

ESTONIA

Russians

Activity: 1991-2003

General notes

NA

Movement start and end dates

- Estonia harbors a significant Russian minority, residing primarily in Tallinn and the border cities of Narva and Sillamae. When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, some Russian leaders from the North-East began to advocate territorial autonomy for Russians within Estonia. We therefore peg the start date to 1991. In July 1993 a referendum on autonomy was held in Narva and Sillamae, which yielded significant support for autonomy. The Independent reported at the time, however that the residents of the two cities were “insisting that they were not seeking to break away completely” or to become “part of Russia”, but merely sought greater autonomy such “the power to levy taxes, make their own foreign policy and amend national legislation” (Independent 1993). The latter claim must be understood in the context of a June 1993 law that designated the vast majority of Russians in Estonia as ‘foreigners’.
- The referendum was declared illegal by the Estonian government. Soon after, the movement appears to have died down as more moderate politicians took over, leading to the stabilization of the situation (Hewitt & Cheetham 2000; MAR). We did not find evidence for further separatist activity. Following our ten-year rule, we code an end to the movement in 2003. [start date: 1991; end date: 2003]
 - o Note: In 2007, there were large-scale protests of Russians in Tallinn precipitated by the Estonia government’s decision to dismantle a Soviet-era war memorial, which was widely seen as an anti-Russian move in the Estonian society. However, we could not find evidence of claims for increased territorial self-determination in this context (Trimbach and O’Lear 2015). The Estonia Centre Party is seeking votes from the Russian-speaking population, but it is not composed predominantly of ethnic Russians and does not advocate territorial autonomy (Euractive 2019).

Dominant claim

- The 1993 referendum focused on internal autonomy (see above). We found no evidence for a claim other than autonomy. [1991-2003: autonomy claim]

Independence claim

NA

Irredentist claim

- At the time of the 1993 referendum, the two cities made it clear that they were not seeking a merger with Russia (Independent 1993). [no irredentist claim]

Claimed territory

- Russian demands for autonomy are tied to the Ida-Viru region, an administrative unit in the east of Estonia. In 1993, they held a referendum in the towns Narva, Kohtla-Järve and Sillamäe, on the autonomous status of this region (Simson 2013). We code this area based on the Global Administrative Areas database.

Sovereignty declarations

- In 1993, the local governments of Narva and Sillamae organized a unilateral referendum on autonomy and subsequently the Sillamae City Council changed its status to that of an autonomous zone in Estonia. But the authorities in both Narva and Sillamae vowed to abide by the ruling of the Estonian Supreme Court on the validity of the referendum (which decided the referendum was invalid; see MAR). [1993: autonomy declaration]

Separatist armed conflict

- We did not find any instances of violence, and thus code the movement as NVIOLSD. [NVIOLSD]

Historical context

- The administrative system of the Estonian SSR (significantly reformed in 1989) largely survived in the restored Republic of Estonia, thus regions (counties) remained with very limited powers. Under Soviet rule, the Russian minority in Estonia was privileged; Russians were allowed to speak Russian with public authorities and there were Russian-speaking schools. This began to change when Estonia's independence was restored in 1991. There were some signs of change already prior to Estonia's independence. January 18, 1989, the Supreme Soviet of Estonia voted to make Estonian the official state language. However, the Estonian language law was far less radical compared to the Lithuanian law, adopted in 1988. Essentially, the 1989 Estonian language law put Estonian and Russian at a par (Hogan-Brun et al. 2008: 519). Still, the developments in the last years of the Soviet Union's existence lowered the status of Russian and Russians in Estonia (given their previously privileged position), hence we code a restriction. [1989: cultural rights restriction]

Concessions and restrictions

- The probably most significant development regarding Russians in Estonia after the restoration of independence is the tough citizenship policy began almost immediately after independence, which effectively led to the establishment of an 'ethnic democracy' wherein non-Estonians were denied voting rights (except for the local level, where non-citizens were allowed to vote, but not to stand for office, see Smith & Wilson 1997: 850-851). Among the more notable developments in this regard is the reinstatement of the 1938 citizenship law in 1992. This implied Estonian citizenship is automatically granted to all who were citizens of Estonia in June 1940 (prior to Estonia's annexation into the Soviet Union) and their descendants. All other residents must have resided in Estonia for two years starting from March 30, 1990, before they can apply for naturalization, and applicants must demonstrate proficiency of Estonian (Raun 1997: 429). The law took effect in February 1992. In late June 1993 the Estonian parliament passed a new law which classified almost all of Estonia's estimated 500,000 ethnic Russians as 'foreigners' (Independent 1993). In 1995 a new citizenship law was adopted, which made it yet more difficult for ethnic Russians to garner Estonian citizenship. September 1993, the Estonian parliament adopts a new law on education according to which high school education in languages other than

Estonian is to be phased out by 2000 (Raun 1997: 431). The law was later moderated and postponed to 2007 (Hogan-Brun et al. 2007: 559). As of 2006, about 8 per cent of the Estonian population continued to be stateless, and thus without the right to vote in national elections. However, the denial of citizenship is not coded as a restriction since it implies exclusion from the state, and not a lowering of the autonomy or cultural rights status.

- After independence, Estonia's language law was tightened, and Russian was relegated to the status of a foreign language. With the 1992 constitution, Estonia became the only official state language. Administration now had to be conducted in Estonian, language tests for public officials were introduced, and legislation was even applied to the private sector (Hogan-Brun et al. 2008: 522). The 1995 language law defines in more detail in which domains the use of Estonian is mandatory. Subsequent legislation abolished the two-stream system in higher education; by the end of the 1990s all higher education was in Estonian (or in English, see Hogan-Brun et al. 2008: 524). The strict language policy introduced in the early 1990s was moderated somewhat upon international pressure around 2000, but in essence it remained unchanged. For instance, in 2000, the requirement that employees in the private sector (if in contact with the public) need to have command of Estonian was weakened and henceforth applied only where there is a 'justified public interest' (Hogan-Brun et al. 2008: 533). In 2003, a more liberal law regarding place names was adopted. The general rule remained that place names need be in Estonian, but now exceptions are allowed, depending on the language that was predominantly spoken in the area by the majority of the population by 1939. Note that most Russians came into Estonia after 1939. According to Minorities at Risk, "Language restrictions have adversely affected the group's educational and occupational opportunities. Amnesty International released a report in 2006 stating that Russians "often find themselves de facto excluded from the labor market and educational system through a system of rigorous language and citizenship requirements for employment and limited possibilities of studying in minority languages in higher education." In light of this evidence we code a single cultural rights restriction in 1992 since subsequent legislation appears to have fleshed out the principles that were established in 1992 rather than changed the status of Russian fundamentally, and concessions around 2000 appear rather minimal. [1992: cultural rights restriction]
- In October 1993, a law granting cultural autonomy to national minorities is approved by parliament. The law mentions ethnic Russians as a national minority. However, Estonian citizenship is a prerequisite for national minority status, and due to the strict citizenship laws, many Russians did not have Estonian citizenship. Moreover, long-term and stable ties with Estonia are required, another provision that excludes part of the Russian population from minority status. As of 2009, only Finns and Swedes have attained minority status. Moreover, attaining national minority status is argued to confer only very limited advantages (Poleshchuk 2009). For all these reasons, we do not code a concession.
- In 1994, there was an administrative reform. The second administrative tier became part of the central government and governors were now appointed by the central government (Mäeltsemees 2012: 159). However, we do not code this as a restriction since it is, first and foremost, an administrative reform and does not appear to have changed the autonomy status (municipalities were strengthened, at the same time).

Regional autonomy

- Estonia is a centralized, unitary state. The Russians do not have regional autonomy.

De facto independence

NA

Major territorial changes

- Estonia attained independence in 1991, implying a host change. [1991: host change (new)]

EPR2SDM

<i>Movement</i>	Russians
<i>Scenario</i>	1:1
<i>EPR group(s)</i>	Russians
<i>Gwgroupid(s)</i>	36602000

Power access

- We follow EPR. [1991-2003: powerless]

Group size

- We follow EPR. [0.256]

Regional concentration

- There is a concentration of Russians in Estonia's northeast (see MAR), though according to MAR (GC7) less than 50% of Estonia's Russians reside there. This matches with information from GeoEPR, where the Russians are coded as not concentrated, and from the 2000 census. [not concentrated]

Kin

- Estonia's Russians have several kin groups in both adjoining and non-adjoining countries: Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Armenia, Israel, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (EPR, MAR). [kin in adjoining country]

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