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Estonia

Conflict in Tallinn after Soviet statue torn down

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Interview with "Ilya"

Question: Could you describe what you were able to see and experience when you were in Tallinn (Reval in Russian), the capital of the Republic of Estonia, some days ago?

Answer: On 26-27 April I found myself in the centre of the mass protests in Tallinn. After they began to take down the monument to the Soviet soldier, in the evening thousands of people, mostly Russian-speaking teenagers from the Lasnamea area of the city, which is like a Russian-speaking ghetto, spontaneously moved downtown.

[<https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/estriots.jpg>]

There were very few political demands, slogans or any kind of organised groups. Young people (some of them were about 13-14 years old!) just wanted to demonstrate their anger against the state, smashing expensive shops, casinos and banks. During these days the police looked completely unable to control the situation. On the evening of the 26th they began to arrest some of the protesters. One young Russian was killed – it was not clear by whom.

On the morning of April 27 the president of Estonia, Henrick Ilves, made a special statement on TV, where he condemned the youth as “vandals”, and called for “peace and order”. I was in a café, where Estonian people were watching Ilves’s speech – they looked really shocked and disappointed. A few days before, no one could have imagined such a revolt in Tallinn! In the evening of the 27th the revolt continued. I was at that time in the Square of Freedom, the central square in Tallinn. About 3000 young people moved into the square, without any particular target. Some of them were carrying Russian flags, some had home-made banners saying “Ansip Out!” (Andrus Ansip is the Prime Minister). The nature of their feelings was very contradictory – it was like a mix of great Russian chauvinism and social protest.

I have read that Russians treat the Estonian authorities and the Estonian nationalists as "fascists". Is that so? Is there some element of truth in such insults?

Of course, that is really just propaganda. The problem is that from the beginning of the present Estonian state, from 1991, it was based on the idea of direct continuity with the Estonian republic which existed from 1919 to 1940. According to this idea, only people whose parents were citizens before 1940 can be full citizens of the new Estonia. That means that the 30% of the population who are non-Estonian need to pass special exams to become citizens. The official version of Estonian history calls the Soviet period “occupation”, and presents Estonian participants in SS divisions in World War II as “fighters for freedom”. At the same time, it has to be remembered that at the end of the 1940s more than 100,000 Estonians (about 10% of the Estonian population) were deported or shot by the NKVD. That means that now, in every Estonian family, you have somebody who was repressed by the Stalinist state. I think that because of this, the nature of Estonian nationalism is very complicated – on the one hand, it is a typical nationalism of a “small nation”, on the other, it has a very strong anti-communist and far-right element.

What do you think about the question of the monument to the Red Army? Isn't it rightly seen by Estonians as a symbol of their national oppression by the state authorities of the Great Russian dominated USSR?

I think the question of the monument was put forward by the Estonian government for political reasons, mainly to provoke a strong and sharp reaction from Russia. The monument was a traditional meeting place for the old

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Russian-speaking veterans of World War II every 9th of May, and over the last the 15 years only a marginal far Right in Estonia came out against it. Only in 2006 did the Reform Party, one of the major parties in the country, begin to speak about the monument. Over the last six months there was growing hysteria about the monument in both the Estonian and Russian media, which to my mind had a very little to do with historical questions and people's real feelings.

How do you characterise the main parties of the "centre-left" government and the parliamentary opposition in the Estonian Rigikogu (parliament) today?

Now, after the last elections in March 2007, you have three parties in the government: the Reform Party – right-of-centre, neo-liberal and extremely pro-EU, whose leader Andrus Ansip is head of the government; then the "Pro Patria and Republic" party, a right-wing, conservative and nationalist force, which now controls the Education and Defence ministries; and finally the Social-Democratic Party, official descendant of the historical Estonian Social Democracy, but which really looks more like a liberal pro-EU party. So, in Estonian politics this government is right-of-centre. The main opposition force in parliament is the Centrist Party, which is traditionally more "social" than the Reform party and its partners. Its leader, Edgar Savisaar, who is now mayor of Tallinn, was from the beginning against the idea of moving the monument to the Soviet soldier. The Centrist Party is also more than the others orientated towards seeking "Russian votes" in the elections.

Could you briefly say something about the labour movement in Estonia (trade unions, working-class political parties, the unemployed movement, etc.)?

At present there is one union, the Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions (EAKL), which is a little bit active only in the public sector, and which also defends Estonian workers in other countries of the EU (now there are about 100 000 Estonians who live and work in Finland, Sweden, Ireland, etc.). At present there is no working-class party in Estonia. All the left groups are very small and have no influence in the labour movement.

In Moscow there are people protesting in front of the Estonian Embassy. Who are these people? The Russian state-owned railway company has announced that the delivery of fuel to Estonia might be interrupted "because of repair works". How do you judge the relations between the two states and their governments?

Over the last few weeks we have seen a growing campaign against Estonia, organised by the pro-government Russian media, the "United Russia" party and some youth organisations linked to it. These youth organisations, which are closely connected to the Presidential Administration, organised a blockade of the Estonian Embassy in Moscow and collected signatures "to drive the Estonian Embassy out of Moscow". I think that this campaign has a mostly internal aim – to focus public opinion on the very abstract question of "fighting Estonian fascism", which has nothing to do with the real political and social problems in Russia, including the problem of growing Russian nationalism, which is supported by the state. The Russian diplomatic offensive against Estonia also plays the role of putting pressure on the EU prior to the Russia-EU summit which will take place in Samara next week. In this conflict the Estonian government is also trying to play a game with the EU, demonstrating the danger from Russia in order to get more support from the EU.

What is the social situation of the Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic republics? What is your opinion about the political moods and forces among the Russian-speaking citizens of Estonia?

According to official figures from 2000, there are a bit less than 1,4 million inhabitants of Estonia. Of these, 65,3 % are Estonians and 28,1 % Russians, and then you have some small minorities of Ukrainians, Belarussians and Finns.

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67 % speak Estonian and 30 % Russian. In Latvia, there is nearly the same national balance. In these two countries you have a real situation of communally divided societies – separate Russian schools, Russian-dominated areas in big cities, Russian bars and clubs, a separate Russian political spectrum, from right to left. In Latvia, for example, Russians vote only for “their” parties.

The biggest one of them, the Movement for Civil Rights, now has one member in the European parliament. This situation has its origins in the old Stalinist policies, when in the 1950s and 1960s a lot of Russians moved to Latvia and Estonia to work in the factories, considering these republics just as another part of one big Soviet country, never being interested in learning the Latvian or Estonian language. After 1991, the Latvian and Estonian governments did nothing to integrate these people into the new society. More than that, they did everything to make it impossible. Now Russian-speaking people are mostly the poor sector of society; A lot of young people feel that they have no perspectives in life. This situation also gives the Russian government an opportunity to use the problem of the Baltic Russians – to put pressure on the EU, for different political manoeuvres, etc.

Do you know anything about progressive or radical groups in Estonia, both anti-capitalist and anti-Stalinist? Are there cultural and political movements in Estonia that are anti-chauvinist and not pro-Western? Are there currents working together with similar Russian groups?

Answer: There are just a few left groups in Estonia. There is the Left Party, reformed ex-Communists, which is a full member of the European Left Party. It does not have a strong position in Estonian politics – in the last elections the party won less than 1% of the votes. There is also a new anti-capitalist/anti-globalisation youth group called Red-Black (Punamust in Estonian). It is a mostly Estonian-speaking youth group, which tries to do some anti-capitalist and anti-fascist activities. Unfortunately, there are no real links between them and the Russian Left.