

Problems of Ethnic Integration in Post-Soviet Baltic States

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In order to understand the problem, it is important to recognise the relational dimension in the non-Russian successor states. The political practice of a nationalising is very much obvious in these states, which can be gauged from the fact that despite acquiring statehood in 1991, the elites of the majority nationalities in each successor state are still devoted to the task of securing a dominant place for their nation within the cultural, economic and political matrix life of their “historic” homelands. Policies designed to promote the language, culture, economic well being and even political hegemony of the core nation produce obvious cultural threats for the minorities. And, it is particularly evident in the Baltics because of the very obvious distinctions between the natives and the Russian minorities.[1]

According to the last Soviet population census of 1989. The total number of people of Russian-based nationalities outside Russia was 28.2 million, with ethnic Russians constituting nearly 90 per cent of this total.[2] According to the 1989 census, the proportion of Russians in the total population in the Baltic republics is, like this in Latvia, 34 percent in Estonia, 30 percent and in Lithuania, 9.3 percent.[3]

It is important to note that many Russians who permanently settled in non-Russian states can be rightly regarded as native inhabitants, since they were born in those republics. The general pattern of Russian migration into non-Russian belts, which goes back to the period of the 1930s to the 1950s, reveals that the then Soviet authorities promoted large-scale migration of workers, pre-dominantly Russians, to areas of prospective industrial development in the Baltic States. Apart from economic considerations, this centralised effort was motivated by a political goal: Russification of the ethnic periphery. This planned migration was a major factor in the process of industrialisation in many non-Russian areas of the Soviet Union, leaving its lasting imprint on the ethnic composition of the working class. Even now the Baltic Republics rely heavily on Russian workers for their industrial potential.

After independence of the Republics, the deteriorating socio-economic conditions of Russian minorities in the Baltic Republic is closely related to the radical change in their political status. All of them now have to rethink their social status and assimilate new patterns of social behaviour characteristics of minority groups. Russians in the Baltic States indicate a higher level of identification with their republics than do Russians in other regions.

The issue of citizenship is vital indeed for the minorities and it is not only for political reasons. Besides being excluded from political life through denial of suffrage, non-citizens expect to receive unequal treatment economically, which means they might be discriminated

against in the privatisation process and against freedom of movement. Thus, in each Baltic country, Russians and other non-indigenous settlers demanded automatic citizenship. But the natives were reluctant to meet this demand especially in Estonia and Latvia, where outsiders almost outnumbered natives. Nonetheless, there were movements in 1992-93 towards accommodation of native peoples and non-indigenous residents in Estonia and Lithuania. The government of the three Baltic Republics replied that citizenship is a privilege, not a right and that human rights were vigorously upheld in their nations.[4] Each Baltic government welcomed external observers in February 1993. Estonia and CSCE (Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe) announced that CSCE would establish watch groups to monitor human rights in the Baltic and urged all concerned parties to abstain from any official declaration or action that might undermine confidence building with the Baltic States.

Russian minorities in the Baltics

I. Latvia

About 7,00,000 people in Latvia or one-third of the population are Russian speakers.[5] Latvia sees a linkage between its long-term integration programme for ethnic Russian and its strategic foreign policy goal of achieving integration into the European Union. But still, Latvian legislature acts undeniably distinguish the rights of citizens and non-citizens, although there is no feature of legislation, which curbs the political, civil and economic rights of non-citizens. It was the collapse of the Soviet state and the consequent shift of the power between ethnic groups, which led to ethnic revival in the peripheries. It also explains the early moves by the Russians to assimilate themselves linguistically. The “tipping of” the Latvian population in favour of self-assertions and mobilization brought hundreds of thousands of people into the political fray. Thus national revival in Latvia was more contingent on apprehensions of possible repression. It was not contingent upon any conviction of the Latvians that they were a nation.[6] It was not the long struggle of ethnic entrepreneurs seeking to revive a language and culture. The Latvian nationalists only vied for a radical change in the ethnic balance of power. They were overawed due to several factors such as higher percent of Russian-speaking residents, higher rates of inter-ethnic marriage and greater Soviet Military presence. This, in relation to the Russian speaking community, was not destined to lead automatically to any downgrading of their status or to any particular pressure for assimilation.

However, there was always a distinct ethnic agenda. The early appeals for support, from both the dissident and mainstream groups, were defined in terms of the right of national self-determination and protecting the linguistic and cultural rights of small nations. The Latvians shifted to a pro-active agenda of minority integration. It came directly from the restorationist concept of post-independence state-building process. This was supposed to offer the Latvians leverage as to defining and controlling the ethnic pluralism in the state. The “restorationist model” propagated by the Latvian citizens’ committees and later the citizens’ congress, stressed Latvia’s illegal occupation by the Soviet Union in 1940 and therefore the illegality of all that had changed in the republic in the course of 50 years. This included demographic changes. The policy of restorationism was designed to counter the pressures from the large numbers of Russian speakers to settle for a bi-national state.

In late 1992, the Latvian government began the controversial policy of registration of population and subsequently the Soviet era permits of several thousand non-citizen residents were revoked. In the late 1993, there was a debate on a final citizenship law where the nationalists argued for strict annual limits on naturalisation process of the non-citizens. This provision was adopted but later it was annulled by the then Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis.

Because of being at the receiving end of the Latvian ethno-political agenda, Russians in Latvia were wary about their prospects in the early 1990s. Still there were latent hopes because of which they remained non-respondent to calls by some groups, such as the pro-Soviet Interfront, to resist Latvian nationalism. In particular, many Russians spoke from the vantage point of being long-term residents of Latvia, whose roots far predated the Soviet takeover in 1940. Moreover, greater linguistic similarities between the Latvian and Russian languages had prompted many more Russians to learn Latvian than was the case with Estonia. Finally, large percentage of Russians in Riga, the Latvian Capital, and in all of the country's major cities would also prompt moderation.

The Russian non-citizens were as aware were as the Latvians of the ethno-political impact of the new citizenship laws; nevertheless, they continued to exercise their rights through legal measures. Russia, although often vocal in its support for Russians and non-citizens in Latvia, were either unable or unwilling to exert full pressure on Latvia.

The incentives and disincentives for Russians to integrate themselves into Latvian society did not develop as rapidly as in the neighbouring Estonia. Delays in Latvia's adoption of naturalisation requirements for non-citizens meant that the pressures for integration among Russians came more from negative sanction than through positive encouragement of gaining citizenship.[7]

At the moment, a high percentage of Russians still feel that assimilation represents probably the best future for the Russians in Latvia. Many Russians feel that Russians had no right to territorial autonomy in the country. It reflects a deep sensitivity among Russians to their large geographic dispersal within Latvia, and even Russians make large minorities in many urban centers. Many also show the willingness to speak the local language when the matter comes to being in contact with the state machinery or power centers. However, it has to be borne in mind that they very well know that no great benefits would accrue from the process of integration through language adaptation, mostly because they see little economic benefits in learning the titular language.

Latvia's 1994 Citizenship Law stipulates a 10 year residency requirement.[8] Hence, for the Russian community, this effect means that for entitlement to citizenship Russians automatically qualified for full citizenship, while most Russian migrants in reality do not. In Latvia, about a quarter of those who have registered as citizens are non-Latvians, who hence qualified, as members of the family of a former citizen.

The Russian President Boris Yeltsin, linked the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Baltic States to amendments being made to local citizenship legislation.[9] As he later emphasized, "Russia has no intention to sign any agreement regarding the withdrawal of troops from Latvia or Estonia until these countries bring their legislation in line with the international standards". Russia's eventual willingness to withdraw its garrisons was successfully concluded by April

1994, primarily due to western pressures concerning economic aid. This was despite the lack of negotiations between Russia and Baltic states on issues related to the status of Russian speaking communities. Similarly, Western pressure also played a big role in influencing Latvia's 1994 Citizenship law, which saw the abandonment of proposed citizen-quotas, and in addition, the residency qualification was reduced.

In 1996, Latvia began the full-scale naturalisation process for non-citizens born in Latvia. By 1998, there were amendments to Latvia's labour laws or legislation adopted by the community's parliament and the new language regulation, which could lead to human rights violations.[10] On April, 1998, the Latvian government endorsed draft amendment to citizenship law, in full compliance with the recommendations of the OSCE and other international organisations.[11] The amendments provide for the scrapping of naturalisation of all citizens born in Latvia and later other non-citizens.

Russia continues to insist that "no-double-standards" can be applied in the universally applied sphere of human rights violations particularly with respect of Latvia. Russia alleges that wide-scale discrimination against non citizen has been a matter of state policy and discriminatory hiring practices have taken root. Russia draws the attention of the UN, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE to these practices, particularly after the protests against large scale desecration of Soviet War Graves in Latvia. Russian officials accuse the West of double standards over human rights in Latvia and Russian left wingers point out at the rise of fascism in the country.

II. Estonia

Estonia adopted a very different kind of model of participatory democracy, which can be labelled as an "ethnic democracy".[12] Hence political hegemony was to be secured by limiting the access to political and electoral participation only for those members of the polity who qualify for citizenship under the 1992 Estonian Citizenship law. According to the Citizenship law, only those who were citizens during the inter-war years (prior to the establishment of independent Estonia) independent and their descendents are automatically granted citizenship. For the remainder, made up of Russian settlers and the emigrants of the Soviet era, naturalisation depends upon factors like length of residency, competence in the Estonian language, and an oath of loyalty. For most of the Russian minority population, the major obstacle was competence in Estonian language were differences themselves, regarding the issue of participation in national elections or formation of their own political organizations. In structuring political access on the basis of non-ethnic criteria, the state in Estonia helped create 'insiders' and 'outsiders' amongst the Russian diaspora and the ethnic Estonians in the process, which weakened the social base for collective action. This also helped promote political factionalism amongst the diasporic elites.

Generally speaking, the current citizenship law of Estonia does not discriminate against anybody on formal ethnic grounds and is more liberal than similar legislations of most other countries.[13] But the immediate real political effect of the citizenship law can be interpreted in ethnic terms. After September 1992 elections, the victorious right-centre coalition led by the Prime Minister, Mart Laar, started liberalising its stance. The liberalisation of the government's approach to citizenship issues led to counter-reaction from the radical Estonian nationalists. The possibility of granting citizenship for "special service" was used quite skillfully by the Estonian

government to influence the leaders of the Russian community. On the one hand the new Estonian Constitution of 1992 adopted human rights clauses for the minorities while on the other hand, the Russians continued to make their presence felt in the power structure. Indeed, compared to the Soviet Era, the share of Estonian minorities at the beginning of 1993 was still very moderate in some branches of the power structures.

There would certainly have been an incentive for Russians under the circumstances in which they had been working to assimilate themselves linguistically into the emerging national consciousness in the new Estonian Republic. There was evidence that such a trend was emerging in the Baltics.[14] In fact Russians in Estonia felt themselves, closer in terms of their values attitudes and tastes, to Estonians than to Russians in Russia, even if they would identify themselves as Russian or Baltic Russians, and not as Estonians.[15] Particularly in the North East of Estonia, there is a strong sense of community due to the overlapping ethno-linguistic and socio-economic boundaries. This has led to the formation of what one may call an “ethno-class” by the recent arrival of industrial urban migrant workers who know no or little Estonian language. This is not to deny that there exists a strong sense of homeland identity with Russia, reinforced by frequent cross-frontier communications. At another level therefore, even many Russian feel uncomfortable about Estonian nationalism. However, it has not resulted in mass politics of isolation or secessionism. While many analysts say that the absence of any spirit of confrontation or secessionism has been due to lack of leadership skills among Russians, limited media resources, lack of a self-conscious cultural intelligentsia, which hinders the process of ethnic mobilization, many others would say that ethnic Russians have been pragmatic and displayed remarkable resilience in adapting to the political changes after the formation of the Estonian Republic.[16]

The Estonian state still keeps open the possibility for individual members of the settler communities to become citizens of the new polity and thereby advance their status and material prospects. Thus ordinary Russians are persuaded to weigh the short-term costs of being a non-citizen against the long term benefits of adherence to the status quo. Thus, many Russians have expressed their keenness to become citizens.

The potential for conflict still remains, however. For example, differences among Russians and Estonians in different areas like economy, politics and education do have the capacity to snowball into inter-ethnic conflict. As per latest available data, the Russian speaking population, which is mainly urban, has lower per capita income than the Estonian population, most of whom live in rural areas. Although the difference in the average annual income between the two communities is not that large, it is important to note politically that Russians are, economically speaking, feeling more deprived. It also appears that the marketisation/liberalisation of Estonian Economy of the 1990s has operated to the disadvantage of the Russian population as compared to Estonians, in contrast to the situation before independence.[17] Many Russians are disadvantaged in the labour market partly due to language because many jobs are open only to those with fluency in Estonian language. Moreover, the newly independent Estonian government deliberately wrecked enterprises where the bulk of the Russians worked. As a corollary, substantial differences also exist in terms of other areas like education, occupation, civil political life etc.

This is perhaps why, even though, by 1997, a substantial portion of them had established a potentially permanent citizenship status in Estonia, they refuse to get assimilated into the Estonian national-identity and do not express confidence in Estonian institutions. Many of them have not developed a strong facility in Estonian language despite the Estonian law on language, which provides strong incentive to learn Estonian. Nor do the Russians endorse a key aspect of the language policy of the current regime. And it is very unlikely that strategies of linguistic adaptation or a change in citizenship law would result in assimilation.

On January 20, 1995, the Estonian parliament adopted a new law on citizenship, ignoring the protests of the Russian parties as well as the Estonian radical nationalists, raising the residence requirements.[18] The Russian foreign Ministry said that Estonian government was flouting the Russian fundamental rights, and violating the spirit of the January 1991 treaty between Russia and Estonia on the principles establishing relationship between the two states. Quite importantly, in March 1998, the Estonian Parliament dropped a draft amendment to the citizenship law from its agenda on the pretext that it would create a large number of citizens who speak non-Estonian.[19] However the simultaneous launching of the Estonian-Russian inter-government commission stressed on setting an agreement on social guarantees for Russian Estonian citizens

III. Lithuania

The leaders of the Lithuanian republic considered “Lithuania” to be an ethno-regional concept, which sought to blend language and territory into a single whole with its own distinct political imperatives.[20]

The Lithuanians were in this way able to avoid the controversial publicity that Latvians and the Estonians received on the minority question. The Lithuanian government also accepted the organization of minority groups as communities and supported the development of schools for the major groups. Leaders of the minority groups now have the opportunity— which they never had in the Soviet times— to mobilize their own communities and build their own power-bases.

The Russians, of course, presented a unique problem as a formerly dominant nationality, now demoted in status. Whereas formerly Russian could force their language onto any meeting in Lithuania as a matter of course, now they could only convince the Lithuanians to use Russian in speaking with them directly. The provisions for citizenship, however, softened the problems because they allowed Russians who took Lithuanian passport to have a share in the “checks” for the distribution of property. Even then, by mid 1990s, due to migration to Russia, the Russian population of the republic declined to less than 9 percent with minimum of rancour. The Russians remaining in Lithuania are there to face the problems in their own ways.

It was evident in the Declarations of Republican Sovereignty itself that Lithuania did not lay much emphasis as in Estonia and Latvia on the need to safeguard a secure homeland for the titular nationalists. For reasons of ethno demographics, Lithuania was comfortable with the multi-ethnic nature of their societies. The proportion of Lithuanians in the republic remained relatively unchanged at around 80 percent due to an economy which saw slow industrialisation and less migrant labour force during Soviet period and due to a relatively high rate of native population growth which contrasted with Estonia and Latvia.[21]

Lithuania was keen to harness the support of non-indigenous population and adopted the “zero option” which based the conditions for citizenship upon territorial and not primordial factors. In order to appease the national radicals within the government, sources acknowledge that Lithuania was a restored but not a new state, despite the ‘new state’ model of citizenship adopted.

After independence, attempts were made by neo-nationalists to narrow down the range of residents eligible for automatic citizenship; the neo-nationalists were fuelled by the anti-Russian feeling following Moscow’s economic blockade. The then President, Vyatauts Landsbergis, however declined to hold a referendum on the legitimacy of granting citizenship to those that arrived in Lithuania during the Soviet period. He cited the reason that this would sidetrack the more pressing problems facing the country and would also aggravate the political situation in the republic, stir up ethnic animosity, lead to civil confrontation and strengthen the underground CPSU and KGB structures.

Russian Communists were unhappy with an emigrant as president of Lithuania after the election of the new President Valdas Adamkus in August 1998. However, Adamkus stressed that Lithuania has “no problem with national minorities and Russian diaspora”.[22] In a significant development, the migrants from Russia would be placed by Lithuanian government in the Kaliningrad region, the former military settlements of Russia, backed up by an international movement in support of migrants—the Forum of Migrating Organizations.[23]

Russian Policy towards Russian Ethnic Minorities in the Baltic Republics

The nature and evolution of Russia’s policy towards Russians living in the ‘near abroad’, to a great extent, can be indicated by its current law on citizenship.[24] In accordance with international norms, Russia acknowledged that dual citizenship could exist only in the context of a treaty relationship with a particular state. The law on citizenship is very friendly to those former Soviet citizens who reside in other states and wish to move to Russia and become Russian citizens. In 1994, the Russian government decided to supplement the idea of dual citizenship with a broader strategy of building special relationship with Russians living abroad. President adopted a special government programme qualifying three categories of Russians minorities residing in neighboring states as “compatriots”.[25] They were: (1) Russian citizens living in the near abroad (2) former Soviet citizens who have not obtained new citizenship, particularly in Latvia and Estonia and (3) those who obtained citizenship of the host country but wish to maintain their own culture and ties with Russia.

On August 1994, President Yeltsin signed a decree that called for the government to formulate the major component of this policy.[26] Government document defined the strategic line of Russia’s policy towards the “compatriots” as promotion of their voluntary integration into the host states. According to the programme, the Russian government’s primary means of defending the rights and interests of the Russians living in the near abroad was to be diplomatic and economic. It also called for the promotion of economic ties between Russia and those enterprises in the near abroad, in which most employees were “compatriots”.

In 1995, the period for obtaining Russian citizenship after migration to Russia was extended until the year 2000. But facing strong opposition from Estonia, Russia did not dare to extend the

same rights to those who preferred to stay in their host state. The subsequent retreat meant that Russia never introduced a permanent mechanism for creating “pure” Russian citizens in the “near abroad”. Thus dual citizenship, once elevated to a strategic task of Russian foreign policy, started disappearing from the political agenda in 1995.

Thus we can see that during the initial period around 1992, Russian policy was entirely rhetorical towards the Russian diasporas. During 1993-94, Russia made an attempt to back up the rhetoric with some assertive measures, including the advocacy of dual citizenship. And by 1995, after the failure of this undertaking, there remained only a combination of moderate policy and tough rhetoric.

The relationship between the diaspora and its external homeland, Russia, has an important bearing on diasporic politics. It is in terms of the role that minorities ascribe to the external homeland in their own geographical imagination and secondly, the role that Russia is likely to adopt as an ethnic patron to the Russian minorities in the Baltics. Thus Russia continues to act as a political agent and the adoption of supportive policies, adopted by Moscow, are likely to reinforce a sense of identity with Russia, in case the Baltic Russian minorities become victim of the new nationalising states. The opening up of access to participation, shifts in ruling alignment, the availability of influential allies and cleavages within and among political allies— these are the primary factors that are likely to determine the relationship between Baltic states and the diasporic Russian minorities.

Thus despite being a firm supporter of the Russian Diaspora in the Baltic Republics, President Yeltsin could only adopt some sort of a combination of moderate policy and tough measures. The issue often cropped up but only at the diplomatic level while Moscow often tried to use its economic leverages. The recent offshoot of alleged violation of human rights in Latvia and very frequent annulments of citizenship reform laws by the Estonian Parliamentary and representative bodies point out to the fact that the issue continues to linger in state-to-state relations. Despite the occasional friendly rhetorics and dispositions often exhibited by the Baltic leaders, Moscow continues to see them with an eye of suspicion. This, seemingly, has resulted in some deliberate efforts by the Russian federation to draw the attention of the international forums and organisations.

Putin’s regime has tried to bring about some moderation in the Baltic state policies towards the Russian minorities, but the issue continues to be in the doldrums of domestic power policies in the region.[27] Frequent changes of regimes or alignments or realignment of political forces in the Baltic States continue to hammer a consistent and determined policy. This is true even in the case of Russia.

End Notes

1. Linguistically and culturally, Baltic people are quite different from the Russians. Linguistically, Estonian is closely related to Finnish language, while the Lithuanian and Latvian together, form the Baltic-Indo-European language family. Estonians and Latvians largely adhere to Lutheranism, in other words, close to the Germans. Thus we find that while Estonia and Latvia were dominated by local German elite and were influenced by German

cultural and other traditions, the Lithuanians developed a Polish and Central European identity.

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11. Ibid. SU/3208 E/1, 23 April, 1998.
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27. Summary of World Broadcast, SU/ 4064, e2 / 7 February 2001.