

Democratic Transition from Soviet Union to Republic of Estonia

V. LENIN KUMAR

Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (India)

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Democracy has been one of the key slogans during the transition period from the Soviet Union to independent statehood in the Baltic States. This paper tries to understand the process towards the democratic statehood of the Post- Soviet nation of Estonia. Estonia's drive to being an independent nation from the clutches of the Soviet Union was a remarkable one, especially as a predominantly nonviolent protest.

“Estonian persistence and Estonian will have united us once again as the Republic of Estonia. The recent elections have shown the entire world, but foremost ourselves, that the Estonian people, you, the Estonian voters, have brought an end to your Soviet past. In its first free elections, Estonia has chosen the free European democratic road” Lennart Meri (Meri, 1992). Lennart Meri, the First elected president of the post -Soviet Estonia said the above in his first speech in parliament in 1992 October 6. Consecutively, other former Soviet Union states, otherwise known as the Baltic States, even while being much smaller, were very high in democratic aspirations. In the same light, Estonia was the one among these Baltic States which was in the forefront in the struggle for independence. Estonia fully used the Perestroika (restructuring) and Glasnost (greater political openness) reforms to mobilise the people for their separation from the Soviet Union.

Estonia's independence movement was rooted in cultural, ethnic and linguistic nationalism. Eiki Berg places important explanation behind Estonia's strong roots towards building nationalistic feeling. One of the main reasons is Estonia's language being different from its neighbours which clearly played determining role in nation building. Language became almost one of the single point agenda behind their building up the Estonian identity (Berg, 2002). As an impetus to this, Estonia's independence movement had very strong influence from elite intellectual circles both within and outside the country. One of the former professors from Tartu university, Andrus Saareste who lived outside Estonia since the end of the Second World War, wrote an article in 1955 where he mentioned three important duties for the people who lives outside Estonia as refugee: 1. Organise Political activity in order for the rebirth of the Estonian state 2. Protect Estonian language and culture in all its diversity 3.

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Protect the ideas of a democratically independent Estonia between two World Wars (Edt Subrent, 2004). These ideas of Saareste became important to the cultural and linguistic unification of people in the light of people's fear that the Russification will dilute their culture and language.

In order to protect their culture and language several steps were taken by the Estonians. These intellectuals and writers who lived outside Estonia during the Soviet occupation formed an association called Valismaine Eesti Kiranike Liit (Exiled Estonian Writers Union) founded in 1945, in Stockholm. After their exile, these writers union merged with Estonian writers union in Estonia in the year of 2000. By the time of this merger of the union around 35 members were part of this union 14 of whom were from Sweden, 12 from the USA, 6 from Canada, 2 from Finland and one from the UK (Edt Subrent, 2004). It shows how strongly the union had worked in Western countries whereby it played a key role in mobilising opinion for Estonian independence from outside Estonia. Though cultural and linguistic clubs created strong political pressure along with educated elites to counter the Soviet authority among the Estonian people and created public opinion, in the later period, the Heritage society emerged as one of the major political force among the Estonians, whereby nationalistic feeling among the people from the perspective of the cultural and historical was created (Estonia.eu). Li Bennich- Bjorkman, put it simply "Estonia stands out in the manner that clearly organised networks with overt cultural, historical and nationalistic aims were formed already in the 1960s" (Bjorkman, 2007).

Mikk Titma further gives an important insight about the role of the educated youth and students in the Estonia's independence movement where "59 percent of the population had secondary school diplomas in Estonia, according to the 1989 census and in 1990 around 16,000 researchers and scientists were working in Estonia" (Titma, 1996). Tartu University played a key role in creating a nationalistic intellectual circle to counter the political elite in Estonia. In Tartu University, in the year of 1966, the Society of Nature was founded which later played a decisive role in protesting against the Soviet Union on environmental grounds. Along with movements on language and culture, the environmentalists also had an important role in creating national awareness among the people. During the 19th century, precisely in 1853, Estonians established their first Naturalist Society to protect the nature in Tartu. In the initial phase of Perestroika, in 1987 May Day, Tartu University students staged a protest against Soviet authority's Phosphorus mining project. Later in June 1988, the Estonian Green Movement (EGM) organised a rally in Tallinn where around 5000 people participated and created sensitisation among the youth about environmental degradation (Auer, 1998 and R. Lawaskiw, 1995).

The Estonian nationalist movement was lead predominantly by three groups, one being Estonian Heritage Society, the second Popular Front and third being Estonian National Independent Party (Zunes, 2009). The Estonian Heritage Society (EHS) was established in 12th December 1987 in Tallinn within a year of whose foundation the society had vast support among the Estonian people. By the year of 1988, 185 local cells comprising about 6000 members had joined this society (Tamm, 2013). Mart Laar, one of the founding members of the EHS, later also became the prime minister of Estonia. The Estonian Heritage Society played a central role in bringing back the old cultural and nationalistic memories from the

past. In the year of 1988, the first time in many decades banned the Estonian flag in the blue, black and white tricolour, and it was also displayed due to the EHS initiative (Smith, 2001).

The Popular Front, which was formed in 1988, has been quite moderate, yet it has been one of the key fronts to mobilise people against the Soviet Union. This front got official registration on 17 January 1989 (Taagepera, 1990). One of the major goals of Popular Front of Estonia (PFE) was to create a separate republic state (Taagepera, 1990). Also, it must be noted that many of the Popular Front members were part of the Communist Party, one of the notable leader of the same being Edgar Savissar. Popular Front demanded more political reforms and economic autonomy from the Soviet (Smith, 2001 and Zunes, 2009). Estonian National Independence Party was formed August 1988, which was more radical opposing any kind of reforms arguing the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Soviet Union. They had also declared Estonia to be a de facto independent state which was illegally occupied by the Soviet Union. Unlike the Popular Front, they opposed all kinds of reforms. Tunne Kelam, one of the founding members of the Estonian National Independence party said “We saw political independence and multiparty democracy as the only pre condition for the real implementation of all reforms” (Edit Subrent, 2004).

In the year 1989, elections for the Supreme Soviet triggered democratic aspirations among the people and it led to separatist demands for having a full republic for Estonia. There were two major stages which the Estonian people passed through towards getting a democratic republic: the first phase was 1989 to 1991, when Estonia Popular Front won the majority of the seats in the Soviet Supreme elections and the next phase was to frame a constitution for the country. There were two hard line difficulties they passed through in these two phases. The first phase was brought about with the help of some small group of people with democratic aspiration and with the help of mass support movements like the singing revolution, which is viewed as one of the most famous movement towards establishing new state republic.

According to many historians, the Signing revolution was the key movement in Estonia’s political movement. Estonian songs have historically had a key role in their independence movement, be it against Germans in the 13th century, or during the 18th century against Czar Peter the Great or later in 1869 when Russian Czar attempted Russification. Whenever the foreign invaders have tried to destroy the Estonian culture, they have historically used their songs as a political weapon to protest. In the year of 1988, the annual music festival was organised early, whereby the Popular Front had taken a serious initiative to mobilise people. Three music festivals were subsequently organised. The second music festival was attended by 20,000 people and the final music festival was attended by around 300,000 people who gathered and sang their national songs while it was restricted under the Soviet Union rule (Waren, 2012 and Zunes, 2009). Cultural artist Heniz Valk was the first one to coin the slogan of singing revolution. During the music festival Estonians was visible everywhere creating a huge impact nationalistic among Estonian people (Smith, 2001).

March 26th, 1989 was land mark date in Baltic States history since it was for the first time since post-Second World War there was a multi-candidate election for the USSR congress of people’s deputies. In this election, one person could vote for one candidate whereby the candidate securing more than 50% votes will be considered to be a winner. It

must be noted that all three Baltic States in this election elected Popular Front supported candidates (Taagepera, 1990). After the success of the singing revolution movement and massive victory in the election, the Estonian political organisation decided to put more pressure on Soviet Union authorities. In August, 1989 three Baltic countries decided to protest against the 50th anniversary of “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact”. The people of Baltic demanded that secret agreement by the Soviet Union officials claiming that the Baltic States willingly joined with the Soviet Union be made public (thebalticway.eu history). As a mark of protest, three Baltic States organised 600 km long human chain connecting all three Baltic capitals. There was a dispute between the Soviet news agency and the Western Media about participatory numbers of the human chain. While the Western media claimed the participation of around 700,000 people, the Soviet news agency announced the participation of around 300,000 people in the human chain (Estonia’s Return to Independence, 19871- 991). Irrespective of the numbers, the impact of the human chain was immense. The Soviet authorities came under pressure from the international community and there was mass unrest against Soviet Union occupation of Estonia. In the subsequent days the Soviet Union acknowledged the existence of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and declared it invalid making it a major victory for the Estonian independence movement (the baltic way).

In 1989 the citizen’s committee movement started the registration of the pre-Second World War citizens. This initiative was taken by the Estonian National Independent Party (ENIP), the Christian Union and the Heritage Preservation Society. This move clearly indicated the process of excluding the Russian settlers. In 1990 the election for Supreme Soviet of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (estonias- history.eu), was boycotted by ENIP. Out of 105 seats, legislature popular won 43 seats and Association for Free Estonia (reform Communists) and other pro-independence groups got 35, and the Russian International Movement got 27 seats, making Edgar Savisaar the first prime minister of the Estonian SSR (Wilder, 1993). The 1990 election can be viewed as a kind of a quasi-parliamentary election for Estonians. While the Soviet Union opposed the move it did not block the election process. Once independence was declared by the Supreme council, the decision was put down by the soviet authorities (Grofman, 1999). Also, the Supreme Council reinstated the interwar title Eesti Vabariik and symbols (Smith, 2001). In August the same year 1990, Gorbachev drafted a new union treaty which the Estonian leaders refused to sign because they believed that the treaty did not represent the will of their people. Then Gorbachev proposed another plan to hold a referendum on the new treaty but Estonian leaders held a separate referendum for the Estonian independence in 1991. In 1991, the reformist leader Yeltsin visited Estonia two months before the important referendum (Smith, 2001).

The crucial referendum was held in March 1991; which produced 78% in favour of independence on an 83% turnout (Wilder, 1993). Post-referendum, the Baltic republics pushed harder for the independence. Later on, the Gorbachev favour coup failed finally culminating in the independence of Estonia on 24 August 1991. Further on Soviet Union General Secretary Gorbachev famously announced “On 1 September “‘ultimate will and intention of the peoples of these republics, I believe we have to agree to it’ (on 27 August he repeated that republics had the right to secede, but it had to be done constitutionally) (Jeffries, 1993). Within a month’s time, leading Western countries reinstated diplomatic relations with Estonia and on

18th September, 1991, the flags of all three Baltic States were raised in front of the UN headquarters in New York (Jeffries, 1993).

From the Soviet Union to Independent nationhood, the Estonians passed through several multifaceted hardships but the determination in their innovative protest lead them to freedom. The independence movement as explained earlier were deeply rooted in the cultural, ethnic and linguistic identity of the Estonian people, but in this process, the Estonian political parties and movements started excluding the Russian-speaking minorities. This created anxiety between two communities. Nevertheless, what needs to be taken note of is the predominantly peaceful and nonviolent in nature of the said independent state movement in Estonia.

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