
RI BULLETIN

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Left Behind: Stateless Russians Search for Equality in Estonia

When Estonia joined the European Union on May 1, 2004, over 160,000 Russian-speaking non-citizens remained in limbo. These individuals are being forced to choose between learning a new language and passing an exam to acquire Estonian citizenship; applying for Russian citizenship and thus surrendering the benefits of EU membership; or remaining stateless with limited political access and foreign travel restrictions. While Article Nine of the Estonian Constitution states that “[t]he rights, freedoms and duties of each and every person, as set out in the Constitution, shall be equal for Estonian citizens and for citizens of foreign states and stateless persons in Estonia,” this mandated equality is not the reality for Estonia’s stateless persons. As the country settles into its new role as a European nation, every resident’s human right to a nationality must be upheld.

The problem of statelessness in Estonia has a long history. In June 1940, Soviet troops occupied Estonia, abolishing its independence and establishing a new Soviet order. From 1944 to 1991, Estonia belonged to the Soviet Union. During this time, thousands of Estonians were killed or deported, while Russians were forced to migrate to Estonia. The Russian-speaking population in Estonia jumped from eight to approximately forty percent. On August 20, 1991, Estonia re-established independence. At that time, the government restricted automatic citizenship to those who held it before the Soviet occupation and their descendents, leaving hundreds of thousands of individuals stateless.

Estonia justifies its current citizenship legislation based on the collective right of ethnic Estonians to their historical territory as well as the need to protect Estonian culture and undo the injustices suffered during the years of Soviet occupation. With a tear in his eye, one elderly Estonian man who had spent time doing forced labor in Siberia told Refugees International, “True Russians are good people, those with mixed blood are not.” Non-Estonians feel they are discriminated against based on language and the association of Russians with the Soviet occupation. They criticize Estonia for not adhering to the international standards of minority and human rights. Others see no need to acquire citizenship or believe that obtaining Estonian citizenship would hamper their visits to see relatives. The ongoing debate has left 12 percent of Estonia’s entire population carrying ‘alien’ (gray) passports.

To acquire citizenship, one must pass Estonian language and constitution exams. However, it is difficult for Russians to learn Estonian since there is little mixing between the two groups, limiting opportunities for Russians to develop adequate Estonian language skills. To address this issue, the Estonian government has imposed a reform plan that increases the percentage of the school curriculum taught in Estonian. However, Estonian language teachers in Russian schools are often non-native speakers themselves. The constitution component of the citizenship exam is reportedly challenging even for ethnic Estonians. Despite access to study guides, many Russians feel reluctant to study for a test to include them into a culture they are otherwise excluded from. This makes obtaining an EU passport the primary motivation for gaining Estonian citizenship.

Although Russians and Estonians have inhabited the same soil for decades, there is little intermingling between the two groups. This is demonstrated by the few marriages that occur between Russians and Estonians and the regionalization of the Russian-speaking community. Outside Tallinn, Russian-speakers live in an economically depressed area and have fallen into a socio-economic quagmire. With a lack of resources and limited hope, the Russians are over-represented in prisons (58 percent of prisoners are non-Estonian) and orphanages, and have a higher incidence of drug addiction and HIV/AIDS (approximately 80 percent of all HIV positive cases are Russian speakers), perpetuating the negative stigma Estonians already associate with Russians dating back to the Soviet era.

In the predominantly ethnic Russian northeast, lack of citizenship touches the daily life of each resident. Mines, industrial complexes, and Soviet military bases have either closed or relocated. Unemployment hovers just below 20 percent. In Sampo, the local shale mines closed some six years ago. The area is now a virtual ghost town, and most of the remaining 700 residents are forced to eke out a meager existence in nearby Ufi. Eighteen-year-old Marta spends her days working alone in a sparsely stocked tin kiosk. She is one of the few employed in a town that once had 1,500 residents.

To its credit, the Estonian government has made significant steps to encourage gray passport holders to apply for either Estonian or Russian citizenship. For example, in 1998 one amendment was passed to give children born in Estonia after February 25, 1992, and whose parents have lived in Estonia for at least five years, automatic citizenship. Shortly thereafter, access to citizenship for persons with disabilities was adjusted. In 2004, Riigikogu (Parliament) passed a bill that doubles the speed of gaining citizenship. Legislation is currently being debated to help elderly people as well.

Despite all its efforts, Estonia has continued to drag its feet over signing the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. One reason is that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with its mandate to protect stateless people, has played a very limited role. It is time to get Estonia on UNHCR's agenda. Greater progress in reducing the level of statelessness in Estonia and elsewhere could be made if there were more than one senior officer at the agency dealing with global statelessness.

The core principles of the EU include peace, democracy, and respect for human rights. If Estonia wants to be considered an esteemed member, it must protect the rights of minorities in its territory.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

The Government of Estonia:

- Sign the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.
- Actively promote economic development in the northeastern region, so all regions have comparable rates of employment.
- Ensure that Russian-speakers and Estonians alike are provided with the same level of education.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees:

- Continue to facilitate discussions toward accession to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.
- Create a department with regional specialists to address specific needs of stateless populations.
- Regional staff partner with Estonian government to ensure that all individuals who wish to acquire citizenship have the opportunity to do so.

Director of Research Maureen Lynch and Field Representative Thatcher Cook visited Estonia in November as part of a three-country investigation of statelessness.