than in other countries including Russia. Furthermore those who successfully passed the language exam were paid back the money they'd spent on the language courses.

We believe that the main problem of Russian in Estonia is an imperial mentality which we have discussed already. Another important reason is Putin's mass media propaganda. Sure propaganda approach is absolutely hypocritical. In Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan the situation of Russians is horrible. It is unbelievable what is happening there, but Russia is completely silent about them, because those states are considered as its allies. People who do not speak the Estonian language are not competitive in the market. They do not read



Estonian newspapers or watch Estonian TV and they are very influenced by Russian propaganda which is available in Estonia through Russian newspapers and TV and very strong now. We read and watch Russian news every day - it is the Soviet Union Cold war rhetoric, they use exactly the same phrases, the same methods of influence and it is very scary. Of course if you follow such influence, the result is a mentality of victimization.

There are people who take difficulties as challenge, and there are those who always find excuses for failures. Here the Russians are offered a prepared excuse presented for them by Russian propaganda; discrimination can always be referred to as an explanation to failure. Actually life is not like that, there are a lot of successful Russian-speaking people here, e.g. in the medical faculty half of the students are Russian speaking. Half of 10 most rich persons in Estonia are also Russian speakers.

We are sure that at the moment, there is no institutional discrimination in Estonia. Meanwhile, there are two forms of discrimination – institutional and personal. As for the personal variant, it exists to an extent in any country. In every country ca 20% of the population is quite xenophobic; it is probably no different in Estonia. However, if discrimination happens, there are legal measures to combat it, equally available to all. Some Russians say they do not trust Estonian courts, but they can always go to an European court of human rights. Meanwhile in ECHR there have been no proved cases of discrimination in Estonia. Why? Probably, we have more speculations about discrimination than real facts...

To compare let's analyze the situation with Ukrainians in Estonia. Ukrainian minority here is the second biggest minority after Russians - 2,1 % of the whole Estonian population. There are strong Ukrainian organization here, Ukrainian Cultural Centre, Greek-Catholic church (the Uniate Church), and a school for children which is also open to Estonians - it is like a museum, a very interesting place. The Centre was supported by ex-president Arnold Ruutel, and also by our president Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who has been there many times. Ukrainians are very appreciated here, and Cultural Centre has got very essential support from



the Estonian government – much more than Ukrainian centers in all neighboring states.

The problem is that some Ukrainians in Estonia during Soviet Union times have been also heavily assimilated to Russians; they have lost their Ukrainian identity. They don't speak Ukrainian, they have a mentality more like Russians, they may sometimes have these identity problems. But those Ukrainians who retained their Ukrainian identity, they do not have any problems. It's quite interesting, because as we talk about minorities and so-called problems with minorities, the problems are only with Russian minorities. Other minorities like Tatars, Georgians or Jews feel very comfortable here, they have no problems.