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Estonia's 'Russian Question'



Winning the vote of Russian speakers has long been a regular feature of elections at every level in Estonia. This comes as no surprise in a country where 25 percent of the population consider themselves ethnic Russians, according to [the 2011 census](#). The share of Estonia's ethnic Russian population reaches 95% in some towns in the northeast.

Municipal elections in Estonia are slated for this October, and these are the elections where this Baltic nation's political parties tend to pay most attention to winning the votes of its Russian speakers. Why more so than its parliamentary elections? This is because elections at the municipal level are the only ones in Estonia which allow for "individuals with undefined citizenship" living in Estonia to vote.

These people make up approximately six percent of the Estonian population in 2017, no small voter base for politicians to aim for. They are the holders of so called "gray passports."

Besides being denied a right to vote in parliamentary elections, it is not always too bad a practical tradeoff for these grey passport holders, who are almost entirely Russian speakers. A visa deal allows them to travel freely in Russia (unlike those who have since taken and passed the tests for Estonian citizenship, who need to pay for visas.) Gray passports also suffice for free movement throughout the EU's Schengen Zone, though it gets a bit

more tricky to visit countries like the United Kingdom or Ireland, which never signed the Schengen agreement. Gray passport visas to the United States, for instance, are also much trickier for a gray passport holder than for a bearer of an Estonian passport.

Lithuania, to the south, had a smaller Russian minority when the USSR collapsed, and decided to automatically offer citizenship, both to its Russian minority and to its Polish minority, although dual citizenship there is currently prohibited.

Estonia, like Latvia, opted for a provisional solution of denying citizenship until efforts had been made by this minority to learn the national state language, whether that was Latvian or Estonian. The assumption was that the number would soon go down, as Russian speakers integrated into Estonian society and began speaking Estonian. This prediction did bear out in a way, but it was more gradual than policy makers in Tallinn had hoped. Estonia remains socially divided along linguistic lines.

In Latvia, which has a larger population of grey passport holders of over 250,000, grey passport holders are not even allowed to vote in their municipal elections. Rules also apply that children of these passport holders will be handed out similar passports, although there is talk in the air of changing this in Latvia. Estonia has since adopted a strategy of handing out Estonian passports to the next generation.

Local vs Parliamentary: Radically different results

Perhaps this somehow explains the radically different outcomes of local and parliamentary elections that have been observed over several electoral cycles in Estonia: the Estonian Center Party (*Eesti Keskerakond*) leads in municipal elections, while the Estonian Reform Party (*Eesti Reformierakond*) wins parliamentary polls. Traditionally, the votes of the Russian-speaking population are [divided between two parties](#): 90% vote for the Center Party and 10% for the Social Democrats. However, this year, apart from these two parties, others are also keen to reshape their platforms for Russian speakers. The local press tends to describe this as “the Russian question”. It would appear striking that none of the parties mentions foreign policy, sanctions or relations with Russia in their party platforms or campaign materials in Russian; this is understandable, however, as these are municipal elections and foreign policy issues are not settled at this level.

A slow walk to integration

So what do Estonian political parties appeal to when addressing Russian-speaking voters? The majority of Estonian parties carry out election campaigns in two languages: Their websites present information in both Russian and Estonian; their platforms are also translated into Russian, and one can see campaign banners in Russian in the streets. There are election [videos](#) featuring municipal election candidates describing their platforms in Russian. Some party leaders even run personal Facebook [pages](#) in Russian. But not everyone is happy with this state of affairs:

“When I go to downtown Tallinn, what do I see?” [said Mart Helme](#), the leader of **the far-right populist** Conservative People's Party of Estonia (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE*). “Bilingual posters of the Center Party everywhere. What kind of motivation to learn the language are we talking about?”

Helme also recently [decided](#) that the EKRE will no longer communicate with journalists in Russian, because of a [scandal](#) in which a politician in favor of closing down Russian-speaking kindergartens and schools in Estonia gave an interview in that language. Perhaps the EKRE is the only party that shows no interest in the Russian-speaking voter during this election campaign: The party does not conduct any noticeable campaigning in Russian. Besides, it is precisely this party that has [put forward an initiative](#) to ban non-citizens from voting even in municipal elections, since, [according to Helme](#), they opt for political forces “representing a way of thinking that is hostile towards the native population, and they cherish a very different hierarchy of values, which poses a threat to the Estonian state and culture.”

The Center Party, the Social Democrats and, surprisingly, the conservative-nationalist *Erakond Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit (IRL)* focus on the Russian agenda most of all. The IRL recently started to organize a monthly “Club of political thought” that gives people the opportunity to talk to ministers in Russian.

The IRL pays great attention to problems of integration, a process it defines as promotion of learning the

Estonian language and establishing Estonian language centers in cities including Tallinn and Narva, where the Russian-speaking population constituted [45%](#) and [97%](#) respectively. The IRL also pays attention to the development of TV channels in Russian in a somewhat different form, [saying](#) “Russian-speaking media are important, although the very idea of ETV+ should necessarily meet the interests of taxpayers.”

The Social Democratic Party (*Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond*, SDE) builds its Russian-language content around opportunities for Russian speakers residing in Estonia to receive information in Russian: Initiatives range from the protection of Russian-language media (such as the First Baltic Channel, modelled after Channel One Russia, or ETV+) down to Russian translation of directions for over-the-counter drugs. Besides, similarly to the IRL, the Social Democrats [promise to integrate](#) the Russian-speaking minority into Estonian society. Integration is seen as teaching them Estonian, while retaining the possibility to obtain education in Russian; providing a number of services in Russian; simplifying the procedure for obtaining Estonian citizenship (in particular, granting Estonian citizenship to holders of gray passports). Moreover, the Social Democrats identify Russian-speaking youth representatives among their ranks, such as Anastasia Kovalenko and the Bogdanov sisters. This approach can help the party kill two birds with one stone: to attract both Russian-speaking voters and youth, since this is the first election when the voting age was lowered to 16. At the same time, the bet on Russian-speaking candidates resembles the strategy of the Center Party, who are extremely popular among Russian-speakers in Estonia partly [because](#) the party has allowed Russian speaking politicians to play a prominent role in their rank and file.

The issue of Gray Passports

The Center Party’s national platform does not tackle the problems of the Russian-speaking population, or relations with Russia at all. However, on the first page of their Tallinn [platform](#), they write: “Our goal is to make Tallinn a happy place for everyone: youth, the elderly, Estonians, Russians and representatives of other nationalities.” The centrists promise to provide public services in Russian and English in Tallinn, as well as increasing the number of Estonian classes in Russian-language kindergartens. The issue of citizenship is also included in the election campaign of the Center Party: Party members Kadri Simson and Yana Toom [opt for](#) granting Estonian citizenship to all holders of gray passports.

The Reform Party has significantly [bolstered its position](#) among Russian-speaking voters: It ranks second in terms of popularity, having outstripped the Social Democrats despite their strong position [against](#) the bilingual policy and the official status of the Russian language. “We need to do more to ensure that not only Russian speakers but also all aliens who reside in Estonia and want to live here can learn the state language,” [says Ants Laaneots](#) from the Reform Party. Moreover, the Reform Party does not approve of simplifying the procedure for granting Estonian citizenship to holders of gray passports. “Many holders of gray passports know the state language,” Laaneots [explained](#). “I have come across such ‘gray’ guys. Many of them have passed exams in Estonian, are fluent in speaking and writing. They have the appropriate certificates. When asked about their lack of Estonian citizenship, they answer frankly that it is convenient to have a gray passport. They can travel to Russia without visas, and move freely in the Schengen area. They are only restricted in their right to participate in elections.”

For the EKRE, the Russian question is only about the promotion of the Estonian language. This is how the party leader [promises](#) to “eliminate segregation in Estonia.”

Apart from the well-established parties, new electoral blocs will participate in the election. For example, the thus far irreplaceable kingpin of the Center Party and former Mayor of Tallinn Edgar Savisaar, as well as a number of other party members, have decided to run on separate electoral lists while remaining members of the Center Party. Savisaar is often perceived as a defender of Russian-speakers’ interests. And he has repeatedly [advocated](#) for lifting sanctions against Russia, at least by Estonia, and for active cooperation with Russia. Hence, [with reference to the members of the Savisaar’s electoral list](#), a number of the Russian propagandist media report that the split in the Center Party resulted from their pro-Russian stance. This was related in particular to participation in a reception at the Russian embassy to commemorate Russia Day on June 12, and laying flowers at the monument of the Bronze Soldier on May 9. In addition, the Russian propagandist media [describe](#) “Savisaar’s list” as “a new political force ready to more consistently articulate and defend the interests of the Russian-speaking residents of Estonia.” However, members of the Center Party [believe](#) that the “split” was caused not by pro-Russian sentiments but by financing of the electoral bloc by

political opponents and competitors of the Center Party.

Besides, Estonia's Russian discussion club [was planning](#) to register a new Russian party, the "Estonian Peoples' Party." It did not succeed, because the group [joined](#) the Estonian United Left Party (*Eestimaa Ühendatud Vasakpartei*), a small group with no representatives in the European or Estonian parliaments, this spring.

Increased attention to the Russian-speaking population in response to this election provokes an ambiguous response. On the one hand, some politicians seem delighted. Thus, for example, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, Jevgeni Ossinovski, who is from a prominent Russian speaking family in Estonia, said he was "hoping for all major Estonian parties to treat the political interests of Russian speakers more seriously and revive their electoral interest in this group of voters." On the other hand, the [public fears](#) that the current election campaign will once again exacerbate relations between Russians and Estonians by "taking advantage of" and "being a parasite on the national question."

Indeed, at the moment Estonia's party system is "de-ethnicized": Russian parties ceased to exist in 2012, and none of the parties today deals exclusively with the interests of the Russian-speaking population. Still, many parties make that group's interests part of their agenda. As a result, serious politicization of ethnicity accompanies each election, when the interests of the Russian-speaking population often boil down to linguistic or citizenship-related issues. Therefore, the majority of political parties in Estonia keep repeating the discourse about language and citizenship, which has not changed much in form for the last 26 years, instead of articulating the pressing economic and social interests of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia.

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