

# Caught in Between

## Citizenship, Identity, and Young Ethnic Russians in Estonia

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*Theodore P. Gerber & Sarah E. Mendelson*

*University of Wisconsin and Center for Strategic and International Studies*

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Days after U.S. President Barack Obama's Moscow summit and just before Vice President Joe Biden's departure for Ukraine, nearly two dozen former leaders and foreign policy experts from Eastern Europe sent a letter to Obama asking Washington not to "forget" them while it tries to reset relations with Russia. The letter is out of sync with Obama's recent message that, for instance, "Russia's future is up to the Russian people" or "Africa's future is up to Africans." The same should apply to Eastern European societies. These countries have serious problems, some of which are exacerbated and exploited by Russia, including legacies of foreign occupations, politicization of history, and crushing economic crises. Yet their own governments are in a better position to address many issues than are Obama administration officials in Washington. Focus groups we conducted in March 2009 with young Russian-speaking Estonians suggest that, at least in Estonia, elites should think less about Washington and more about Tallinn.

Addressing issues related to Russian-speakers in Estonia is critical for the well-being of Estonia as this population is at the center of a complex set of current and past political conflicts. Many ethnic Estonians resent the presence of a large population of Soviet-era immigrants and their offspring, whom they perceive as occupiers. However, denying citizenship to a substantial portion of Russian speakers, including many who have lived their whole lives in Estonia, fuels the Russian government's hostility, which is already substantial following Estonia's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. Barriers to citizenship not only lend some plausibility to the Russian government's charges of economic and political

discrimination on the basis of language and ethnicity, they are contrary to the citizenship policies of many countries in the Euro-Atlantic community.

Tensions within Estonia, as well as between Estonia and Russia, came to a head in spring 2007 during the “Bronze Soldier” incident, when the Estonian government relocated a statue commemorating the Soviet army’s sacrifice in World War II and reburied the remains of Soviet soldiers. The incident provoked violent street demonstrations, harsh reactions from Moscow, and a cyberattack on Estonia. There have been no confrontations of this scale since then, but tensions and conflicts over ethnic Russians in Estonia have hardly diminished. A recent broadcast on the Russian international news station *Russia Today*, for example, referred to “criminal discrimination” against Russians and characterized the current Estonian government as an “apartheid regime.”

This memo provides new insight into the continuing conflicts over citizenship, identity, and the treatment of Russian-speaking Estonians based on four focus groups we conducted with ethnic Russian young adults residing in Tallinn and Narva in March 2009. Two groups consisted of Russians who had acquired Estonian citizenship (T2, T3), one included those with no current citizenship and who thus hold an “alien” or “gray” passport (T1), and the final group was mixed (N). Although ethnic Russians in Estonia have been the focus of policy and propaganda from various political forces, little research has systematically examined their experiences and attitudes. These focus groups, the first stage of a larger project that will include a random-sample survey in Estonia and Russia, reveal how young people from this ethnic group feel about their situation and prospects.

This memo summarizes some of the most salient themes from the focus groups and makes policy recommendations for defusing tensions based on new empirical data. Russian speakers, particularly those with “gray” passports, expressed considerable alienation and confused national identities; those with blue (citizen) passports tend to be better integrated and more optimistic. Despite their sense of alienation, few see Russia as an answer to their problems. The impact of the Bronze Soldier incident in April 2007 had an enormously negative effect on the views of ethnic Russian citizens and non-citizens alike. Overall, the situation is fluid. If Estonian leaders adopt carefully crafted policies, the country’s Russian speakers could become better integrated. If the government chooses, instead, to reinforce differences or ignore the resentments sparked by its citizenship policies and its actions regarding the Bronze Soldier, then alienation is likely to increase.

## **Alienation**

Many participants said they believe Estonians would like ethnic Russians to leave. One even went so far as to characterize Estonians as a “Ku Klux Klan without clubs: they think to themselves and sometimes say aloud ‘get out of here’ and that’s it. That is their main wish” (T1). Others reported incidents in which they were told they were not welcome in Estonia and should go back to Russia or cases in which they believe Russian speakers were discriminated against by employers, teachers, or officials.

Feelings of alienation were most pronounced among gray passport holders, who

explicitly linked their discontent to a lack of citizenship. “I am primarily concerned with the citizenship issue. Why do we have gray passports? We were born here, and we don’t have Estonian passports. I was born here. I pay taxes, and I am no one here” (N). Another commented, “I was also born here and also don’t view Estonia as my Motherland [...] I have a gray passport [...] I’m an alien in this land” (T1). A third remarked, “Yes, the standard term for us is that we are ‘non-Estonians.’ And I do not want to be a ‘non-Estonian.’ Why am I a ‘non-Estonian?’” (T1) Whether or not the rights of these individuals are being violated, as Russian President Dmitri Medvedev has claimed, the majority in the focus groups, citizens and noncitizens alike, found the passport system deeply objectionable.

Another manifestation of alienation is the mixed or confused sense of national identity that many participants described. The question of what they consider their “homeland” provoked, above all, awkward confusion, hesitation, and responses such as, “Well, you live here, but in your soul you feel like it’s Russia, somewhere over there” (T3), and, “Well, I’m used to living here, I was born here, but all the same, the way people treat us...” (T3). Another respondent lamented, “I love [Tallinn], I just adore it. I love the little streets, the history, the local culture. But somehow they won’t let us love it, they won’t allow us to.” Participants often resolved their dilemma by answering “the Soviet Union,” as that is where they were born, or cited the city in which they lived.

## Integration

Russian speakers in Estonia are not homogenous. There are important differences in their levels of integration that correspond in part, but not entirely, to citizenship. Many participants in the two focus groups of citizens have Estonian friends, get along well with Estonians at work, and say that tensions between Estonians and Russians are inflated or exaggerated. Some blue passport holders said that Russian speakers with gray passports should make more of an effort to integrate, that it is not only up to the government.

“I’ve heard so many times ‘Oh, it’s so tough for us, we can’t find work.’ I have a girlfriend who’s always worked in Tartu as an executive, but since she’s been here in Tallinn, she’s not found work and she’s gone to work in a shop. I tell her that she needs to go learn Estonian so that she can at least go for an interview. I tell her to take a course or find a tutor. I’ve been telling her this for a year. Has she done anything? Nothing. For a year she just lamented about how hard it is for her and how I should help her find a job. But how can I help her if she doesn’t speak Estonian, only Russian?” (T2)

Others in the group agreed with this perspective and told similar stories.

## Russia is Not the Answer

While some participants expressed a sense of alienation from Estonia, this sentiment did not translate into a practical affinity with Russia. The vast majority have no desire to move to Russia. In their view, Russia’s economy is worse, citizens of Russia are rude,

and they treat Russians from Estonia like foreigners. Some were perplexed by the misconceptions about life in Estonia voiced by their contacts in Russia. “Do they insult you? Don’t they beat you?” (T2) Others described the country as overwhelming, and the lifestyle as unattractive. While they may feel an emotional attachment to Russia, they do not want to live there. “Emotionally, then, I think [my homeland] is Russia, after all. But to really think that I would have to move to Russia today – no. There are too many Russians for me to move there” (T1). “I adore Russian culture [...] But I understand that I will never live there; I am a Western type of person, not Eastern. And I would not want to raise my children there” (T3). Yet this “Western” person cannot view Estonia as her homeland either “because people are stubbornly pushing (us) away.”

### **Moving the Monument as a Seminal Moment**

The April 2007 “Bronze Soldier” controversy came up spontaneously in three of the focus groups, and in all of them the topic palpably raised the emotional temperature of the discussion. The Estonian government’s actions elicited bad feelings among Russian speakers, who perceived it as an act of overt “disrespect for Russian culture” (T3) and an aggressive message to the Russians that “we’ll show you who’s boss [...] We’ll show you your place. We are the masters here” (T1). Many took the action as a personal affront:

“They spit on my soul, personally.”

“It was a provocation.”

“My grandfather fought (in the war)!” (T1)

Several suggested the Bronze Soldier incident made them regret taking Estonian citizenship, and many agreed that “the situation with respect to integration got much worse after the April events. That is to say that people really took much harsher positions.” (N)

Some participants understood and even agreed with the reasons for moving the monument, but they objected strenuously to how it was done, “under the cover of night,” “shortly before the May 9 [Victory Day] holiday,” “without prior discussion,” and without taking steps to soothe the feelings of those whose relatives suffered during the war.

“You understand, from the point of view of the Estonians—indeed, it was an occupation. But from the Russian point of view, it was something different. I’m not going to get into the history and politics. The point is that, for the Estonians, the monument is a sign of Soviet authority, a symbol that the Estonians were deprived of, roughly speaking, the right to free speech and many other things. And that’s during the Soviet regime. For the Russians it’s something entirely different. Those are our grandfathers, our great-grandfathers! They battled against fascism! For us it’s a little different [...] One thing, though, is [the Estonian government] behaved indelicately, in that it was possible, of course, to find the relatives of those people who were buried in those tombs, or [...] ask for

permission to rebury them. I mean, there's no need to be so harsh!" (T3)

## **Estonia's Future is up to Estonians**

Bearing in mind that we cannot generalize based on focus groups, and that our findings need to be replicated in forthcoming surveys, the groups' responses suggest that the Estonian government should try to mitigate the alienation and dislocation experienced by young ethnic Russians in Estonia. Caught in-between and identifying neither as Estonian nor Russian, these young people represent both a challenge and an opportunity. A deeply alienated population poses a long-term security risk and plays into the hands of Russian officials who advocate aggressive policies toward Estonia. The Obama administration cannot fix this problem, and the tandem of Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin seem intent on exacerbating and exploiting it. Only the Estonian government together with society can solve it. There are encouraging signs of potential integration in the focus groups, but the April 2007 Bronze Soldier incident was a major setback.

The United States has an interest in urging the Estonian government to promote the integration of its Russian speakers more effectively. Their continuing alienation may undermine the stability of a key country on the eastern edge of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. If Estonia is to thrive in the twenty-first century, it must do so as a multiethnic state.

What, then, should the Obama administration encourage its Estonian partners to do? In "The 'Bronze Year' of Estonia-Russia relations," Kadri Liik, Director of the International Center for Defense Studies in Tallinn, has advised that "we need to talk with our Russian fellow citizens." The government should use the mass media in Estonia to tackle this issue. One respondent (T2) described an innovative television program, now apparently off the air, which was co-hosted by an ethnic Estonian and an ethnic Russian and which discussed current issues in Estonia in both languages. Formal integration programs should be bolstered, not scaled back. It might also be helpful to encourage a Russian-Russian dialogue between blue and gray passport holders. Russians who have integrated – and there are many of them – are probably the best situated to engage those who have not.

The Estonian government might consider reforming citizenship and language policies. Although Estonia has a technical legal basis for denying citizenship to those who immigrated during the Soviet occupation and their offspring, it may be politically unwise in the long run (not to mention unfair) to withhold citizenship from individuals who were born in the country and who have lived all their lives there. Ethnic Russians might feel less embattled if the Estonian government were to make Russian the country's second official language.

While concerted efforts to openly discuss competing perspectives of Estonia's troubled twentieth century are unlikely to yield a consensus, there may be room for greater agreement. In any event, as with the new Russian "Historical Commission," Estonian institutions such as the Historical Memory Institute and the Museum of Occupations, which openly proclaims that the Soviet occupations of Estonia were worse than the Nazi occupation, further complicate, rather than effectively address, this issue.

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