The Impact of the Russian Minority Issue on the Relations between Estonia and Russia

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Summary of the PhD thesis

The topic of the research is chosen due to its actuality. After the eruption of the crisis in and around Ukraine, the debate arose about the role of Russia in the region. The annexation of Crimea and the actions of Russia in the East of Ukraine were justified by Russia, among other things, by the needs to protect the Russian minority beyond Russia's borders. It was continuation of the trend of putting rhetoric into practice, which started with Georgian war in 2008. The situation in the international relations changed a great deal after these events, and led to many speculations about what comes next. The Baltic states are a target of many utterances stating that the Russian new assertive behaviour can lead to worrying developments in the region. One of the issues much discussed in both academia and political discourse is the presence of numerous Russian minorities outside Russia as a reason for instability. This topic has been high on the agenda since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the danger of violent ethnic conflict loomed over the post-Soviet space. Though the fears concerning the Baltic states have not realised, the issue of the Russian minority is still important. After the Ukraine crisis erupted, many asked, if Narva is next, comparing the situation in Ukraine with this in the Baltic states. The problem of the Russian minority is present in many post-Soviet states. This dissertation looks into the problem analysing the Estonian case as one of the examples. The dissertation looks at the problem of the impact of the Russian minority issue deconstructing the policies of Russia and Estonia.

The topic of Russian minorities as such is well researched, as many sociological data are available on this issue. Many researchers have also touched upon the security issues in the region. The added value of the present research is to find a new angle to the topic, combining the sociological approach with political analysis and security studies' aspects. The research can help to analyse the complex relationships between different actors, it contributes to the bulk of empirical knowledge in the field, and adds important theoretical insights.

I.

The subject and objectives of research
The main subject matters of the research are the bilateral relations between Estonia and Russia and the Russian minority issue. The additional subjects of the research are the policies of Estonia and Russia concerning minority issue, including minority legislation, and also the identities of Russians, Estonians, and the Russians of Estonia.

The main objective of the research is to assess the impact, which the Russian minority issue has on bilateral relations between Estonia and Russia. The research also postulates tasks of deconstructing the relevant legislation and policies of both Estonia and Russia concerning the issue of minority. It looks into European norms and legislation concerning minorities and the important role of international organisations, such as the European Union, OSCE, and the Council of Europe. The objectives include the analysis of political, economic and sociological situation of the Russian minority of Estonia.

II. Theoretical approach and methods

The starting point of the theoretical approach of the research is the constructivist perspective. The dissertation describes the main research done in the area of nationalism and ethnicity, mainly concentrating on the link of these fields with international relations. The review analyses the existing definitions of ethnicity and also describes the juxtaposition between primordialism and instrumentalism in terms of their attitudes to the origin of ethnic groups. The theories of modernisation are also touched upon, as they played an important role in the formation of constructivist perspective. The main reason why the issue of ethnicity became so important from the point of view of international relations, is the possibility of violent ethnic conflict in ethnically divided societies. As far as international relations are concerned, the ethnicity was a long neglected aspect. The reason for this was the domination of realism paradigm in the discipline, which treated mostly the relationships between states, ignoring the factors influencing the formation of policies, such as identity. Identity became a much discussed matter from the 1990s though. It became a central category of analysis in constructivist approach. Constructivists started to explore what is going on inside the “black box” of the states, and how identities form the policies.

The important theoretical background of the study is the interaction between nationalising state, national minority and external national homeland according to the classification of Rogers Brubaker. Many researchers add to this triangle a fourth factor, that of international
organisations, thus the quadratic relationship is formed. The dissertation analyses several aspects of this complex relationship.

The theoretical background also contains references to the problem of minorities in political discourse. It concentrates on the securitisation theory of Copenhagen School, seeing the discourse of threats as an important element. Securitisation is an utmost stage of politisation - putting an issue so high on the political agenda that any special measures to solve the problem are justified. This approach distinguishes the securitising actors (as those who start the process) and referent objects (something in need of protection). One can see that the discourse of threats and protection against them is very important. In the course of the development of this theory, the concept of macrosecuritisation arose. The referent objects of macrosecuritisation are more general, of a higher level. In the present dissertation, the macrosecuritisation of the West versus the East is suggested. The study proposes the theoretical model where the four elements are highlighted, and also the level of securitisation process is added. The model thus contains the elements NATIONAL MINORITY - NATIONALISING STATE – EXTERNAL NATIONAL HOMELAND – INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS, the element on securitisation is added to this model.

As far as the methods are concerned, the study uses interdisciplinary approach combining the methods from sociology and international relations. The study uses the historical analysis, the analysis of documents, and quantitative data of sociological research. Empirical method used in the study includes content analysis of the media.

III. Hypotheses and research questions

The main hypothesis of the research is that the Russian minority issue has a significant impact on the relations between Estonia and Russia. The minority issue is the main problem in the bilateral relations. This impact manifests itself in the framework of the complex relationship between Estonia, Russia, the Russian minority of Estonia and international organisations. The role of the Russian minority issue is dual. First of all, the Russian minority issue is used by Russia in order to gain more influence in the region, which it considers a part of the West in the new situation of confrontation. At the same time, Russia considers Estonia as a part of the „Russian world“ due to the presence of the Russian minority.

The dissertation also suggests additional hypotheses clarifying the complex impact of the
Russian minority issue on the bilateral relationship:

- The nationalising state (Estonia) is trying to show that the Russian minority is the threat for the national identity of the titular nation of the state – it is securitising the minority issue.

- The external national homeland (Russia) is trying to prove that the protection of the minority is needed in order to preserve the national identity of the nation of Russia – it is securitising the minority issue.

- The international organisations are seeing the policies of the nationalising state as a threat to the stability, they are afraid of violent ethnic conflict – they are securitising the minority issue.

- The Russian minority in Estonia is playing a passive role in the quadratic relationship, thus it is better characterised as the ”minority” and not “diaspora”. There are different members of the minority though, and they can be subdivided into “core”, “passive”, and “silent” members.

- The external national homeland (Russia) is playing an active role in the quadratic relationship trying to mobilize the Russian minority of Estonia.

IV. Content and organisation of the research

The research is organised according to the scheme of quadratic relationship described above. The first chapter describes the theoretical background of the problem of minorities and international relations. The historical background of the region is also given. The second chapter deals with the identity of Russians, and the situation of Russians beyond Russia. The third chapter analyses Russia’s policies concerning minorities abroad, including legislation on compatriots. The fourth chapter deals with Estonia’s policies connected to the minorities, analysing in great detail citizenship, language and integration legislation. This chapter also contains the analysis of Estonian-language media and the reaction of public opinion on the minority issue. The fifth chapter analyses the Russian minority in Estonia, its political activities and sociological characteristics. The chapter also includes the analysis of Russian-language Estonian media. The
sixth chapter is dedicated to the influence of international organisations on the subject, analysing the legislation on the minorities of the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union. It pays attention to normative values of minority protection and also conditionality of accession process of Estonia into the European Union. The chapter also describes the Russian influence on the international organisations. The seventh chapter analyses the relations between Estonia and Russia concentrating on the main issues of contention.

The research time span is from 1991 to 2014. 1991 is chosen as it is the date when Estonia regained its independence from the Soviet Union, and the minority issue became important for the relations between Estonia and Russia.

The year 2014 is chosen as a cut-off date, as it is the time the Ukraine crisis erupted, and the situation in the region changed a great deal.

V. Sources

The research uses several primary and secondary sources for the verification of the hypotheses. First of all, the wide-ranged analysis of literature is undertaken. The literature on ethnicity and nationalism is analysed (Anthony D. Smith, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Donald Horowitz, Arend Lijphart etc.). The connection between international relations and ethnicity is also looked into (Ilya Prizel, Iver B. Neumann and others). The monographs concerning the issue of Russian identity and foreign policy (such as Andrei Tsygankov), the issue of Russian minority in the near abroad (such as David D. Laitin, Neil Melvin) are analysed as well. The primary sources include the European legislation on minorities (such as Bolzano/Bozen recommendations), as well as the Estonian legislation (Citizenship law, Language Act, the Aliens’ Act) and Russian legislation (for example, the Federal Law on Compatriots abroad). The doctrines of both Estonia and Russia are analysed (national security concepts, for example). The data of sociological research on the minority in Estonia are put forward as well (for example, Integration Monitorings). The primary sources also include the content analysis of Estonian (both Estonian and Russian-language) media during the year 2014.

VI. Main findings

The main findings concerning the Russian identity verify that it is closely connected to the state, as Russia has been formed as an empire, and not a nation state. The important feature of the
Russian identity is also its blurriness, as borders of Russian identity are broader than those of the present state of Russia. It leads to the situation when there are ample opportunities for the Russian state to securitise the issue of Russian minorities abroad. As Russian state’s mental borders are not well-defined, it adds up to the unclear and somewhat threatening situation around Russia. As the related doctrines are analyzed, one can see the tendency in the policy to move away from so-called Statist approach towards Civilizational one, which is seeing Russia as a separate civilization with the values worth of spreading universally. The policy towards compatriots continues this tendency, as it is voiced by Russia’s authorities explicitly that Russians abroad are to be protected by Russia. In this context, the concept of the “Russian World” is also analyzed. The gist of all these policies stem from the ideas of Eurasianism, and doctrines of the Russian Orthodox Church.

It can be claimed on the basis of the analyzed material that the Russian official discourse securitises the minority issue indeed. It uses many arguments for the protection of the minorities with extraordinary measures. The Russian policies also show that the motivation behind these activities is mixed – on one hand, there is a genuine wish to protect the minorities on the basis of nationalist arguments – in order to preserve the united nation of Russians. On the other hand, there clearly exists the geopolitical motivation, as the Russian authorities would like to create the sphere of influence around Russia, and the minorities are an instrument, which could help achieving these objectives.

Further on, as the case of Estonia is analyzed, the conclusions are that the most important principle underlying all policies is that of the restitution of the Estonian state, which means that there is continuity of principles since the Republic established in 1918. The Soviet era is marked as the occupation in Estonian discourse. The policies concerning the minorities have undergone certain genesis since 1991, as in the beginning, mainly exclusive polices were implemented, whereas the Russian minority became isolated. Later on, the need for integration became acknowledged, and more inclusive policies started. The dissertation also analyses the attitudes of Estonians towards these policies concentrating on the period of 2014, up to March, 2015, as there were parliamentary elections at this time. The findings suggest that the attitudes towards the identity question were quite liberal during this period, with some opinions still claiming ethnic nationalism as important, while others suggesting the inclusion of non-Estonians into the civic nation.
The findings also contain the historical background to the origins of the Russian minority in Estonia and describe its political activities during the 1990s and up to 2014. The minority is clearly comprised of active political members and passive majority. The active members are closely connected to Russia and its activities in Estonia. The situation on the political scene developed from quite a significant influence of ethnic Russian parties to the decline of their influence. At the moment of the research, the Centre Party of Estonia, which is not an ethnic Russian party, represented the Russian-speaking electorate to a large extent. The study continues with the analysis of sociological research on the opinions of the minority. It becomes clear that the minority is not monolithic, and different identities and opinions exist among the people. The study also analyzed the Russian-speaking Estonian media during the period of 2014- March, 2015. In total, the analyzed material shows that the minority of Russians and Russian speakers in Estonia is diverse. On one hand, it is highly influenced by core members, who are closely connected to the Russian Federation. On the other hand, the research shows the various identities and patterns of integration among Russians. It can be claimed that the minority as such is quite passive and consists in their majority of passive and silent members. There are though certain tendencies that allow for the mobilization of the minority – as similar media consumption patterns, historic memories, holiday celebrations, threat perceptions and other features are widely shared by the community of Russian speakers.

Further on, the dissertation analyses the role of international organisations, as a fourth pole of the quadratic relationship. It is analysed from two angles. First of all, the international organisations put their normative pressure on Estonia, in order to avoid violent ethnic conflict, as it was the general preoccupation of the West after the Yugoslav wars and the collapse of the Soviet Union. It led to the situation when the so-called “Collective West” produced certain incentives in order to encourage Estonia to include the minorities more into the society. The main incentive was the membership in the European Union. Secondly, the international organisations are in their turn influenced by Russia, as it accuses Estonia in different international fora of violating human rights. The allegations are analysed in terms of so-called humanitarian dimension of Russia’s foreign policy. Russia internationalises the issue of minority placing it on the agenda of international organisations, thus securitising the issue along the way. At the same time, Estonia also internationalises the issue while trying to de-securitise it, analysing it in the framework of normal politics, through regular monitoring.
Bilateral relations between Estonia and Russia are analysed. The present situation stems from the basic disagreement on the principles of relations. Estonia sees the legal foundations of the republic to be the Treaty of Tartu. After its signature on the 2nd of February, 1920, Soviet Russia recognised Estonia's sovereignty, and it was the first document recognising de jure the new state. Estonia sees the regaining of independence in 1991 as continuation of the state created after World War I, and the interim period as the occupation by the Soviet Union. Russia, though officially recognising the independence of Estonia, is not considering the Soviet period as an occupation. The dissertation describes the current relations in the fields of cultural exchanges, economy, and energy. The study also concentrates on several cases of contention between two states during the period between 1991 and 2014. The first such case is the issue of withdrawal of the Russian troops from Estonia. The negotiations were protracted and difficult, and the links between Estonian policies towards Russian minorities were made by the Russian side along the way. In this issue, international activity played an important role with the OSCE and the United States exercising pressure on Russia. The troops finally left Estonia on the 31st of August, 1994.

The next important contention issue is the border agreements. In this respect as well, Estonia first foresaw the Treaty of Tartu as the legal basis for negotiations, while Russian side opposed this approach. Estonia realised that the border treaty is pragmatically more important than the recognition of the Treaty of Tartu, which would mean some territorial claims on the Russia's territory. The new pragmatic approach separated these two issues, and the Russian side accepted the fact that only technical aspects of the border line would be negotiated. After protracted negotiations, the agreements were finally signed in 2005. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs though announced after the ratification of the agreements by Estonian Parliament that Russia did not intend to become a party to the treaties. The reason was the preamble to the ratification law added by the Estonian Parliament and containing the reference to the Treaty of Tartu. Though the preamble did not contain any claim that the Treaty of Tartu should be the basis, the process was stalled again and the treaties put on ice. In 2012, the process was restarted and the treaties signed again on February 17, 2014. For the time being they remain to be ratified by both sides.

The dissertation also deals with the attitudes of Russia towards Estonia’s accession to the European Union and NATO, as this used to be quite a significant irritant in the relations. It must be mentioned though that Russia concentrated much more on NATO, as this enlargement was
perceived as more of a threat than the EU. At the time of the enlargements by 2014, it is clear that Russia securitised NATO. After enlargement, Russia realised that the EU has a very significant impact on the societies of the new member states, and it meant the escape from the Russian sphere of influence.

The case of strong contention between the two countries is the so-called Bronze Soldier crisis of 2007. This period is considered the lowest point in the bilateral relations during the analysed period. It concerns the relocation of the monument to Soviet soldiers from the centre of Tallinn to the military cemetery and the protests this move evoked in April, 2007. Violent clashes with the police led to 153 injured, and one Russian citizen killed. The crisis escalated with the attacks on the Estonian Ambassador in Moscow and cyber attacks on Estonian Internet sites. The crisis showed the deep conflict in the society on the basis of different historical memories. For Russian speakers the monument was the symbol of the Soviet victory in the World War II, and to the liberation of Tallinn from fascism, for Estonians, it was a symbol of a subsequent occupation of Estonia by Soviet Union.

The last issue analysed under bilateral relations is the year 2014, and the case of Eston Kohver, Estonian Secret Police officer abducted from the border with Russia. The atmosphere was already tense, as the Ukraine crisis erupted, and it influenced the bilateral relations to a great extent. Eston Kohver was detained by Russian Federal Security Service on the 5th of September, 2015, under disputed circumstances. The Estonian side claimed that he was abducted from Estonian territory, and the Russian side insisted that Kohver crossed the border. The case aroused general feeling of support for Kohver in Estonia, with hard lobby for his release. In August, 2015, Kohver was sentenced to 15 years in prison. On the 26th of September though, it was announced that the exchange operation took place on the border, and Kohver was exchanged for Aleksei Dressen, a former Estonian security official serving a 16-year sentence for spying for Moscow.

In most of these cases, one can see the impact of Russian minority issue on the bilateral relations. The minority issue was used as a bargaining chip in negotiations several times. It was used in the issues of troops’ withdrawal, border issue, and the opposition to the EU and NATO membership.

The research concludes that the tendencies of the two countries’ internal developments had an impact on the bilateral relations. First period is characterised by the adaptation to the fact that
Estonia is not a part of Russia anymore, it symbolically ended in 1994 with the withdrawal of troops from Estonia. The next period from 1994 to 2007 is characterised by not very warm relations, but still the attempts to solve contention issues such as border agreements were undertaken. In this period, Russia also, though reluctantly, accepted Estonia’s membership in the EU and NATO. The year 2007 was the lowest point in the relations, and till 2014, the “mending fences” occurred, though without a particular break-through. The year 2014 brought new tensions with the crisis in Ukraine and the case of Eston Kohver.

The research has also shown that the bilateral relations are influenced by other factors, such as international situation, and situation in the region. Russia sees Estonia not as a separate player, but as a part of a wider region. The dual attitude of Russia is manifested, as it sees Estonia as a part of its sphere of influence and the “Russian World” on one hand, and on the other hand, it treats Estonia as a part of the West. Thus, Estonia is a part of macrosecuritisation between the West and Russia.

The research clearly shows that the Russian minority issue had a significant impact on the bilateral relations between Estonia and Russia during the analysed period. The bilateral relations are seen in this study as one of the components of the quadratic relationship, where all the members of the model interact with one another and influence one another. At the same time, the geopolitical interests of Russia in the region influence in their turn the attitudes towards the Russian minority issue.