

**COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE**

237 FORD HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

(202) 225-1901

**RUSSIANS IN ESTONIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS**

*A REPORT PREPARED BY THE STAFF OF THE  
COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE*

*SEPTEMBER 1992*

## PREFACE

In summer 1991, the Helsinki Commission examined the situation of Russians in Estonia, in the form of a chapter of a larger report on national minorities in the CSCE context.<sup>1</sup> The present report is essentially an update, and was occasioned by the most significant event affecting the status of Russians in Estonia since the country regained its independence in September 1991. In February 1992, Estonia passed a law that restored citizenship only to citizens of the interwar Estonian Republic and their descendants. Consequently, the great majority of Estonia's Russians, most of whom came to Estonia after its forcible incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940, did not automatically become citizens of Estonia and could not vote in the country's first national election after the restoration of its independent statehood, held on September 20, 1992.

Estonia's citizenship law and the resultant exclusion of about 40 percent of the resident population from voting elicited from Russians, both inside and outside Estonia, charges of discrimination and human rights violations. Russian government officials and parliamentarians protested Estonia's treatment of Russians in international forums, in the media, and in Washington and other Western capitals. Considering their allegations of human rights violations, the Helsinki Commission sent two staffers to Estonia to talk to Russians and Estonians and study the situation on the ground before the election and on election day. Their primary mission was *not* to observe the election per se and this is not an election report; in fact, the Commission believed that the Estonian election authorities were quite capable of organizing free and fair elections. Rather, the Commission hoped to examine the reasons for, and possible consequences of, Estonia's deliberate decision not to give citizenship and the vote to some 40 percent of the population.

The following is a report of the Commission staff's investigation. Their research and conclusions are based on interviews and discussions conducted in Tallinn, Kohtla-Jarve, Sillamae and Narva. The last three cities are in northeast Estonia and are mostly populated by Russians.

**Note:** The word "Russians" in this report, unless otherwise qualified, refers to the non-Estonian portion of the population and therefore includes not only Russians (some 90 percent of non-Estonians, and therefore about 30 percent of the population), but also Ukrainians, Jews, and many others of non-Estonian nationality. Often called "the Russian-speaking population," most of them do not know Estonian or know it poorly. The amount of time they have spent in Estonia varies; some came decades ago, some a few years ago.

The Commission would like to express its appreciation to the Ambassador and staff of the U.S. Embassy in Tallinn for their excellent support and cooperation.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Minority Rights: Problems, Parameters, and Patterns in the CSCE Context*, pp. 85-97.



## SUMMARY

- Comprising about 40 percent of the population, most Russians came to Estonia after its forcible incorporation into the Soviet Union. Since 1988, many of them have been nervous about their rights, as Estonia asserted its sovereignty and then openly came out for independence. The February 1992 citizenship law passed in newly independent Estonia denied these Russians automatic citizenship and voting rights, although Estonia has offered non-citizens quite liberal procedures for obtaining citizenship through naturalization. The issue of the status of Russians came to prominence when Estonia scheduled its first free parliamentary elections for September 1992, at a time when most Russians, even had they applied and fulfilled all the requirements, would not have been able to acquire citizenship and to vote.
- The failure to grant Russians automatic citizenship has elicited charges, especially from the Russian government and legislature, that Estonia has violated the human rights of its Russian-speaking population. Helsinki Commission staff visited several cities in Estonia's heavily Russian-populated northeast region to gauge the mood of the population and to observe the election.
- Some Russians deeply resented being unable to vote, and Russians generally would have preferred to receive the option of automatic citizenship. At the same time, most Russians are clearly more focused on economic issues. They were more worried about possible unemployment and rising prices than about voting in this election. Even Russian ex-communist municipal authorities in Narva, who had previously emphasized inter-ethnic relations as the main cause of tension, acknowledged that economic issues are paramount for their constituents.
- There is, however, a link between the Russians' status as non-citizens and their economic anxieties. Especially troubling for them is the lack of clarity about the rights of non-citizens: will they be able to work, get their pensions, buy and sell their apartments and dachas, and participate in privatization? To allay some of these fears, Estonian law already stipulates that non-citizens will enjoy the same economic benefits as non-citizens, although non-citizens will not be allowed to own land under proposed privatization plans.
- Commission staff members were also struck by the widely held belief among Estonia's Russians -- both ordinary people and the local political elite -- that they and their concerns are being manipulated by politicians in the Russian capital. Nevertheless, even if some in Moscow hope to benefit from continuing tension in Estonia, Russia's leadership apparently does not wish to see serious trouble, much less a Trans-Dniestria-type situation. Russian troops are quietly being removed from Estonia, even while the negotiations on their removal are stalled. If influential politicians in Moscow do not try to aggravate inter-ethnic relations in Estonia, that country would have a much better chance of building good relations with Russians, both at home and abroad.

■ Despite predictions of trouble arising from Russian resentment over being denied the vote, the Estonian elections held on September 20, 1992, came off without any violence, demonstrations or disruptions. Voters elected a new, center-right, 101-seat parliament that will choose between the two presidential candidates who won the most popular votes.

■ Estonia's newly-elected parliament (*Riigikogu*) now must deal with the "Russian question." Everyone faces unavoidably tough economic times in the transition to a market economy. But the parliament must legislatively ameliorate, if not remove, the sources of anxiety for Russians: clarifying some still undeveloped procedures for obtaining Estonian citizenship, and specifying and guaranteeing both political and economic rights of non-citizens. Estonia must also develop programs to teach Estonian to non-speakers, which has been done inconsistently up to now. Integrating the Russians into Estonia will be a vital long-term project essential to political stability, economic development and forging good-neighborly relations with the gigantic Russian Federation.

## BACKGROUND

### The Citizenship Law

Aspects of the history of the Russian presence in Estonia were addressed in the Commission publication *Minority Rights: Problems, Parameters, and Patterns in the CSCE Context*. As noted in that report, much of the Russian community was already dissatisfied with the 1989 Estonian language law, which required that persons employed in responsible public positions be able to speak Estonian by 1993.

After Estonia declared sovereignty and it became clear that the country's ultimate goal was the full restoration of its independence, the issue of "who will be a citizen of Estonia?" came to the fore. The question was not resolved until Estonia regained its independence, and the answer was a compromise between a minority (obviously, mostly Russian) of legislators favoring blanket citizenship (the "zero variant") for all residents, and Estonian nationalists who did not wish to see any citizenship law passed until after a new, freely chosen, i.e., post-Soviet, National Assembly had been elected.

As adopted by the Supreme Council, the Law on Citizenship is based on Estonia's 1938 Law on Citizenship, with amendments as of June 16, 1940, and an accompanying resolution on implementation of February 26, 1992. Accordingly, persons who were citizens as of June 1940 or their direct descendants are eligible for immediate citizenship. Citizenship may also be granted to persons who "provide particularly valuable service to the national defense or society of the Republic of Estonia or who are widely known for their talents, knowledge or work."

Persons who moved to Estonia after 1940 are eligible to apply for naturalization under the following conditions: 1) two year residency beginning March 30, 1990 -- the day that Estonia declared its intention to restore statehood; 2) knowledge of the Estonian language; 3) acceptance of an oath of loyalty. Ineligible for naturalization are: 1) active duty foreign military personnel; 2) persons employed by the USSR security and intelligence services; 3) persons without a legal source of income.

Following application for naturalization, the applicant must reside an additional year in Estonia, in effect creating a further one-year "waiting period." It is this one-year waiting period, during which the legislature decided to hold the presidential and parliamentary elections, that created much of the controversy over "second class citizenship" and "human rights violations."

Adding to this concern is the fact that the specific language requirements have not been determined by the Estonian government. The conventional wisdom is that knowledge of about 1,500 words will be required. (Note: although specific language qualifications for naturalization have not been formulated, the professional language examination prescribed

under the above-mentioned Estonian Language Law has, according to a number of sources, been allowed to be used as a substitute for some applicants.)

Throughout the visit, Commission staffers got the impression that procedures for obtaining citizenship, if not entirely clear in statute, may be even less clearly applied in practice. In one case, a naturalized Russian and self-taught Estonian speaker did not know upon what grounds he had received his certificate of citizenship -- passing the professional language test or his "services to the Estonian republic." According to Estonian city officials in Kohtla-Jarve, as of August 1, 1992, 53 persons had received certificates of citizenship through naturalization, but no one was sure on what basis, or how many persons had applied. This uncertainty is not helped by the rumor mill and some elements of the Russian language press, which, according to local sources, assiduously reports every rumor of alleged chicanery in application of the language requirements for Russians.

Despite these problems, as of June 28, 1992, when Estonian citizens voted in the referendum on the constitution, about 6,000 non-citizens had applied for naturalization. Participants in the referendum were also asked whether these applicants should be enfranchised for the elections, but they voted down the idea.

Since the provisions of the citizenship law could allow many Russians to acquire citizenship by March 1993, permitting them to vote in the next parliamentary election scheduled for 1995, Estonia's next parliament could theoretically reflect the country's actual demography, with some 40 percent of the legislators of "Russian" background. The question arises, therefore, why Estonia -- facing that theoretical possibility -- decided, in effect, to disenfranchise 40 percent of its population and stand accused of human rights violations, when all that might be gained would be a few years of a virtually all-Estonian parliament.

Estonians officials have offered several answers to that question. First, after 50 years of Soviet occupation, Estonia is now reconstituting its independent statehood, and its 1938 citizenship law therefore had to be reintroduced. Moreover, in reestablishing their statehood, the Estonians were determined to control events, make the rules and not yield to the *faits accomplis* of demography changed by decisions made in Moscow. One other reason was the painful legacy of 1940, and the manner of Estonia's entry into the USSR: Estonia "voted" in fraudulent elections to enter the USSR with Soviet troops standing at the ready to ensure the desired outcome, and Estonians did not want to give Russians the vote while Russian troops are still in Estonia.

## THE VISIT

### The Setting

Five major coalitions, three smaller groupings and two separate parties fielded candidates for the 101-seat parliament (National Assembly). The distribution of seats in the National Assembly is according to a fairly complicated individual and "party list" system, somewhat similar to the Finnish system.

There were four candidates for President: Arnold Ruutel, former Communist Party chairman of the Estonian SSR, leading a "Secure Home" coalition dominated by former factory managers and Party officials; former Prime Minister Lennart Meri, supported by both the conservative "Pro-Patria" coalition and right-leaning social democratic "Moderates"; Tartu University (and formerly University of California at Irvine) professor Rein Taagepera, heading the "Popular Front" ticket associated with former Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar; and, former political prisoner Lagle Parek, the nominee of the Estonian National Independence Party, considered the most conservative (or radical, by some observers) of the major factions.

A Presidential candidate needed over 50 percent of the popular vote to win. Otherwise, the Parliament selects one of the top two contenders.

Although the Estonian-Russian ethnic issue received prominent coverage in the foreign press -- both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published articles earlier indicating that ethnic Russians in Estonia were being relegated to second-class citizen status -- it did not play a major role in the campaign. Interestingly, some of Isamaa's strongest support came from Russian businessmen appreciative of the party's business-oriented, free market approach to economics. The "Popular Front" was somewhat stigmatized by claims that Edgar Savisaar had tried to maneuver the citizenship law to include a large segment of the Russian community, and thus expand the Popular Front's voting base.

Most of the election debates centered around the direction of Estonia's economic revival -- whether, in the words of one veteran Estonia-watcher, the nation would go "bourgeois" or "social welfare." Estonian authorities were aware of the threats of violence in the northeast, but were determined not to be intimidated into retreating.

Parek herself had indicated that she had no particular desire to become President, but had agreed to lead the National Independence Party ticket on behalf of the party's National Assembly candidates. Taagepera at one point told voters that they could choose any of his rivals over him, except for Ruutel.



A few days before election day, candidate Meri was challenged by charges that his father had been a KGB informer, and that Meri himself had written paeans to Marxist-Leninism. These charges seemed to have little bearing on the election campaign, however, in a country facing severe economic hardship.

## Meetings

### *The Russian non-vote*

Commission staffers met with a variety of Estonian government and non-government officials and individual members of the Russian-speaking community to gauge their attitudes toward the upcoming elections and the citizenship issue. While there was a consistency in many of the observations and complaints, there was much less homogeneity in opinion than might have been expected.

Moreover, there are significant sociological and political differences among the three major Russian-ethnic urban centers of the northeast -- Narva, Sillamae, and Kohtla-Jarve -- to say nothing of busy, Westernized, half-Russian, half-Estonian Tallinn. One experienced observer suggested that Kohtla-Jarve, with its deteriorating industries, 80-20 percent Russian-Estonian ethnic mix, newly-minted youthful police force and high crime rate, presented a more volatile situation than Narva, where, for all their headline-grabbing intransigence, city officials take seriously their ability to keep the city under control.

Some Russians, particularly representatives of the Russian Democratic Movement in Tallinn who had supported Estonian independence, were angry at the denial of citizenship and disenfranchisement (in northeast Estonia, few Russians make a pretense of having supported Estonian independence). The vast majority of those interviewed, however, were less concerned about the elections than they were about their economic prospects for the approaching winter, the "uncertainty" of their future status, and that of their children, than voting in Sunday's elections. Even Narva city officials made it clear that they were much more concerned about the economic situation than the September 20 vote (although in an apparently symbolic protest, Estonian flags did not fly on election day in Narva, as required on a national holiday). All agreed, however, that if the Estonian government did not resolve the citizenship issue promptly, and with the expectation of a worsening economic situation, tensions would surely increase.

As for learning Estonian, some respondents expressed willingness to take lessons, but "we haven't had any motivation"; others seemed to cling to the hope that some sort of arrangement would spare them the necessity. In Sillamae (3 percent Estonian population, with 500 eligible voters out of a population of 21,000) city officials claimed that the entire Russophone police force would be dismissed as of February 1, 1992 if the language law stayed unchanged. In many of Kohtla-Jarve's city enterprises, while Estonian

language courses were being offered, "lots of people study, but lots drop out." The officials reported rumors that requirements for persons over 65 would be dropped.

An interesting note was sounded by a naturalized ethnic Russian who had received citizenship for "services to the Estonian Republic." He drew attention to the fact that while many observers focus attention upon elderly Russians who cannot speak Estonian and probably never will, few consider the plight of elderly Estonians in the northeast who are expected to survive in a Russophone society.

Questioned about possible secessionist sentiment in the northeast, city officials in Sillamae claimed that this notion was thought up by Tallinn to discredit the Russian political leadership in the northeast in the eyes of the Estonian population. As far as Moscow's support for their plight, "we are just being exploited by Moscow," they declared. Anger against Moscow was also expressed by a city official in Narva who described futile attempts to obtain from bureaucrats in Moscow's economic and trade ministries licenses to permit the import of raw materials for factories.

#### *Russian citizenship movement*

Approximately 14,000 Russians living in Estonia have taken advantage of a Russian citizenship law that allows individuals to become Russian citizens simply by signing a form affirming the acceptance of Russian citizenship and turning it in to a Russian Embassy or Consulate. The leader of this movement stated that many Russians had taken this step in view of paragraph 5 of the Russian Citizenship law that obliges Russia to "protect" (*pokrovitelstvovat*) citizens abroad. He said that while little protection had emerged from Moscow, the administration of St. Petersburg mayor Sobchak was allowing Russian students from Estonia to continue their free education in St. Petersburg. The interlocutor did not discount the threat of violence if the economic situation continued to worsen.

#### *The Russian "Generation Gap"?*

Representatives of the Estonian National Independence Party (considered the most "hardline" on Russians), suggested that contrary to conventional wisdom, the older and middle generations of Russians are not as hostile to Estonian citizenship as is supposed. Many of them have developed roots in Estonia and have learned some Estonian. The younger Russians, by contrast, usually thought to desire citizenship in a Western-oriented Baltic state, consider Estonians and the Estonian language an inconvenience, with citizenship too much trouble to acquire. In fact, given their commercial interests, the second language they want to learn is English.

### *More on Moscow*

A former Estonian government minister expressed the view that Moscow is controlling events in the northeast, and has told the leadership there to "sit tight" for the time being, since Russia needs Western foreign assistance. When Russia regains its economic health, he predicted, things will heat up in the northeast. He maintained that the recent precipitous drop in the value of the ruble means that the Russian government is still spending huge amounts on the arms industry.

### *Election Day, September 20, 1992*

Commission staffers visited four polling places in northeast Estonia, two closer to Tallinn (northwest), and one in Tallinn itself. As noted previously, Commission staffers were less concerned with actually monitoring the election process than to gauge the mood both of Estonian voters and Russians in the area.

Predictions of violence in Narva turned out to be completely unfounded. Voting at a large central polling place (there were four in the city) was orderly, while outside, non-voting residents went on about their business. There was no indication of strengthened security measures.

Some voters were hopeful that their candidate(s) would make a difference. Others were less optimistic, but felt obliged to take part in their country's first truly free multi-party elections in post-Soviet Estonia. Asked about the attitude of their Russian neighbors toward not being able to vote, most confirmed that it was of little import compared to their economic plight, and that "we are all suffering, all of us."

Polling places featured a separate table for representatives of the local Citizens Commission. Individuals who had not responded to the nationwide census/citizenship mailing in June and had therefore not been registered to vote, could, with documentation proving citizenship eligibility, fill out the registration cards and vote. In one polling place, the applicant's word was sufficient. "If we check and find out he wasn't telling the truth, we'll cross him off the list," said the Commission representative. In Tallinn, the applicant was required to go to the Citizenship office and secure a specific permission slip.

### *Results*

Incomplete election tallies for president gave Arnold Ruutel approximately 42 percent of the vote, Lennart Meri 30 percent, Rein Taagepera 24 percent, and Lagle Parek 4 percent. Since no candidate gained over 50 percent, the selection of either Ruutel or Meri will be decided in the National Assembly, scheduled to open on October 5.

