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Evhen Tsybulenko: Ukrainians thrive in Estonia

*The Ukrainian academic **Evhen Tsybulenko** has lived in Estonia since 2003. He is a professor of international law at the International University Audentes that is part of the Tallinn University of Technology. He is a citizen of Ukraine and his native tongue is Ukrainian, but he is also fluent in Russian, as he traveled around the Soviet Union with his father who was in the military, and often went to Russian schools. He participates in Estonian public debates mostly in Russian.*

Iivi Anna Masso: Professor Evhen Tsybulenko, you are a relatively recent immigrant in Estonia. Do you already see yourself as an Estonian, or are you a foreigner, or a representative of Estonian minorities?

Evhen Tsybulenko: First of all I am Ukrainian, I have quite strong Ukrainian identity. I have very good relations with the Ukrainian minority here, which is the second biggest minority after Russians, 2,5 % of the whole Estonian population. There is a strong Ukrainian organization here. I'm a member of the Ukrainian Council of Estonia, we have a Ukrainian Cultural Centre, our own Greek-Catholic church, the Uniate Church, and a school for children which is also open to Estonians. It is like a museum, a very interesting place. It was supported by ex-president Arnold Rüütel, and also by our president Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who has been there many times.

I also feel a strong connection with Estonia. I really like Estonia, I like the Estonian mentality which is close to ours, and the spiritual development. I like the Estonian people, they can set clear goals and then pursue them. If a country knows what it wants, it can always achieve it.

IAM: Does the Ukrainian minority feel discriminated against in Estonia?

ET: No, I have a feeling that Ukrainians are very appreciated here, and our Cultural Centre has got very much support from the Estonian government.

The problem is that some Ukrainians have been heavily assimilated to Russians in Estonia, they have lost their Ukrainian identity. They don't speak Ukrainian, they have a mentality more like Russians, they may sometimes have these imaginary problems.

But those Ukrainians who retained their Ukrainian identity, they do not have any problems, I haven't met anyone who had any problems here. It's quite interesting, because as we talk about minorities and so-called problems with minorities, the problems are only with Russian minorities. Other minorities like Tatars, Georgians and Jews feel very comfortable here, they have no problems.

IAM: Why, then, do some members of the Russian minority have problems?

ET: First of all, there is an imperial mentality which was created by the Soviet Union, as a result there is a certain collapse of identity. In the Soviet Union Russians were the leading nation. Although officially all nationalities were equal, in reality Russians were more privileged. Of course when they were suddenly in a situation where they should be like the others, it is a step back in comparison to their former privileged status.

Another important reason is Russian propaganda. People who do not speak the Estonian language are not competitive in the market. And they are very influenced by Russian

propaganda, they do not read Estonian newspapers or watch Estonian TV, and Russian propaganda is very strong now. I read Russian news every day, it is the Soviet Union Cold war rhetoric, they use exactly the same phrases, the same methods of influence, it is very scary. Of course if you follow such influence, the result is a mentality of victimization.

There are people who take difficulties as challenge, and there are those who always find excuses for failures. Here the Russians are offered a prepared excuse presented for them, discrimination can always be referred to as an explanation to failure. Actually life is not like that, there are successful Russian-speaking people here. In the medical faculty half of the students are Russian speaking. I don't think there is any talk about discrimination.

IAM: You mean the talk about discrimination has no ground in reality?

ET: There are two forms of discrimination – institutional and personal. At the institutional level, there is no discrimination in Estonia at the moment. As for the personal variant, it exists to an extent in any country. In every country ca 20% of the population are quite xenophobic, it is probably no different in Estonia. If discrimination happens, there are legal measures to combat it, equally available to all. In European court there have been no cases about discrimination in Estonia, although there have been some cases about fair trial.

Some Russians say they do not trust Estonian courts. They can always go to an European court, Russia is a member of the Council of Europe. Russia has lost ca 70 cases in European courts. So there is no legal ground to say there is this kind of discrimination in Estonia.

IAM: In that case, where does the talk about it come from?

ET: It is Russian propaganda. Russia has become totalitarian. Any totalitarian state can exist only by claiming that they are surrounded by enemies. It's a form of consolidation, states like Latvia and Estonia can be used as tools to consolidate people. Of course it is absolutely hypocritical. In Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan the situation of Russians is horrible. It is unbelievable what is happening there, but Russia is completely silent about them, because those states are its allies. Democratic states are dangerous for Russia nowadays, because they set a "bad" example. Any democratic state as a neighbour is a threat to totalitarian Russia. The last two years, there is a problem with Latvia, and Ukraine, and Georgia. Almost all democratic states have problems with Russia.

IAM: Talking about that, do you think Georgia could have avoided the conflict in August 2008?

South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the Transnistrian republic of Moldova were created by Russia to destabilize the countries. These self-proclaimed states cause violence, instability and Mafia-ruled areas. There are more ethnic Ossetians in the Georgian government than in the South Ossetian government. The South Ossetian government is mostly Russian. There were permanent provocations from South Ossetia, and Georgians tried to establish a constitutional order. Their attack was no aggression against any independent state.

The giving to Ossetians of the Russian passports is amazing, as many Russians from Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan waited for years to get Russian citizenship. In Ossetia they got Russian passports just like that, and they are doing the same in Ukraine. The same happened in Czechoslovakia in 1930-ies. It was exactly on the same ground, the protection of German citizens in Czechoslovakia, then Poland. Now Georgia almost surrendered. That so called independence is a myth, basically those regions were made Russian.

IAM: Was Russia ever actually democratic in your view?

ET: Not really. During Jeltsin's time they tried to go to the right direction. It was not democracy, but it was an attempt to go to the right direction. Now they're going back, Russia is already like the Soviet Union. Full collapse of freedom of speech, the media, there is basically only one party, and a muppet parliament.

IAM: What do you think Estonia can do to prevent tensions with the Russian minority?

ET: First, time should pass. The younger generation is already different, young people say they are happy in Estonia. Actually Estonia integrated a lot of people, I was a member of an integration commission. There are complaints about stateless persons, but in Estonia it is easy to get citizenship, if you want. There are two exams, a minimum level language test and basic questions about the constitution, about the democratic system – a normal procedure that is the same everywhere, it is even much easier than in other countries. In Russia it is much harder. But many Russians do not want to do it, some 86% of the stateless persons said they did not want to get citizenship, as they think it is humiliating to pass the language exam. If you believe speaking the language of the country to which you've moved is humiliating, it is a matter of attitude, not the problem of the country.

IAM: What about your own experience with the language? You do not speak very much Estonian yet, have you faced difficulties because of that?

ET: I am studying Estonian, I speak it at a very primitive level, but I hope to improve it. Meanwhile, I experience no difficulty at all. I think it is normal to live in a country and speak the language, I cannot understand the people who spend their whole life here, do not bother to learn the language and then complain about discrimination. Here I teach in English, and we also have a Master's program in International Relations in Russian. Many people speak Russian, younger people often speak English. Usually I can communicate in English or Russian. In five years, I have met four or five people who speak neither.

IAM: What do you think about the transfer of the Bronze Soldier from Tallinn's center in April 2007, and the events around it?

ET: I supported the transfer. For Estonians the meaning is different, for Russians it is a person who defeated the Nazis. That was the national idea of the Soviet people, even though Hitler was created by Stalin – they had joint parades after conquering Poland in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. For Estonians, the Soviet occupation was no better than the German one. It is a little strange having a monument that symbolizes occupation in the centre of the capital, can you imagine a monument of a German soldier in the centre of Tel Aviv? The cemetery is a good place for the monument, there are graves of many other Soviet soldiers. If you want to pay respect, it's there.

In Russian news, they spoke not about the transfer of the statue, but about demolishing it. It's a completely different thing, it is propaganda. If you look at it objectively, nothing bad happened, the monument is there, not destroyed, it looks even better.

IAM: Are you optimistic about the future of Estonia?

ET: About Estonia, yes. About Russia, no. I am worried about Ukraine, I think the reaction of the international community was not strong enough against Russia in the

Georgian case. If you watch Russian news, they are triumphant. It's the most horrible outcome of the situation. Russian authorities now feel encouraged to continue.

IAM: Some Europeans claim that Estonian and Ukrainian reaction was too strong?

The Ukrainian, Polish and Baltic reaction was not too strong. It was a completely adequate reaction, the rest of Europe should also have been much stronger. It always talks about oil. But oil for Russia is 70% of the budget, and for Europe, 20-30% of oil comes from Russia, so they need to sell oil and gas more than Europe needs it. For Russia, not selling the oil would be the collapse of economy. In the beginning of 1970s because of Arabo-Israeli war and the fact that Israel was supported by Europe, Arab states tried to put pressure to Europe cutting oil supplies. It was a hard time for Europe, but Europe survived. What is the difference now? Democratic values mean nothing for us today?

Estonia is a member of NATO. If this reaction is so soft, Russia may want to test NATO, but later. First Ukraine and Moldova are in danger, maybe Azerbaydzhan. After that, they may want to touch NATO, as NATO is the only one effective mechanism of collective defence. I'm so sorry Ukraine is not in NATO yet. Events in Georgia have to show the international community that Ukraine and Georgia should be parts of NATO as soon as possible.