

Melting pot Estonia faces a challenge: 'Residents feel they have to choose a side'

REPORTINGA third of Estonian residents have a Russian background. What does that do to them now? And how are they viewed? In Narva, where even 95 percent is 'Russian', the mayor is awake.

Mark van Assen 11-03-22, 16:00 Last update: 11-03-22, 18:44

It's a strange feeling. This is Estonia, and there's Russia, about 100 yards away, on the other side of the river. If you cross the bridge (and have a visa), you'll be in Ivangorod just like that. The white-blue-red of the Russian flag flies above the huge 15th-century fortress high on the riverbank, and a few Russian fishermen have been casting a line in the cold waters of the Narva.

But Russia is here too, on this side of the river. And how. Narva is considered the most Russian city in the European Union. About 95 percent of the local population of nearly 60,000 people is Russian-speaking. That means that you really only hear Russian here on the streets and in the shops. And if you turn on the TV, you will see Russian sports programs, Russian game shows and Russian soap operas. This is not because Narva has been secretly taken over by Moscow (although some pessimists see the mood), but because of what has happened here in the past.

Mikhail Komashko (33) can talk about it. „And my story is not exceptional, is it. It is the story of so many here.” Please note: his father was born in the former GDR, his mother in Lithuania, his grandfather in Kazakhstan, and there are many roots in Ukraine, right up to the time of Catherine the Great.

His father and mother lived first in Saint Petersburg, then in Moscow, Kamchatka and Kazakhstan and settled in Narva in the late 1970s. "I am the first person in my family to be born in Estonia."

Russianification

Such an odyssey as that of the Komashkos was indeed not uncommon in the then Soviet Union: you went where the State or the Party wanted you to go. For example, if engineers or factory workers were needed for Estonia's heavy industry, they were sent there from all over the Union. Saying "no" was not an option. Another interest of Moscow at that time: Russification of the new republics. This also had major consequences for Estonia.

"Before World War II, Estonia was almost exclusively Estonian," said Raivo Vetik, professor of Comparative Political Science at the University of Tallinn. "After the communists annexed the country, they started populating it with Russians. There were two big waves, in 1940 and 1948." At the same time, many thousands of Estonians were deported to Siberia, never to return. Its wounds are still not healed here.

Separated life

That whole operation completely changed the country. In 1945 no less than two thirds of the population was Russian. By 1991, with the fall of the Soviet Union, that had been reduced to just over a third. Now, according to Raiko Vetik, it is just under a third. Most of them live in the capital Tallinn and the northeast, with Narva and also Kohtla-Järve as outliers. They are called 'ethnic Russians', 'Russian speakers' or simply 'Russians'. But never Estonians.

Mikhail Kamashko uses his own description: „I am a Russian-speaking Estonian. But I do have an accent, which sometimes makes it difficult.” And he is still of the young generation, in his case highly educated, which feels emphatically European, has no connection with Putin's Russia and simply wants to participate in Estonian society. It is more difficult for the elderly, especially in a city like Narva. They live their lives in a totally different world. Not out of ill will, Kamashko emphasizes, but forced by the circumstances and by stealthy manipulation by Russia.

People feel like they have to pick a side. That's really very basic

Katri Raik, Mayor of Narva

For decades it was not even intended that the two population groups would mix. Education was separate, politics and work often as well. And everyone thought that was fine. However, when the Soviet Union fell, everything changed here. Some "Russians" left Estonia, fearing deportations (which never came). Many stayed, but had to pass a language test to become citizens. That caused bad blood, because Estonian is not the easiest language.

Integration

When Estonia later wanted to join the EU, Brussels demanded that work should be done on the integration of Russian speakers. „It is going reasonably well, especially with the youngsters," say experts such as Raiko Vetik. The elderly are a different story. They usually do not speak Estonian and rely on Russian TV for their information and entertainment. Vladimir Putin quickly figured out how to use television to bind and mold the people.

“Russians make insanely good TV,” says Kamashko, who works in Narva for Estonia's Russian-language public broadcaster (a facility that didn't even exist for a long time). “There is a big market and an even bigger bag of money. They can only make one show of our entire budget. Day in day out lifestyle, sports, movies, news. If you, as an Estonian Russian, can choose between rather boring TV in a language that you don't speak and understand well, or the other, well. You are over 50, come home from work, have no money to go to the theater or a restaurant, then Russian TV is a wonderful alternative.”

You used to have 10 percent propaganda on television and the rest was entertainment. There are now channels showing manipulated news 13 hours a day

Mikhail Kamashko

Since the war in Ukraine, all Russian state channels have been shut down. But of course the damage has already been done (and besides, people have discovered that you can easily pick up the signal with a normal antenna). Kamashko: „You used to have 10 percent propaganda and the rest was entertainment. In recent years this has been reversed. There are now channels showing manipulated news 13 hours a day.”

The war has not yet led to great tensions in this complicated Estonia. There is occasionally some nasty shouting on social media, but that's it for now. In Narva, something else is going on: here the discord in the Russian-speaking community comes to the fore. “People feel they have to choose sides,” said Mayor Katri Raik. “That is really very fundamental. Some tell me that they don't want to be Russian anymore or that they feel

European. Others continue to believe in Putin's propaganda and talk about the 'Ukrainian fascists' and the 'struggle for the Motherland'."

Name calling

What has really shocked her in recent days ("And I sleep very badly because of this") is that the Ukrainian refugees who Narva has also taken in are being verbally abused on the street or in the shop. "I don't know how widespread this behavior is yet, but I'm already in discussions with the police. And with representatives of the Russian community, at their request. I find this really disgusting. Maybe it's just a small group, but she's making way too much noise. How am I going to solve this?"

She sighs. "Talk, talk and listen. That is the most important now."