



Weekly Briefing

**Estonia Social briefing:
A diverse society of a country that celebrates its centennial
E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

China-CEE Institute

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A diverse society of a country that celebrates its centennial

Back in February 2018, Estonia started celebrating its first truly big anniversary – 100 years since the country became independent, having managed to appear as an internationally recognised nation on the rumbles of the collapsed Russian Empire. Later, a member of the League of Nations since 22 September 1921 before being occupied by the former Soviet Union in 1940, Estonia – currently a full Member State of both the EU and NATO – has ‘sewn’ a patchy historical thread for itself. In a certain way, literally every single historic period, which the Republic of Estonia had to go through, left a distinct feature on the country’s *intra*-societal multi-faceted composition. One could argue that, since the time when Estonia had regained its independence (on that particular occasion it was decisively taken from the collapsing USSR in August 1991), the country’s main problem – in terms of creating a comprehensive society-building policy – has been in detecting a fine line to allow Estonia’s ethnic minorities enjoying all positive rights in expressing themselves culturally, while “showing sincere loyalty to the state where the population’s majority speaks Estonian, respects the Estonian culture, and follows the Estonian traditional way of life”¹. There is also an intriguing ‘twist’ that could be found in the process of analysing the Estonian society – its significant segment is comprised of a Russian-speaking commune who have lived within the boundaries of the present day Estonian Republic for many decades (some of them – for centuries). In 1994, in his unique manner, the then country’s President Lennart Meri managed to underscore the essence of the issue:

Culture is politics because it is primarily in culture where the national identity becomes apparent – identity is a necessary element, a substance which is difficult to describe, but from which nations are born. Politics is culture primarily

¹ Helina Sildvee, ‘Eesti ja Eestis elavad vene keelt kõnelevad inimesed: normatiivne raamistik vs reaalsus’. 9 June 2017. Available from [<https://digi.lib.ttu.ee/i/?7838>].

*because the ultimate aim of politics is to defend the individual, to assist the individual to determine and deepen the characteristics of a person. The primary characteristic of a person is the phenomenon: that a person does not exist outside a culture.*²

In a significant addition, as argued by Sildvee, it is very common to come across a terminological confusion in the usage of core notions such as ‘Estonian’, ‘Russian’ and ‘Russian speakers’ – many commentators on Estonia and even scholars in the field of international relations have been making a crucial analytical mistake by ‘labelling’ all ‘Russian speakers’ in Estonia simply as ‘Russians’ (whatever it may mean). As Sildvee explains further, there is a problem of misidentification when a ‘Russian speaker’ who lives in Estonia is treated by an analyst as a ‘Russian’, while he/she can easily be of a different ethnicity, i.e. Belarusian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Moldovan, Uzbek, Ukrainian, other.³

For example, ethnicity wise (not the same as citizenship wise), out of the country’s total population of **1,315,635 people**, the 2017 record shows that ‘Estonians’ with 904,639 people represent the largest ethnic group, following by ‘Russians’ (330,206), ‘Ukrainians’ (23,183), ‘Belarusians’ (11,828), ‘Finns’ (7,591), and others⁴. At the same time, intriguingly, the total number of foreigners (the figure includes citizens of other EU Member States and non-EU citizens) who are usually residing in Estonia on 1 January 2018 is reported as **196,344 people**⁵, and this bit of data can only mean that many of ethnic Belarusians, Russians, Ukrainians and other non-ethnic Estonians are, in fact, Estonian citizens. Each member of the latter politico-societal group, by law, is required to possess the Estonian language proficiency on the level that is no less than B1⁶, which assists in arguing that, at least, **85 per cent** of the Estonian Republic’s total population **can speak Estonian**, even though with presumably a different level of proficiency.

² Lennart Meri, ‘Speech’. 24 February 1994. Available from [<https://vp1992-2001.president.ee/eng/k6ned/K6ne.asp?ID=9400>].

³ Sildvee.

⁴ ‘Population by ethnic nationality, 1 January, years’. 9 June 2017. Available from [<https://www.stat.ee/34278>].

⁵ Population by citizenship – Foreigners. Available from [<https://www.stat.ee/57209>].

⁶ Examinations and Tests. Available from [<https://www.innove.ee/en/examinations-and-tests/estonian-language-proficiency-examinations/>].

In this context and in a way of continuing the aforementioned Lennart Meri's speech through a couple of decades on, the country's current President Kersti Kaljulaid stated the following:

The multiplicity of choice in advanced and wealthy societies has always meant fewer children per family, and children born later in life for the parents. Therefore, it is imperative that we consider all of those who grow up here, as one of our own. No 7-year-old should feel that they are not fit for an Estonian school. They might have a charming accent when they speak Estonian, they might be of different colour or the name might be hard to pronounce – that all cannot matter. Why should we tell the people who themselves want to be part of our language and culture that they cannot become part of us? It is unfair, it makes no sense, and it will not help our nation to survive!

Most probably, the above approach has defined a particular method, which President Kaljulaid is extensively employing to make the Estonian society-building process more multi-dimensional as compared to the previous decade-related developments. In December 2017, to a surprise of many, the President made an announcement that, in autumn 2018, she would be moving to Narva for one month, where she would occupy the Open Space theatre complex on the property of the former Baltijets Factory as her presidential office; on 28 August 2018, Kersti Kaljulaid did what she had promised⁷. Narva is not only the country's third most populous city of 58,610 residents (after Tallinn and Tartu), but it also represents a factor, a cornerstone, and an example of endless as well as heated *intra*-country political debates on the quality of the Estonian society-building process. Both *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* explain the nature of the issue.

Figure 1. Narva: Ethnic composition of population, 01.01.2018⁸

⁷ 'President Kersti Kaljulaid starting first work week in Narva on Tuesday'. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/856785/president-kersti-kaljulaid-starting-first-work-week-in-narva-on-tuesday>].

⁸ 'Narva in figures' in Narva Linnavalitsus. Available from [http://narva.ee/en/left_block/narva_in_figures/page:3543].

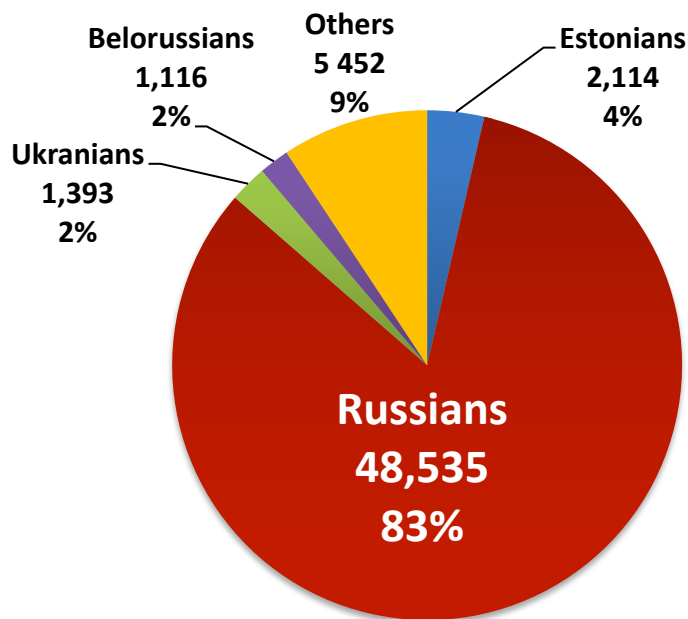
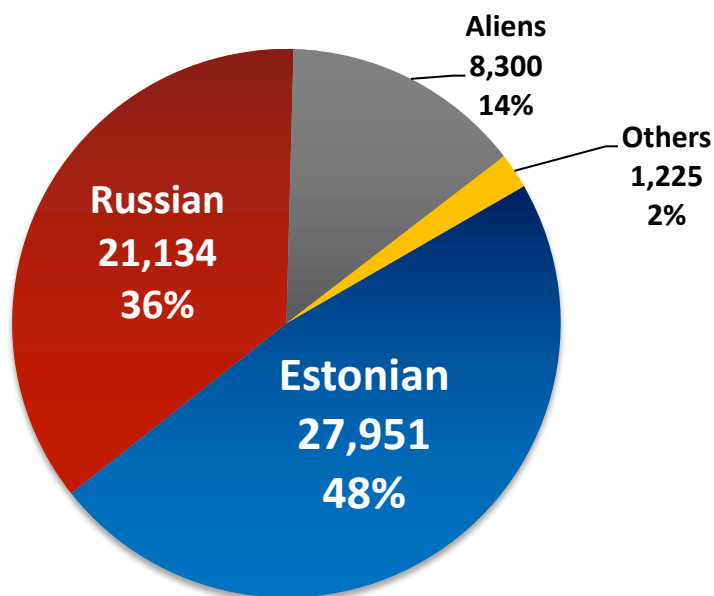


Figure 2. Narva: Citizenship composition of population, 01.01.2018⁹



Being fully aware of the challenge lying ahead of her, President Kaljulaid declared it in an explicit way, so any misunderstandings and overestimations would be avoided:

Narva is of course very special, but it is an average Estonian city in the best sense of the word. [...] Working here, it is possible to meet plenty of great people,

⁹ 'Narva in figures'.

*and of course the area will get more attention, which will help to break through some of the stereotypes some people still have about Narva.*¹⁰

Arguably, the idea was – perhaps, for the first time on the presidential level since 1991 – to give it a good political go in order to see the country as one. The immediate proximity of Narva to Russia and the closest possible connection that the city has with Ivangorod, the Russian bordertown across the Narva River,¹¹ indeed makes Narva “special”. Nevertheless, to what extent this “special” character needs to be further promoted, and at what point the residents of Narva should sincerely think of their city in the context of the Estonian Republic’s interests? Yet again, President Kaljulaid expressed her vision on the issue:

*I have never looked at Estonia regionally. To some extent – because I have worked for Eesti Energia – I have known the topics of Virumaa, especially as concerns the environment, manufacturing and industry, for a long time. When I was younger, my brother and father told me stories of Narva. I do not have different feelings for Narva. I have never seen it as... look, there is a place I know nothing about. It is not Vanuatu, it is Narva!*¹²

In sum, the closer the country approaches the next parliamentary elections (scheduled for March 2019), the more Narva-linked topics will be, predictably, popping up on the political and societal surfaces. Both Narva and its region, Ida-Virumaa, represents a strong electoral ground of the Estonian Centre Party (*Eesti Keskerakond* or EK), which is now the biggest party in the governmental coalition, having five portfolios in the Estonian Government including the post of Prime Minister. This party is particularly vocal – quite often, in a distinct populist manner – when it comes to debating on the so-called ‘Russian’ topics in Estonia. In 2015, as a result of the last parliamentary elections, the EK received 142,460 votes in total¹³, with 20,328 of which the party got in Ida-Virumaa, ‘scoring’

¹⁰ Kersti Kaljulaid in ‘President Kersti Kaljulaid starting first work week in Narva on Tuesday’.

¹¹ Between the two World Wars, Ivangorod, known then as Jaanilinn, was a part of the Estonian Republic.

¹² Kersti Kaljulaid in ‘This is not Vanuatu, this is Narva!’. 28 August 2018. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/6149235/this-is-not-vanuatu-this-is-narva>]

¹³ ‘Eesti Vabariik’. 20 March 2015. Available from [<http://rk2015.vvk.ee/voting-results.html>].

remarkable 59% in that particular region¹⁴. It could be argued that the Estonian society development-linked context will become a major ‘playground’ for different political forces in the period before March 2019.

¹⁴ ‘Valimisringkond 7 (Ida-Virumaa)’. Available from [<http://rk2015.vvk.ee/voting-results-7.html>].