



## **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS:**

### **CASES OF ESTONIA AND LATVIA**

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#### **1. Introduction**

Political participation of national minorities in decision-making process, especially on the issues directly concerning the minority has become considered to be one of the litmus tests of the democratic system of a country. In case of Estonia and Latvia, the lack of political rights among the large proportion of its post-war immigrant population has led some scholars to classify the democratic systems of those countries as 'ethnic democracy' (Smith 1996; Pettai 1998; Järve 2000) or an 'ethnic control regime' (Pettai and Hallik 2002). Both of these classifications refer to some degree of democracy deficit in the political systems in operation.

However, before going to the analysis of political participation of national minorities, some peculiarities of the situation of those two Baltic countries should be discussed. The first question is the definition of the national minority itself. Large part of the non-native Estonian and Latvian population comprises of people who have immigrated to these countries after the WWII from the other parts of the USSR, mainly Russia. The history of their immigration puts them into comparative situation with immigrants in other Western European countries, such as Turkish immigrants in Germany. That is how these people are often seen by Estonians and Latvians as well as classified in the official government policies. However, the significant difference is that most of those Russians do not see themselves as immigrants since the relocation to Estonia and Latvia took place at a time when there were no borders between the Soviet republics. Thus, majority of these people did not see the moving to Estonia or Latvia different from moving between places in Russia itself. This 'disagreement' over the definition creates some tension in the policy process and public discussion.

Secondly, the pure share of non-native groups in the population – 32% in Estonia and 42% in Latvia) influences significantly the political process. In some geographical locations Russian-speakers make up more than half of the population and in case of places such as Narva and Sillamäe in Estonia, over 90% of their residents are Russian-speakers. In those areas it is rather Estonians who are a minority.

Thirdly, the nationalities policy of Soviet Union or rather the lack of it, had far-reaching impact on interethnic relations in USSR and consequently on the policies of the successor states. Segregation of two communities, titular population and post-war immigrants, in geographical as well as social, economical, cultural educational and almost all other spheres of life lead to highly segregated societies where the contacts between people from these groups were minimal.

And last but not least, presence of Russia as historic homeland and the identification of itself as a kin state to all those millions of Russians who live in former parts of USSR presents itself a significant factor in minority-majority relations in the region. Russia's policies towards what it perceives as its diaspora community are closely tied up with its geopolitical interests and thus for the successor states the questions of minority policies often become part of its security issues. This securitization of minority issues puts Russian-speaking community in the position of the hostage of security policies of Estonia and Latvia.

## **2. Political Rights and Legal Framework**

Politically, non-titular populations of Estonia and Latvia can be categorized in many groups. There are so called historic minorities which both states acknowledge as the only 'true' national minorities. In Estonia these are Baltic Germans, Swedes, Jews and Russians. In Latvia, in addition to those there is a almost extinct ethnic group of Livs. However, these ethnic groups, with an exception of Russians, are either almost or totally extinct, mostly through emigration before WWII. As already mentioned the largest part of non-titular population is made up post WWII immigrants, mainly Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians. However, this group can be divided into three groups based on their political rights (see Table 1). First, majority of these people are citizens of Estonia or Latvia and thus enjoy full political rights.<sup>1</sup> Second, quite significant number of them in Estonia and fewer in Latvia have the citizenship of Russian Federation. Third, there is a significant number of Russian-speakers in both countries who do not hold the citizenship of any country and are defined by the governments of these countries as 'people with undetermined citizenship' which de facto means they are stateless. Last two groups that for example in case of Estonia make up half of Russian-speaking population, do not have the right to vote in national elections, neither to form or participate in political parties or take up posts in state administration. In Estonia, third country nationals and stateless people have the right to vote in local elections without the right to run for elected office; in Latvia, they don't have political rights on local level either. Thus, when discussing the political participation of minorities in Estonia and Latvia one has to bear in mind, that around half of immigrant minorities in

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<sup>1</sup> In Latvia, more than half of non-Latvians are citizens of Latvia (56%), in Estonia almost a half of Russian-speakers are the citizens of Estonia (48%) (author's calculations based on data from Latvian Naturalisations board 2007; Kodakondsus- ja Migratsiooniamet 2007).

each country do not have political rights on the first place. Political participation opportunities of these people are very limited leaving private sector (for example journalism) and civil society as the only options to have a say in decision making process.

**Table 1: Citizenship statistics (%)**

	<b>Estonia (2007)</b>	<b>Latvia (2007)</b>
Citizenship of country of residence	83,3	82
Citizenship of Russian Federation	7	1
Citizenship of third country	0,7	1
Stateless	9	16

Source: Kodakondsus ja Migratsiooniamet 2007 (Estonia); Latvian Naturalisation Board 2008 (Latvia)

Also both Estonia and Latvia ratified the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities with a special clause limiting the definition of national minority only to those who are citizens of the country although in case of Latvia, people with other citizenship or stateless are also considered belonging to national minority in case they have long-established ties with Latvia. Due to those limitations the scope of the applicability of FCNM was limited significantly and the influence of the CoE monitoring process on the extension of political rights has been minimal.

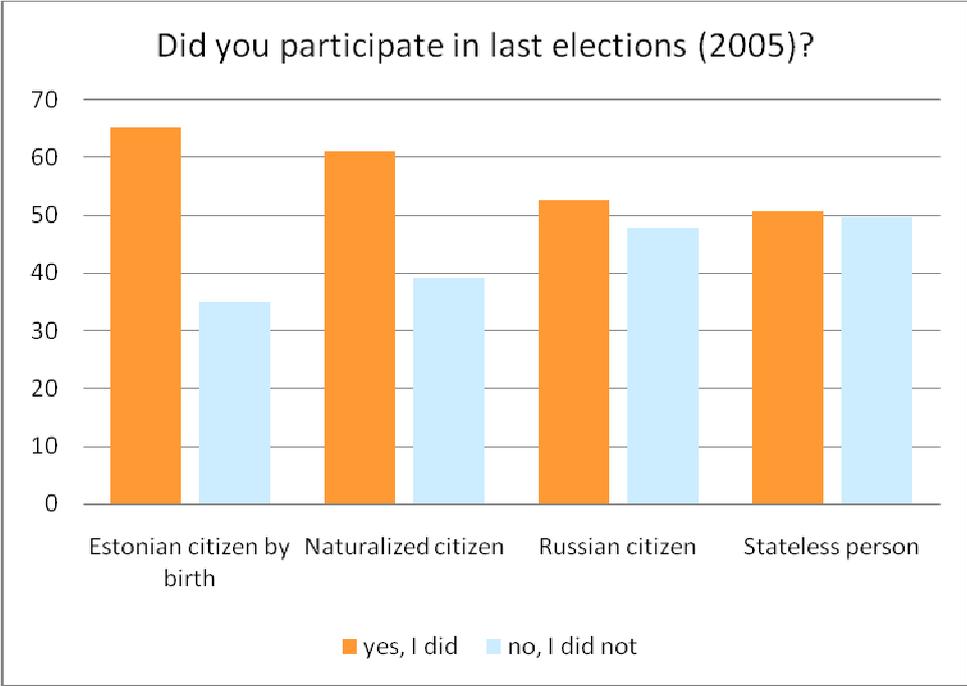
**3. Political Representation: Voting Rights and Political Activism**

**3.1.National Elections**

In Estonia voter turnout has decreased year by year. The participation of 68 per cent of eligible voters in the 1992 elections for the Riigikogu was followed by a decrease in activity. Voter activity rose again in the 2007 elections, where the voter turnout was 62 per cent. Elections’ turnout is even lower in the case of elections for the local governments. The voter activity is the same for ethnic Estonian and Russian speaking voters. The 1992 elections of the Riigikogu, and especially the elections for local governments where non-citizens can also vote, have shown that the voter activity of non-Estonians is similar to the Estonian average – often even higher. Thus the overall voter turnout in Estonia in the 1992 Riigikogu elections was 67 per cent, similar to that of predominantly Russian speaking towns – 66.8 per cent in Narva, 66.4 per cent in Kohtla-Järve and as high as 83.4 per cent in Sillamäe. In the 1996 local government elections, the voter turnout of non-citizens reached 85 per cent in all of Estonia according to the Electoral Committee, while total voter turnout was just 49.7 per cent. However, in two of the last elections (Riigikogu elections 2003 and 2007) it was East Viru County that had the lowest voter turnout (52 per cent on both occasions, compared to average turnouts of 58 per cent in 2003 and 61 per cent in 2007). Similarly, based on the results of survey

carried out right after 2003 municipal elections (where also non-citizens could vote), Russian-speaking people had slightly smaller participation rate compare to Estonians (see Graphic 1).

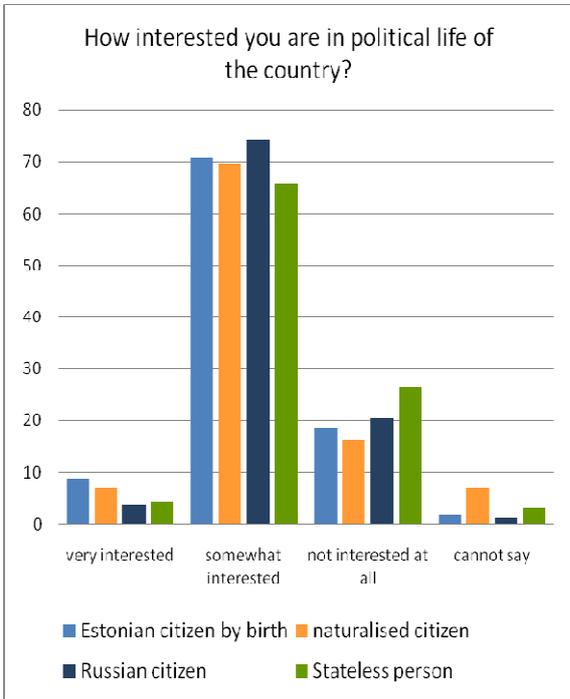
**Graphic 1: Survey results about participation in municipal elections 2005 (TÜ Pol 2005).**



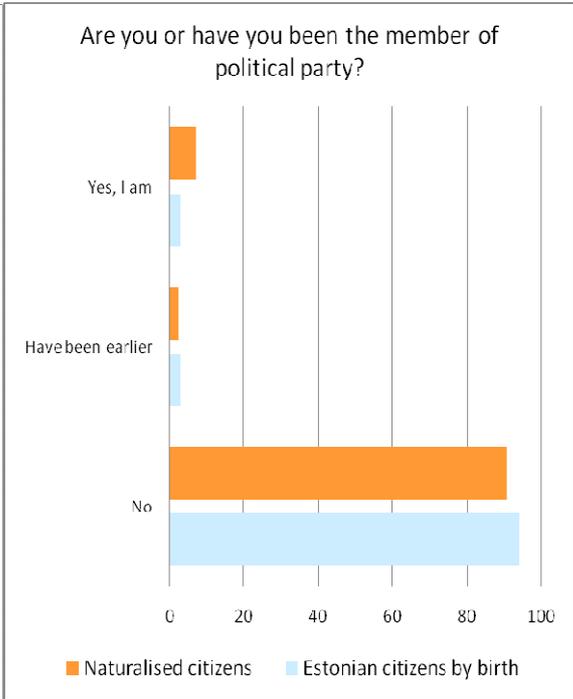
Source: Post-election Survey on Political Participation, Univeristy of Tartu 2005

A further similarity appears in the level of interest of ethnic Estonians and non-Estonians in politics and their participation in political groups. The poll “Me, the World and Media” conducted by the Department of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tartu shows that 74% of both ethnic Estonian and Russian speaking respondents stated that they were not members of any political group or party and that they were not interested in politics (MeeMa 2005). Similarly, a survey conducted the same year by the Department of Political Science indicated that around 80% of both, ethnic Estonians and Russian-speakers, are not members of any political party (see Graphic 3). However, respondents with undetermined citizenship claimed more frequently that they were uninterested in politics (see Graphic 2). This abstention from political life can be easily explained by the lack of political rights.

**Graphic 2. Survey results about the interest in political life (TÜ Pol 2005).**



**Graphic 3. Survey results about the membership in political parties (TÜ Pol 2005).**



Source: *Post-election Survey on Political Participation, Univeristy of Tartu 2005*

The fact that Russian-speaking voters now constitute about 15 per cent of the electorate in Estonia and their voting activity is similar to ethnic Estonians should theoretically mean that the role of non-Estonians in the country’s political life has increased in importance. It should also mean that their representation in elected bodies has increased. Two courses exist for the realization of this increased representation: either through what are called ethnic parties (i.e. the so-called ethnic Russian parties), or through mainstream parties. In the Estonian political practice, the electoral lists of candidates with an ethnic background other than Estonian have thus far been unable to cross the 5 per cent threshold in elections to the Riigikogu. Throughout the years the number of members of parliament from minority ethnic groups has been around 6 (out of 100) which is currently three times than the percentage of Russian speaking voters in the population. With an exception of six members of Russian-speaking community elected to Riigikogu in 1995 and four members in 1999, the rest of the MPs have been elected through the lists of mainstream parties, mainly Central Party (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Representatives of the Russian speaking population in the 1992, 1995, 1999, 2003 and 2007 compositions of the Riigikogu, by factions.**

Year of Riigikogu elections	1992	1995	1999	2003	2007
<b>Number of non-Estonian members</b>	0	6	6	5	6
<b>Faction</b>		Our Home is Estonia	Centre Party (2); United People's Party of Estonia (4)	Centre Party (4); Reform Party (1)	Centre Party (5); Reform Party (1);

Source: Lauristin, M. & Kristina Kallas. "The Participation of Non-Estonians in Estonian Social Life and Politics" in *Estonian Human Development Report 2008*. Tallinn, 2008

The voting preference study conducted by the Department of Political Science at the University of Tartu regarding the 2007 Riigikogu elections (TÜ Pol 2007) indicated that ethnic Russian parties have almost no appeal for non-Estonians. The study also showed that the preferences of the latter are divided between major political parties dominated by ethnic Estonians that are represented in the Riigikogu, with the majority of non-Estonians supporting the Estonian Centre Party. After the crisis of April 2007, the aforementioned tendency of the Russian speaking electorate increased further: according to polls support for the Centre Party became dominant among the Russian speaking community in Estonia (Lauristin & Kallas 2008).

In Latvia the share of the Russian-speaking MPs in Seima is higher (currently 18 out of 100), however, it is still below the share of the Russian-speaking people among citizenry. Similarly, there is a preference towards mainstream parties among Russian-speaking voters.

### **3.2. Political Participation in Local Government**

In case of Latvia political participation in municipal elections is inhibited by the lack of political rights among the large part of Russian-speakers and the representation of minority members in city councils and administration is lower than their proportion among citizens. Minority representatives make up 12.3 per cent in city councils and 11 per cent in administrations (Pabriks 2002). In Riga, however, minority representatives make up only 4 per cent in city council and 7 per cent in city administration (ibid).

In Estonia, the Russian-speaking population has been rather active in local elections (see paragraph 3.1 above) and in municipalities where Russian-speaking people make up significant part of populations, such as Tallinn, the city councils tend to represent well the ethnic composition of local population. Twenty-four of the 63 members (38 per cent) elected to the Tallinn City Council in 2005 are non-Estonian, while an entire 63 per cent of the 32 members of the Centre Party faction are non-Estonian. The proportion of Russian-speaking members in city councils is even higher in majority

Russian municipalities such as Narva and Sillamäe. Remarkably, again, no ethnic Russian party has won the elections of local governments in Tallinn or East Viru County where Russian-speakers dominantly live.

#### **4. Civil Service and Advisory and Consultative Bodies**

Access to public office represents the openness or closeness of the state administration to the people from minority ethnic background. Holding a public office job such as one in ministries or agencies provides the direct involvement in the policy implementation process as well as the policy development process and thus can create the feeling of ownership of the policy. When the ministries and state agencies are exclusively filled with employees from dominant ethnic group then the citizens from ethnic minority groups tend to feel as objects rather than subjects of state policies directed to them.

Since 1991 restatement of their independence, Estonia and Latvia had to build the state administration institutions from the scratch. As the result of citizenship and language policies the new state institutions became almost exclusively filled with ethnic Estonian or Latvian employees. In Latvia 8 per cent of employees of ten ministries are minority representatives (Pabriks 2002) (see Table 3). In Estonia 2.8 per cent of employees of 13 ministries and central state administrative bodies are minority representatives (7.6 per cent of all central state institutions) (Nestra 2008). And although titular nationalities tend to be still overrepresented in the ministries, there is a tendency towards more heterogeneity in terms of ethnic background of state officials in both countries in recent years. This has been the result of the naturalisation process that has increased the share of ethnic minority people among citizenry and the generation change where young people of immigrant decent are not affected by the impact of citizenship and language policy that excluded their parents from political participation.

**Table 3: Ethnic proportionality in Latvia's ministries<sup>2</sup>**

<b>Ethnic origin</b>	<b>Proportion among citizens (%)</b>	<b>Proportion in ministries (%)</b>	<b>Proportionality index</b>
Latvians	76.3	92.10	1.20
Russians	17.4	5.70	0.32
Belarussians	1.3	0.30	0.23
Poles	2.2	0.65	0.29
Ukrainians	0.4	0.17	0.42
Lithuanians	0.9	0.23	0.25
Jews	0.3	0.10	0.33
Others	0.9	0.60	0.66

Source: Pabriks 2002

The situation is much better in police where the proportion of non-Estonians and non-Latvians reflects the proportions of the whole population. In Estonia 22.2 per cent of police employees are from ethnic groups other than Estonian (Nestra 2008).<sup>3</sup> In Latvia, Latvians are even slightly underrepresented and Ukrainians highly overrepresented among police employees (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Minority representation in police in Latvia**

<b>Ethnic group</b>	<b>Ratio (%)</b>	<b>Proportionality index</b>
<b>Latvians</b>	65.8	0.86
<b>Russians</b>	25.0	1.43
<b>Belarussians</b>	3.0	2.30
<b>Ukrainians</b>	2.1	5.25
<b>Poles</b>	2.0	0.90
<b>Lithuanians</b>	0.7	0.77
<b>Other</b>	1.1	0.91

Source: Pabriks 2002

Major problem associated with the ethnic minorities' access to public office is the low proficiency of official language. Although it is required to be able to speak state's official language in the highest level, it is often the case that one has to be a native speaker to be able to perform the tasks (and

<sup>2</sup> Data presented in table 3 and 4 is from the survey carried out in 2002 and thus does not present the official statistics of ethnic representation in Latvia's ministries.

<sup>3</sup> This data is from survey carried out in 2008 and does not represent official statistics about ethnic representation in Estonian police.

more often actually expectations of the heads of the ministries) prescribed in the ministries such as writing official state notes. As a result of long-term period of exclusion of Russian-speakers from the state offices, the young people from Russian-speaking community prefer to acquire the professions other than the ones that lead to public office job. In this way the professions such as medicine and physics are much more popular than political science among Russian students in the University of Tartu (Lauristin and Vihalemm 2008). Additionally, the securitization of minority issues discussed in introduction introduces the questions of loyalty and trust in employing Russian-speaking people. High-level state officials and politicians often admitted in in-depth interviews carried out in 2007 that although the active participation of Russian-speakers in economic and social life of Estonia is positive, one has to be careful when it comes to employing them in state administration (see Lauristin and Vihalemm 2008).

The role of advisory and consultative bodies in political life and especially in policy development process has been rather minimal in both countries. In Estonia there is currently no efficiently functioning advisory or consultative body in the field of minority issues. In Latvia, several councils have been established within last seven years however, their impact on policy has been minimal and has remained in the form of consultation rather than full-scale participation. In both countries the councils established in municipal level have proved to be more efficient.

## **5. Self-government rights and civil society**

Latvia and Estonia have both laws on cultural autonomy originating from interwar period and for which the countries were highly prized at that time. The law provides significant self-government rights to national minorities in cultural sphere from establishing theatres to minority language primary schools. However, minority ethnic groups have used very little the opportunities offered by the laws. In case of Estonia only small ethnic group of Ingrian Finns has registered its autonomy and Swedish minority is in the process of registering with an aim to get financial support from the state to their cultural preservation activities. Largest ethnic group – Russian – have not made an attempt to use these self-government rights in the cultural sphere. To some extent it can be explained with the restrictive definition of national minority that excludes those without Estonian citizenship among whom majority are ethnic Russians. Still this does not provide the full explanation since the number of ethnic Russians among citizenry is large enough to form the cultural council required by the law<sup>4</sup> as the ultimate body that manages the self-government rights.

The more civil society organizations exist in a society and the tighter their cooperation network, the more actively the residents participate in the political life of the country, including elections. Actual membership in civil society organizations is similarly low in the case of all ethnic groups in Estonia. However, based on survey results more ethnic Estonians reported that they were interested in the activities of the following organizations without being members themselves: environmental protection, heritage conservation and locality associations (52.1 per cent of ethnic Estonians

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<sup>4</sup> The law in Estonia requires that at least 3000 people sign the act about the establishment of such cultural council.

compared to 31 per cent of respondents of other ethnic groups), educational and training societies (40 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively), charitable clubs (30.4 per cent compared to 8.9 per cent) and leisure and hobby clubs (48.5 per cent compared to 23.6 per cent). Religious societies, whose activities received more attention from respondents of other ethnic groups than ethnic Estonians (15.4 per cent of respondents of other ethnic groups compared to 8.2 per cent of ethnic Estonians) emerged as an exception to this trend (MeeMa 2005).

Despite the fact that the participation of the Russian-speaking people in civil society organisations has recently shown some improvement, the important problem of segregation persists in the case of youth organizations, professional associations and hobby clubs. Language plays an important factor in the segregation of civil society, especially in media where Russian-speaking people often consume mainly Russian media coming directly from Russian Federation. Additionally, religion is another segregating factor although to lesser extent since both communities are in majority not active church-goers. Minority civil society organisations can mostly be classified as either cultural or social (i.e. Community of Russians in Latvia, Russian cultural centre 'Lyra' in Estonia) that focus on the culture and language and less on socio-economic and political issues of the minority. Differently from Estonia in Latvia there exist also minority-run organisations that provide legal or information assistance.

## **6. Conclusion**

Within last 15 years Estonia and Latvia have gone through the process of ethnic diversification of their citizenry. When in 1991 right after the restoration of their independence due to citizenship policies put on practice by young governments the citizenry in both countries consisted of almost exclusively of titular ethnic group, i.e. Estonians or Latvians. Large majority of post-war Russian-speaking immigrants were left with the status of statelessness. While naturalisation process that brings more and more Russian-speaking residents into citizenry has slowed down in recent years, a momentum has been created already where half of the Russian-speaking community in both countries have the citizenship of Estonia or Latvia respectively. This growth of Russian-speaking voters means that more pressure is exercised on political life, especially in areas where the interest if national minority is the highest such as language policy and education. Both, in Estonia and Latvia these new citizens prefer to enter politics through mainstream parties rather than ethnic Russian parties. And although the representation of Russian-speaking community in national elected bodies is still far below their share among citizenry, in the municipal level the representation is reaching the proportions in electorate, at least in Estonia.

However, problems of obtaining political rights remain high on the agenda for both countries as there is still large proportion of population that does not have the citizenship of any country. Additionally, questions of not sufficient knowledge of official languages as well as the prohibition of the use of Russian as a minority language in political debates remain as an obstacle to full participation of Russian-speaking population in political life of those countries.

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