Estonia after 1991
Identity and Integration
Toivo U. Raun
Indiana University

The past two decades have witnessed a reassessment and broadening of conceptions of identity among both the ethnic Estonian and Russian populations in Estonia. In addition to a continuing focus on aspects of national distinctiveness, emphasizing their small numbers, language, culture, territorial homeland, and—as a new factor—the state, the Estonians have increasingly engaged with a wider range of identities (local, regional, and European). Among these, the regional level has been the most productive, enhancing Estonia’s already strong ties to Finland but also fostering closer connections to its other Nordic and Baltic neighbors. Although integration into NATO and integration into the European Union continue to receive strong approval, a European identity is still in the process of formation. For the Russian community, the fall of communism led to a full reevaluation of the bases of its identity. The major trend has seen a shift from a political consciousness (loyalty to the Soviet Union) to a greater emphasis on the Russian language and ethnicity. In spite of the general peacefulness of ethnic relations, any meaningful integration of the two major nationalities in Estonia remains incomplete, as graphically demonstrated in the Bronze Soldier affair in April 2007. Russians, especially younger ones, increasingly know the Estonian language, but views of history, especially regarding World War II, and attitudes toward Russia still differ markedly between the Estonian and Russian populations. The process of integration is further complicated by the neighboring and still powerful kin-state of the local Russian population.

**Keywords:** Estonia; identity; integration; Russians in Estonia; Bronze Soldier

Nearly two decades have passed since the restoration of Estonian independence in August and September 1991, making its existence almost equal in length of time to that of the first Estonian Republic in the 1920s and 1930s. In the aftermath of the unresolved problems of World War I and the prevailing international fragmentation of the interwar era, graphically illustrated by the hapless and ineffective history of the League of Nations, Estonia and the other two Baltic states lost their first independence in 1940 as a consequence of the notorious Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939. In 2009, in an increasingly globalized and much more interconnected world, the future of the Baltic states appears considerably brighter than it was seventy years ago in spite of the current economic crisis and the ongoing chilly relationship with Russia, the former imperial ruler and still the claimant to
hegemony over the region it calls “post-Soviet space.” The half-century of Soviet occupation and rule, characterized by colonial dominion from Moscow and a coerced and distorted variant of modernization, left a powerful imprint in Estonia and its Baltic neighbors. Most significantly, Moscow’s policies led to sweeping changes in the ethnic composition of the population of Estonia and Latvia, reducing the proportion of the titular nations by a rate that proved to be unique among union republic nationalities. The challenges posed by these changes for the leaders and inhabitants of the restored Estonian state serve as the focus of the current essay as it offers an assessment of how conceptions of identity have evolved and to what extent a successful integration of society has been achieved since 1991. Following the collapse of a political and social system with such all-encompassing pretensions, it is perhaps understandable that most observers have tended to concentrate on the phenomenon of post-communist transition. Nevertheless, after nearly two decades, the experience of the Baltic peoples and states since 1991 deserves to be analyzed in its own right.

From the first signs of the spread of national consciousness in the Estonian lands by the 1860s and 1870s, intellectuals such as Jakob Hurt were acutely aware of the relatively small number of their compatriots and the implications this might have for the Estonian future. By the twentieth century, concerns about physical survival were heightened by the early onset of the demographic transition, and consistently low fertility rates have meant that Estonia—and Latvia—have not been able to recoup the large population losses that occurred during World War II and the Stalin era. Although some modest natural increase took place among the ethnic Estonian population in the post-Stalin decades, their numbers were swamped by the massive state-sponsored immigration of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians in the Soviet era. As a result, the ethnic Estonian share of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic’s population declined from an estimated 95.0 to 97.0 percent in 1945 to 61.5 percent in 1989, while the ethnic Russian and East Slavic (largely Russian speaking) proportions rose to 30.3 and 35.2 percent, respectively, in 1989. Substantial out-migration by Russians and other East Slavs in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse in the early 1990s reduced the ethnic Russian community to 25.6 percent by the census of 2000 and the total East Slavic share to 29.0 percent, while the Estonian proportion rose to 67.9 percent. Nevertheless, these recent trends did little to ease the sense of demographic vulnerability since an absolute decline in ethnic Estonian numbers has continued since 1991. Any assessment of Estonian identity in the recent past must take into account the sense of concern and urgency raised by this unfavorable demographic situation, which was further exacerbated by the significant economic dislocations of the transition from the Soviet system.

The period of restored independence has afforded the ethnic Estonian population new opportunities to engage with a greater variety of forms of identity. In addition to a continuing a focus on national identity, which had served as a defense mechanism in the Soviet era, the removal of constraints on freedom of movement and
communication has also fostered an interest in a wider range of identities—local, regional, and European. It is increasingly accepted that a modern citizen can and should have multiple identities, and rather than interfering with or diminishing each other, they serve to enhance and enrich the individual’s role in society. With regard to national identity, three markers that dominated in the Soviet decades continue to be highly salient: language, culture, and territorial homeland. Linguists, writers, and other intellectuals express much satisfaction with the regained prestige of Estonian as the state language and the privileged means of communication. At first glance it would appear that the position of the Estonian language, which survived the threat of Russification in the Soviet decades and also continued to be modernized as an effective means of communication, has never been stronger. Nevertheless, as the native tongue of a small-numbered people in an open society and a globalized world, Estonian is also seen to be threatened by what Tove Skutnabb-Kangas has termed “killer languages,” especially English and Russian. Some critics point to the powerful onslaught of English-language media and perceive a weakening of loyalty to the mother tongue. Others fear that the linguistic assimilation of a large Russian-speaking minority is impossible without distorting the form of Estonian spoken by ethnic Estonians. In short, a lively debate has ensued over the best means to ensure the survival of Estonian as a living and sustainable modern language: a protectionist approach that would stress organized language planning or an open one that boldly seeks to accommodate and assimilate external influences.

As the Estonians gained broad access to the external world following the restoration of independence, their cultural elites had to adjust to a transformed and more competitive environment. One of the ironies of the Soviet era had been that Moscow did indeed subsidize the native cultures of the union republics, including Estonia, presumably with the unrealized goal of inculcating a Marxist–Leninist worldview. With the advent of the free market, the certainty of publication or the purchase of artistic works disappeared, especially in the initial years of economic upheaval. The consumers of Estonian culture also faced rapidly increasing costs. The sudden availability of international culture, in the form of translations into Estonian or touring foreign performers, created a much more diversified and challenging cultural landscape. Nevertheless, a specifically Estonian culture, building on the traditions of the past as well as responding to new external stimuli, was able to adjust to the changed situation and once again command a growing audience as economic conditions improved. The all-Estonian song and dance festivals, the former dating from 1869, continued to be held at five-year intervals (1994, 1999, 2004, 2009) and proved that they could attract a massive number of participants and spectators even without the motivation of responding to external pressure, as in the Soviet era. Native belletristic literature also thrived, whether in the historical fiction of the established master Jaan Kross or the fresh approaches of popular young authors such as Tõnu Õnnepalu and Andrus Kivirähk. The Estonian attachment to a clearly defined territorial homeland has been enhanced by geographical features (water to the west, north, and east)
and minimal change in the area of ethnic Estonian settlement along the southern frontier in recent centuries. For nature-loving Estonians, the lifting of Soviet-era restrictions on freedom of access to the coastal and island regions within their own country constituted a key aspect of liberation from external domination. Combined with the doctrine of the “friendship of peoples,” emphasizing the historical helping hand of Russia and the Russians, the imposition of the Marxist–Leninist paradigm in the Soviet period greatly limited Estonian access to the past. Already in the glasnost years, an explosion of interest in the “blank spots” of the twentieth century had appeared, and a determined search for a usable past has been a characteristic feature of the period since 1991. Although recent studies of earlier centuries have resulted in a number of important academic works, the public interest remains largely focused on the four decades from World War I to the end of the Stalinist era. In the dominant discourse, the heroic emergence of an independent Estonia from 1918 to 1920, beyond anyone’s wildest dreams just a few years earlier, is viewed as the crowning achievement of Estonian history, but the performance of the interwar leadership, especially in the 1930s, is hotly debated and often criticized. The treatment of World War II and the horrors of Stalinism generate the deepest emotions, and they also reveal the most profound disagreements between Estonians and local Russians. Indeed, the Estonian government’s decision in April 2007 to move the Bronze Soldier, a Soviet-era monument, from central Tallinn to a military cemetery led to the greatest public unrest in the country since 1991. How to treat public space and properly commemorate the past remain highly contested issues among ethnic Estonians as well, as seen in the recent divisive debate over a monument to the War of Independence in Tallinn's central square that takes form of a massive “freedom cross.”

After four decades of existence—albeit with a fifty-year hiatus—the Estonian state is increasingly seen as an aspect of national identity, but mainly as a means to the end of safeguarding the future of the Estonian language and culture. Jakob Hurt’s nineteenth-century dictum that the Estonians can achieve greatness only in the realm of culture still remains a guidepost today. The brief revival of the Lutheran church among the Estonians during the glasnost years peaked by the early 1990s, and interest in religion declined in the ensuing two decades. A recent Gallup survey found that Estonia is the most secularized country in the world with only 14 percent of the population indicating that religion plays an important role in their lives. Close behind Estonia are Sweden and Denmark, suggesting that the Soviet period probably served to speed up a process of secularization that was already well underway.

The Soviet authorities strongly discouraged the cultivation of subnational identities, but they quickly reappeared in independent Estonia. The strongest such identities are based in southern Estonia (the Võro and Seto) and reflect the considerable linguistic differences between Northern and Southern Estonian. The Võro language (or dialect, depending on one’s point of view) revival is viewed ambivalently by some Estonian intellectuals who fear its potential to fragment the already
small-numbered Estonian nation. The Seto movement, based in the Orthodox church and customs strongly influenced by neighboring Russians, is hindered by the division of its traditional homeland between the Russian Federation and Estonia. Both the Võro and the Seto also consider themselves to be ethnic Estonians and focus on the cultural enrichment that their additional identity provides.

In the past two decades the most productive form of identity has been the regional one, in large part a result of the opening of Estonia’s borders with its Baltic Sea neighbors. The one unsurprising exception is Estonia’s relations with the heir of its former master to the east. The relationship with Finland, the most important external connection in modern times, has evolved to a new and more equal level in the past two decades, reflecting Estonia’s recent political and economic advances, and the traditional cultural ties among intellectuals that began in the late nineteenth century and continued during the Soviet era have deepened even further. Finland remains by far the main destination for Estonians working abroad, especially professionals such as doctors and musicians. To the south, Estonia’s relations with Latvia and Lithuania have never been stronger. Although this connection lacks the linguistic and cultural warmth of the Finnish one, all three Baltic peoples—and their leaders—increasingly recognize the mutual benefits of cooperation and solidarity, in contrast to the disastrous soloing of the 1930s. In the larger Baltic Sea region, the Nordic–Baltic connection has been especially fruitful, as the five Scandinavian countries adopted an activist policy of cooperation with the restored Baltic states. Sweden’s special role in Estonian history, for example, its establishment of Tartu University in 1632 and the promotion of peasant literacy, has also received renewed recognition.

For many Estonians, the most significant achievement of the past two decades was the country’s integration into NATO and the European Union in 2004, a seemingly successful solution to the search for both hard and soft security that had eluded Estonia in the interwar era. Although the use of the metaphor of a “return to Europe” was as ubiquitous in Estonia as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the extent to which a European identity gained meaningful ground among the Estonians in these years remains uncertain. In opinion polls, “Europe” as a choice for identification tended to lag behind national, local, or regional options. On the other hand, Estonian responses on the EU Eurobarometer surveys in the past five years have shown a clear upward trend on global questions about satisfaction with membership and the benefits that have accrued to Estonia as a result. Estonia seems satisfied with having a voice at the European table, recognizing that the ability of a small state to exercise sovereignty is limited in any case.

For the Russian population of Estonia, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of an independent Estonian state entailed not only a loss in status but also the need to fully reassess the bases of its identity. No longer part of the dominant imperial nationality, its members had become part of a “beached diaspora” bewildered by the loss of their privileged position. During the Soviet Union’s existence,
most Russians, especially those resident in the non-Russian borderlands, adopted a Soviet identity based on political loyalty to the existing system, while linguistic and ethnic affinities remained marginal. With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, however, the Russian language and ethnicity played an increasingly significant role for Russians in Estonia, partly influenced by the identity patterns they observed among their Estonian neighbors. Nevertheless, for many Russians, Soviet-era nostalgia remained important, and the concept of cultural and—to some degree—political loyalty to the Russian Federation was fed by the latter’s overwhelming domination of the Russian-language media available in Estonia, especially television. In the media “war,” Estonia does not have the resources to compete with the Russian Federation, and it is not surprising that Russians in Estonia, nearly all located in urban areas, tend to mainly identify with their local communities (Narva, Tallinn, etc.) and with Russia. On the other hand, the “Estonian Russian,” that is, an individual who can function in both the Estonian and Russian cultural worlds and who feels at home in Estonia, is an increasingly visible, although still minority, phenomenon. In recent years, scholars have tended to posit the existence of a Russian-speaking nationality in Estonia, given the high levels of cultural Russification among the other East Slavs and smaller ethnic groups as well. If such a nationality is in the process of formation, it is not yet fully formed, and in view of the varying backgrounds it is unlikely to develop any monolithic form of identity. Although the EU accession referendum in 2003 revealed an ethnic split (with Russians much more negatively inclined), later evidence suggests that Estonian and local Russian attitudes toward the European Union have begun to converge.

Given the challenges and obstacles the process has faced, it is not surprising that any meaningful integration of the two major nationalities in Estonia has remained incomplete after only two decades of renewed independence. The difficulty of the task was eased by the out-migration of just over one-fourth of the ethnic Russian population in the 1990s, but Estonia’s economic success story continued to make it an attractive location for those who decided to stay. A distinctive feature of ethnic relations in the Baltic region has been the notable absence of violence, in both the waning years of the Soviet era and the more recent past. Peaceful relations were promoted by a tendency to segregate by nationality, as seen in low rates of intermarriage, and by the Russian concentration in the more anonymous life of urban areas, especially the northeast (where very few ethnic Estonians resided) and Tallinn. The credit for maintaining composure and the avoidance of violence should go to both Estonians and Russians, but for the Estonian side in particular it was clear that any advocacy or use of violence would have been counterproductive, inviting Moscow’s direct intervention.

After an initial period when many Estonian politicians hoped and assumed that the “Russian problem” would solve itself through emigration, by the late 1990s the government accepted the state’s responsibility to promote ethnic integration. The official goal was a multicultural Estonia in which each ethnic group would
be able to retain its native language and culture but also a society in which a functional command of Estonian, the privileged state language, served as the basis for establishing a common civic identity and an informed citizenry that could readily communicate with each other. A fully reformed educational system was slated to play a key role in this transformation. The heightened prestige of Estonian as the state language and recognition of the country’s political and economic achievements did encourage more serious study of Estonian at all levels of education, and some Russian and other non-Estonian parents began to enroll their children in Estonian-language schools from the first grade. Self-reported Russian command of Estonian, for example, jumped from 15.0 percent to 39.7 percent between 1989 and 2000. Nevertheless, much resistance to learning Estonian remained, and the state clearly lacked the resources—both human and material—to dramatically raise the quality of Estonian-language instruction in Russian schools.

Official state policy aside, what is the level of motivation for any meaningful integration among both the Estonian and Russian communities? On the Estonian side there remains considerable nostalgia for the nearly monoethnic nation-state of the 1920s and 1930s whose composition was transformed through brutal Soviet policies. Some Estonians would prefer to continue the Soviet-era practice of viewing their native language as a secret code that should not be accessible to outsiders such as Russians. On the other hand, with the emergence of the much broader conceptions of identity noted above, there is also increasing acceptance of the view that to remain sustainable Estonia and the Estonian language need to adapt to a globalized world via a new openness that was not necessary in the past. For their part, Russians in Estonia also continue to be ambivalent about integration. In broad terms, close to one-half of the non-Estonian population has become naturalized, about one-fourth has taken citizenship in other countries (over 90 percent in the Russian Federation), and another one-fourth has remained stateless. Although EU membership in 2004 initially led to an increase in the naturalization rate, the pace has slowed markedly in the past few years, most recently influenced by the impact of the Bronze Soldier affair, but also perhaps reflecting a new Russian tendency to look beyond residence in Estonia to the larger European world. Despite the growing number of ethnic Russian citizens in the country, Russian political parties have had only limited success, largely because of the inability to unite their forces, and in recent years Edgar Savisaar’s Estonian Center Party has managed to capture the majority of the Russian vote on both the national and local levels.

It is also important to bear in mind that ethnic relations in Estonia do not take place in a vacuum. Next door is the still massive kin-state of the local Russian population, the wounded former superpower who has yet to view Estonia and the other Baltic states as neighboring countries rather than as historical possessions of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. It is not in Russia’s interest to promote the integration of the Russian population in Estonia, and it has sought to exploit opportunities such as the Bronze Soldier affair to raise ethnic tensions. Although the
unrest associated with the Bronze Soldier’s transfer clearly indicated the need for a reassessment of the prevailing integration strategy, a study done in June 2007 suggested that ethnic relations had not worsened because of the incident and local Russians had begun to pay more attention to the Estonian media for information. Analysts noted that language learning alone was not sufficient to foster loyalty to the state and called for involving the already strongly integrated part of the Russian population (close to one-third) as a partner in reaching out to the rest of the community. It is clear, however, that the challenge for future progress in integration remains strong. Russia will continue as a troublesome neighbor, and along with serious disagreements on the history of the twentieth century, the Estonian and Russian communities still differ markedly in their views of the Russian Federation and its intentions toward Estonia as well as on current developments in the region, for example, the Russo-Georgian conflict in August 2008. As a result of the events of the twentieth century, Estonia became a more complicated multiethnic society, and it behooves all of its inhabitants, especially its two major nationalities, to come to terms with this fact.

Notes

11. The title of a poem by the Estonian poet Hando Runnel, published in 1988, “Ei saa me läbi Lätita” (We cannot survive without Latvia), has often reappeared as a headline in the Estonian press of the past two decades.

**Toivo U. Raun** is Professor of Central Eurasian Studies and Adjunct Professor of History at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is the author of numerous studies on Baltic and Finnish history, including *Estonia and the Estonians* (Hoover Institution Press, 2001), and co-editor of *Soviet Deportations in Estonia* (Tartu University Press, 2007).