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DEMOCRATIZATION IN ESTONIA

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1. The Democratic Agenda

The Estonian democratic agenda during the later part of 1990 involves activity at two distinct levels. The simplest is the organization level, which requires the structuring of a party system for Estonia. Currently there are approximately 14 PARTIES. Some of these are very small, others large, ranging from a heavy concentration in the centre to the centre-right with a small number on the left.

But the most serious questions of the current agenda concern the fundamental question of the basis on which an independent Estonia should be constructed. On the one hand there is the legalistic concept of returning to the status quo ante, to 1940, with a revised 1938 constitution; and on the other, there is the establishment of what its detractors call "the third republic" (the first being 1918-40, the second 1940-88, and the third since 1988). The second fundamentally divisive issue in the current Estonian political agenda concerns the ideological foundation of the reconstructed economic and social structure of the "new" versus the "old-new" republic. The difference is simply an antagonistic interpretation of whether Estonia should reflect a Thatcherite or American type of "free-enterprise" economy which in the first instance would be a kind of early robber baron capitalist society, or whether it should reflect the Nordic social-democratic societies-economies, of which the Swedish is held up as the ideal model.

All of these questions and conflicts are primarily conflicts that reflect cross cutting cleavages in Estonian society based very much on a kind of "class" and SES division. The cleavage also reflects an age/income division in that older, poorer people such as pensioners with low status jobs tend to favour a status quo approach whereas younger, more adventuresome and the successful former party and other leading groups in society tend to support a rapid movement towards capitalist social reconstruction. To the present the fledgling political parties have not formed very firm ideological positions relating to economic questions and thus the skirmishing and the increasing debate that is taking place across party lines is found primarily in the newspapers and on radio and television.

But political questions have until very recently overshadowed economic questions. Hence, an ongoing debate that has not left the front pages of the newspapers, although it is no longer one that excites the mass of people, concerns the conflict between the Estonian Congress and the Estonian Supreme Soviet. This is basically a matter of pointing a finger at the other institution and accusing it of not acting "legitimately" or effectively in pursuing Estonia's independence. Again, the conflict is not so much between the different parties that may favour one or the other as it is between the two bodies themselves with the Estonian Congress making most of the accusations against the Supreme Soviet, which it regards as an "illegitimate" representative of the "illegitimate Soviet occupation forces". The Supreme Soviet on the other hand sees the Estonian Congress as being toothless and largely ineffective in furthering Estonian independence. In fact, the latter has not been able to acquire any kind of recognition by western governments or parliaments or by the Soviet Union as the legitimate representative of the Estonian people. It, however, regards itself as the truly democratic representative of the Estonians since it was elected on February 24, 1990 by ethnically Estonian citizens of the former independent republic and their descendents, both in Estonia and abroad. Moreover, the election produced a turnout which was larger than that of any elections in Estonia during the period of independence.

Fundamentally, the conflict revolves around the interpretation of which body is the true and "legal" repository of the will of the Estonian people.

This argument ties in with the initial point above with respect to the basis of a reconstructed independent Estonia. The legalistic return to the 1938 constitution is supported by large numbers of the activists in the Estonian Congress. These consist to a large extent of former dissidents, anti-Communists and people from the countryside, who have always been anti-establishmentarian. In addition, the exile communities, especially in Canada and the United States, show considerable degrees of support for this position. The view expressed by these people is characterized by a rigidity of outlook and tends to be "illusory" in that it over-emphasizes legalistic continuity and does not take Moscow seriously as a negotiating partner. There is a large element of faith in the western democracies and especially the United States as the moral guardian of what is right and wrong in this world. Hence, the conflict over whether Estonia should be reconstructed as of 1940; or as of 1988, taking into account the changes in society that have taken place since 1940. The Estonian Congress represents the view that the past 50 years should be wiped out completely and everything, including property rights, should be based on the status quo ante in 1940. Needless to say, the Supreme Soviet, made up of individuals who have been in upper SES positions during the Soviet regime, cannot go along with this categorical rejection of the past 50 years. They also, of course, point to the enormous social dislocations that would take place were one to attempt to turn the clock back.

It must be emphasized, however, that the establishmentarian position on Estonia's reconstruction does not negate a need to reduce the impact of the past 50 years and to eventually right all the wrongs of this period and return Estonia to an ideal democracy.

The conflict over the constitutional/legal basis of the Estonian republic ongoing at present is about to be followed by an even greater confrontation over the economic and social structure of the new Estonia. Here, the multiple cleavages are different from the ones in the constitutional debate and reflect a more standard upwardly mobile versus lower self-ascribed social/economic status. The former, whatever their ideological and partisan pasts, tend towards an embracing of raw capitalism and believe that a rapid explosive freeing of the economy to unregulated market forces will be the only effective way to institute a western type economy. This, despite the acknowledged period of social upheaval and economic dislocation akin to that of early capitalism in the early 19th century in the west. Others, including the current government, who, because of its exposure to the demands of the masses for better living conditions and greater social security, are aware of the political and social cost of following Jeffrey Sach's Polish example, tend to argue for a controlled dismantling of the centralized economy along with the attendant social structures and the security blankets of the past system. Hence, there is a growing industry of article writing in the daily press where the two sides accuse each other of either being heartless, pre-capitalist ogres or of carrying the baggage of past Communist beliefs into the new world of western democracy. In addition, a number of intellectuals have joined the fray in portraying Estonia already as a version of Disraeli's *Sylvia*, where you have two societies, a "white" "have" society and a "black" "have not" one with an increasing conflict developing between them.

The government and the nascent parties are in the early stages of arguing over such things as the meaning of social contract and the compensation packages that should accompany price increases and the dislocations that the market economy will bring. Such "capitalist" aspects of social reconstruction as paying for social services versus the provision of these "free" and the question of the rate at which price controls should be dismantled and the rate at which prices should be allowed to rise, as well as the question of what privatization entails, are about to become the main battle grounds of politics.

That there is a major problem in understanding the value basis of a democratic society and its attendant economy is demonstrated by the case of the Income Tax Act. The Estonian Income Tax Act, introduced into the Supreme Soviet in May, has gone through several readings but has not been passed as of yet because there is a major mental block over the question of whether people should be paying tax at all, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, serious questions are raised whether, and how, a self administered income tax return system could work. Many simply do not believe that people will pay taxes voluntarily.

2. Changing Relations Between the USSR and the Republics

Since May, 1990 the Balts, under the leadership of Edgar Savisaar, the Estonian prime minister, have instituted a three level set of negotiations. At the base there is the intra-Baltic cooperation by means of the Council of Baltic States. That this really does work is shown, not only by the frequent meetings of the heads of government and of state that have taken place in the last few months, but the daily contacts among several ministers who have instituted negotiations not only among themselves but with Moscow and other non-Baltic republics. In fact, this council behaves very much like the Nordic council which for the past 40 years has developed a harmonization of laws and of economic and social relations among the Nordic countries.

Second, there is what may be called horizontal negotiations, which involves negotiations between each of the Baltic states (as coordinated by the Council of Baltic States) and various oblasts and republics as well as the cities of Moscow and Leningrad over political and economic arrangements, including barter deals. This seems to be reaching a crescendo as during the next few days an agreement will be signed between Russia and Estonia. This will form the basis for Estonia

being able to close its borders and institute a customs system against the Soviet Union. Trade henceforth will take place with the Russian republic and the other republics and oblasts on the basis of agreements. This will also mean that Estonia will be able to control its economy and will be able to introduce its own currency, leading to de facto economic independence.

Third, relations with the Kremlin, the so-called vertical negotiations, are continuing sporadically. The negotiations between Estonia and the Kremlin were suspended at the beginning of September, but "negotiations to establish negotiations" for Lithuanian independence began a few days ago.

What is actually happening in the Baltic is that the Kremlin is becoming less important as the Balts cooperate and are able to negotiate with the other republics. The most important factor insofar as the latter is concerned is Russia and President Yeltsin's desire to "get Russia moving again", and incidentally, to undermine Gorbachev's position.

3. Democracy and Ethno-Politics in Estonia.

In Estonia two solitudes continue, the Estonians and the non-Estonians. The Estonians have very little to do with the non-Estonians, regarding them all as "Russians". The non-Estonians are regarded as Russians by the Estonians mainly because their main or common language is Russian. In fact, only approximately 30% are ethnic Russians. Among this motley group of 600,000 just under 40% of the Estonian population, concentrated geographically in a small area in the Northeast near Leningrad and in Tallinn, there is a range of attitudes from total apathy to pro-Estonia. The middle-classes have for the past year been desperately flocking to language classes to learn Estonian as a result of the passing of the language law last December. They do not want to leave the country and the language law requires 6 degrees of demonstrated competence in Estonian for anyone dealing with the public by the end of a four year transition period. Estonian is the only official language. Russian has a status similar to that of English or Urdu. It may be used but it has no official standing. Among the non-Estonians there is a small hardcore group who are characterized as typical *Homo Sovietici* by the Estonians and who have consistently worked to undermine Estonia's drive to independence. This group is led by parachuted central All Union ministry works directors. That their influence is declining is shown by the decrease in the numbers of people that they are able to even bus to rallies, which are orchestrated to coincide with the end of the afternoon shift.

Estonians' attitudes towards the "Russians" are rigid and class ridden and are not likely to change until the general impression of *Homo Sovietici* which characterizes the "Russians" in Estonia is erased. For this to happen the "Russians" will have to learn Estonian, and significant numbers of the unskilled labourers will have to leave the country. The problem is that Estonians have a very negative attitude towards the "Russians" and regard them as *nekulturny*. This attitude has been reinforced consistently by the anti-Estonian agitation of Messrs. Jarovoi, Kogan and Panfilov.

October 6, 1990