

TYPE
A case study on media manipulation of Russian speaking population living in Estonia
PROBLEM DESCRIPTION
Problem typology The world is full of different people. People are labelled by skin colour, sex, ethnicity etc. - stereotypes what do not reflect real personalities. Throughout history there have been times when manipulations was extreme. It is therefore hard to realize that manipulation is the 21th century problem, too! In Estonia the Russian-speaking people are the biggest minority group. Are their needs really ignored? Are Estonians mistreating them? This is at least what media says. Still, most Estonians disagree.
Actors involved Estonians (the host society) and the Russian-speaking population living in Estonia (the biggest ethno-cultural minority)
The occurrence context According to the Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka, national minorities are the groups that origin from complete and functioning societies in their historic homeland prior to emigrating. These people typically prefer building their own nation over integrating into the host nation. This is exactly what is happening in Estonia. The Russian minority insists pursuing their own cultural traditions and resists to integrate. Many Russians do not speak Estonian although they have lived here all their life. Estonians, however, are interested in maintaining their national culture. They have been trying to teach their language and promote their values to Russian speaking population, but they have had little success so far. It is only natural that this conflict of cultural interests can cause mutual disappointment as well as lead to poor communication and mistrust.
Description of the situation According to the statistics collected 1 January 2016, the population of Estonia is 1 315 944. Among them are 905 805 native Estonians and 330 263 Russians, which make this minority a quarter of the population. Many Estonians define it as a problem as there is a certain group of Russians who would rather create their own society here. They are kind of living in a “bubble”, greatly influenced by the Russian Federation. It can be dangerous. For example, in Estonia we have a county called Eastern Vironia, where most of the residents are Russians. Even the signs in shops are written in Russian. These people have created a new kind of culture, which has nothing to do with the Estonian culture. People who live in Eastern Vironia watch mostly Russian television, and they do not follow the Estonian news. Most of them now little or no Estonian at all. They have no need to learn Estonian because all they need in their community is Russian. As Estonians we find it offensive: they live and work here, but they do not respect the official language of our country – the Estonian language! There is little communication between Russians and Estonians. That is a problem, for how can we unite nations if there is little communication going on?

On the other side, not all Russians are like that. We know many Russians who have learned to speak good Estonian, and they respect our culture and land a great deal. Some Russians say that they feel safer living here, in Estonia, and those people are usually loyal to Estonia, as well. Moreover, there are many Russians who are well-known and respected among Estonians. For example, the zoologist and ethologist Aleksei Turovski is known to most Estonians. The historian and teacher David Vsevirov is considered an opinion leader and one of the most influential people in Estonia.

What are the reasons for which we consider it a problem (or becoming a problem)?

Media claims that the Russian-speaking minority is discriminated in Estonia. For example, they argue that many young ethnic Russians have problems in finding a job or earn less than the Estonians who do the same job. It is highly likely that a quite large activist group in the Russian-speaking community, fighting for their rights, has emerged due to media manipulation. There have been cases of violent protests in the past.

The most recent unrest took place in April 2007, when 'The Bronze Soldier' was removed from the centre of Tallinn to a military cemetery. For most Estonians this monument was a symbol of Soviet occupation and repression, but for Russians 'The Bronze Soldier' symbolized Soviet victory over Nazi Germany and their claim to equal rights in Estonia. The Bronze night or April unrest has in fact been the worst riot in Estonia since the Soviet reoccupation in 1944.

It is true that the Soviet injustice has influenced Estonians a great deal. They have grown distant and less tolerant against Russians due to the Soviet occupation in 1940 and reoccupation in 1944. The most tragic events in the Estonian history happened in June 1941 and March 1949, when more than 30,000 innocent Estonians were deported to Siberia. Thousands of families were torn apart, and thousands died there. Estonian children are taught about these events when they are quite young, and this common national feeling of historic injustice may have caused Estonians to remain very careful and alert about Russia and the Russian speaking population in Estonia.

Possible risks

More than 80% of people living in Narva (the Estonian town right at the Russian border) are Russians. This is also true about Eastern Vironia. These two places in Estonia are highly likely to cause security risks, especially, if the residents living in those places were to grow unsatisfied with their living standards here and/or to become manipulated by Russian leaders.

INTERVENTION

The American analyst, writer and columnist with expertise on Russia Paul A. Goble underlines the statistical fact that between 2013 and 2015 only 37 Russians moved from Estonia to Russian Federation. It shows us that most Russians prefer living in Estonia over living in Russia. What Estonians expect from these people is loyalty. For example, many Estonians think very highly of their former foreign minister Marina Kaljurand – a lovely woman of Russian and Latvian origin. She is very patriotic towards Estonia; she speaks fluent Estonian, and some Russians even say that she is more Estonian than Russian.

Russian students attend Russian basic school, and for upper secondary education they have schools where they can learn some subjects in Russian and others in Estonian (the Estonian

language, Estonian literature, Estonian history, music and geography). The first language in all high schools is Estonian, but the schools can still teach 40% of the subjects in Russian.

RESULTS

Young people. A change for the better begins from/with youth. Estonians and Russians should learn together. Otherwise, our nation and society might become more and more fragmented.

Attractive jobs for young Estonians in Eastern Vironia. Our country should provide attractive job positions in the Russian-speaking part of Estonia, so that native Estonians would like to go and work there. They would bring more Estonian culture to local people, and local Russians would learn more Estonian this way.

Tourism. There should also be more tourism targeting Eastern Vironia. Tourism always creates many new jobs and give people new hope. There would be much more communication between the residents, tourists and Estonians, and much more intercultural understanding as well.

Stories about patriotic local Russians. In order to act against the stereotypical thinking among Estonians, the Estonian media channels should find those local Russians who are patriotic and then write articles, do interviews or TV programmes about them. So instead of negative media coverage, positive messages should do a better job.

References:

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