

## RUSSIAN-ESTONIAN RELATIONS: A MEDIUM-TERM FORECAST

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*This article shows why the non-existent political dialogue between Russia and Estonia will hardly develop in the next five years and why Estonia can lose its significance for the Russian foreign policy rhetoric and Russian mass media. This conclusion is drawn from a medium-term forecast about the changing role of Estonia in Russian foreign policy. The forecast is based on the scenario methodology, which suggests that the modern means of political forecasting make it possible to make conclusions not about the future states of political phenomena, but rather about the trends of current states, which are called scenarios. The article describes the four possible scenarios of changes in the role of Estonia in Russian foreign policy that are evaluated from the perspective of the development of Russian-Estonian relations and factors affecting the probability of each scenario. It is shown that any change in the role of Estonia in Russian foreign policy depends not only on the specific actions of the Estonian elite, for example their readiness to change their position on the participation of Russian-speaking population in the democratic decision-making process or the evaluation of controversial events of the past, but also on the meaning that will be attached to these actions by the Russian elite.*

**Key words:** international relations, foreign policy analysis, Russia, Estonia, forecast

There are two main problems in political forecasting that need to be resolved. They are the unpredictability of targeted revolutionary changes aimed at political development, on the one hand, and the unpredictability of sporadic political changes constituting the essence of evolutionary development, on the other hand. In an attempt to justify the possibility of scenario-based political forecasting in the conditions

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of uncertainty, N. Yu. Blagoveshenskij, M. Yu. Krechetova and G. A. Sartarov come to the following conclusions: “If we cannot forecast the future, we can, at least, try to establish a link between possible variants of the future and the present” [1, p. 75]. The research tools used by modern political scientists cannot ensure sufficient accuracy in describing future conditions of certain political elements. Thus, in the context of the objectives formulated in this article, it seems to be impossible to characterise the role that Estonia will play in Russia’s foreign policy after the period described as “a mid-term perspective” is over. However, it is possible to identify some trends that reflect changes in the current state of certain political elements. This approach enables us to analyse how the role of Estonia in Russia’s foreign policy is likely to change. In political forecasting, descriptions of such trends are called scenarios. It is worth noting that all scenarios always include an assessment of the current condition of the element of the political world, whose development is to be forecast. Regardless of whether they are produced for a short-, long- or, as is the case in this article, mid-term perspective, forecasts are better suited for analysing the present than for creating an image of the future. It is the optimal context for considering the forecasts of Russia’s policy towards Estonia that, for many years, have been produced by the experts working under the aegis of the Academic Baltic Centre of Russian Studies at the University of Tartu (Estonia) (for example, see [2]).

In effect, these forecasts are, firstly, assumptions about the steps that might be taken by Russia in the year following that of forecast production and that can be approved by Estonia. Secondly, they contain assumptions about the steps that Russia might not take because they could provoke criticism of Estonia. Thus, when producing their forecasts, Estonian experts base their analysis not on the goals and objectives of Russia’s foreign policy but on the goals and objectives formulated within Estonia’s foreign policy (that will be based on approving of or criticising certain actions of Russia). This article follows the described pattern: it will not analyse possible actions of Estonia in a mid-term perspective but rather possible changes in Russia’s perception of these actions. Unlike the Estonian forecast produced for a short-term perspective of 1 year, our study focuses on a mid-term perspective of 5 years.

### **The role of Estonia in Russia’s current foreign policy**

Today, the position of Estonia in Russia’s foreign policy is characterised by two trends. On the one hand, as an overview compiled by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2001 concisely states, “Russian-Estonian political contacts are limited” [3]. On the other hand, Estonia is assigned an important — though negative — role in the speeches of Russian political leaders and Russian mass media, which is disproportionate to its influence on trade and economic ties, and the more so political contacts. This assessment suggests that four scenarios of changes in the role of Estonia in Russia’s foreign policy are possible:

1. “Stagnation” in Russian-Estonian relations — Estonia will still occupy a significant position in Russian political rhetoric (and vice versa). However, political contacts between the countries will remain limited.

2. “Oblivion” in Russia’s foreign policy — Russian-Estonian political contacts will remain limited. However, the country’s significance for Russian foreign policy rhetoric and mass media will decrease.

3. “Unfairness” in Russian-Estonian political relations — frequent political contacts will emerge between Russia and Estonia. However, their impact will be underestimated, and they will not be paid enough attention in Russian political rhetoric and mass media.

4. “Improvement” in Russian-Estonian relations — frequent political contacts between Russia and Estonia will create a positive image of Estonia in Russian foreign policy rhetoric.

However, the probability of any scenario does not characterise the development of Russian-Estonian relations in a mid-term perspective, since it cannot be described with high degree of accuracy. Even if research tools of modern political scientists were capable of identifying that the probability of the “oblivion” scenario were, for example, 60%, the obtained results would be of limited importance. 60% probability means that, out of 10 similar occasions, this scenario will unfold six times, whereas four times one of the three other scenarios will take place. However, in the modern world, there is only one Russia and only one Estonia. Even if there were an opportunity to establish that the given scenario unfolded on six out of 10 occasions, it would not mean that Russian-Estonian relations would inevitably follow this very path.

### **Russia as a great power and Estonia as a small state**

At the same time, one can identify the factors either facilitating or hampering a certain scenario. In our opinion, the role of Estonia in Russian foreign policy rhetoric and mass media is determined by the idea of the Russian political elite about the role of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Estonia in international relations and world politics in general. Today, most Russian citizens think of their country as a great power. In the first half of the 1990s, just a few people believed in the re-emergence of Russia as a great power in the world arena, whereas the attempts to speak of Russia’s greatness were characterised by A. A. Zinovyev as “mocking the people” [4, p. 285]. In those conditions, Estonia was perceived as a country that had an almost equal to Russia’s standing in the world arena and as a tough opponent of some of Russia’s foreign policy plans since it did not manage to become Russia’s partner.

As early as 2007, Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Urmas Paet threatened to obstruct negotiations between Russia and the European Union [5], and it was perceived as a serious threat in Russia. As a result, the role of Estonia in Russian mass media and speeches of Russian leaders increased significantly at the time. Nowadays, Russia is one of the “centres of power” [6] for the whole Baltic region, alongside the EU and the USA. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult for the Russian elite to perceive Estonia as a state capable of affecting Russia-EU relations, either positively or negatively. This situation is maintained by the trends that emerged in the EU in the conditions of the Eurozone crisis. Recently, the significance of non-formal institutions — for instance, summits of the leaders of major EU states — has increased [7, p. 130]. Estonia

does not take part in these institutions, and thus it cannot affect Russia-EU relations either in the understanding of Russian political elite or in the reality.

In these conditions, the role of Estonia in Russian foreign policy rhetoric and mass media could increase through multilateral cooperation. For example, according to A. P. Klemeshev, G. M. Fedorov and Yu. M. Zverev, the prospect of innovative cooperation between Russia and Estonia facilitates the “formation of the Gulf of Finland growth triangle” [8, p. 95]. This initiative suggests active participation of Russia, Estonia and Finland. However, as the experience of international cooperation in the Nord Stream construction shows, Estonia will not be ready to participate in any forms of multilateral cooperation in the near future, even if the third party is represented by a EU partner — for instance, Germany or Finland. It is likely that the potential of the “Gulf of Finland growth triangle” will not be fully developed in a mid-term perspective, predominantly, due to Estonia’s position.

### **Cross-border cooperation**

In a mid-term perspective, the role of Estonia in Russia’s foreign policy rhetoric and mass media could increase through cross-border cooperation. However, it requires large projects to be launched in the framework of cross-border cooperation, which is not probable at the moment. Neither the potential of Estonia, the more so its eastern regions, nor that of the Leningrad and Pskov regions of the Russian Federation situated in the vicinity of the Russian-Estonian border gives any reasons to expect the launch of large projects involving a great number of regions from Russia and the EU. Similar to the case of the Russian-Estonian-Finnish “growth triangle”, the probability that successful cooperation will develop in a mid-term perspective is rather low.

On the contrary, there is an emerging tendency towards a decrease in the number of participants of cross-border projects as well as their narrower scope. In the late 1990s, cross-border cooperation was trilateral (Russian, Estonian and Latvian border regions). A special council supervised cooperation of the countries’ border regions [9, p. 62]. Today, cross-border interactions are bilateral: Russian-Estonian projects are implemented separately from Russian-Latvian ones. At the same time, the municipalities and authorities of Estonia and Latvia — two EU countries that have not managed to forge good-neighbourly relations — cannot be held fully responsible for these developments. One of the obstacle is the reluctance of Russian regional elites — first of all, those of the Pskov region — which was emphasised by A. Makarychev as early as a decade ago [10].

Focusing on the case of Estonia, N. M. Mezhevich demonstrates that the presence or absence of a cross-border agreement between two countries has no effect on the intensity of cross-border cooperation [11]. Even if in a mid-term perspective a cross-border agreement between Russia and Estonia is signed, it will not facilitate the emergence of major cross-border cooperation projects, nor will it increase the role of Estonia in Russian foreign policy rhetoric and mass media. On the contrary, one can assume that its role will even decrease: as long as the agreement remains unsigned, related debates arouse certain interest. It was the case in 2005, when, after signing the agreement, the Russian party withdrew

the signature of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S. V. Lavrov; in 2007, when the cross-border agreement with Latvia was signed and ratified; in 2013, when new hopes for the signing and ratification of the agreement emerged. When the agreement is finally signed, the topic for media debates will disappear.

### **Historical issues and the problem of Russian-speaking population**

As it was mentioned above, the emergence of a currently non-existent political dialogue between Russia and Estonia will not immediately increase the role of the country in Russian foreign policy rhetoric and mass media. Moreover, there are no factors that could facilitate the emergence of a dialogue between the two countries in a mid-term perspective. However, there are factors that will hamper such a dialogue. Firstly, it is the differences in the Russian and Estonian assessment of certain events of the past — predominantly, those of the 1940s. Secondly, it is Estonia's current ethnopolitical model, according to which hundreds of thousands of Russian-speaking population permanently residing in the country over several decades are excluded from the democratic process of decision making. They cannot affect either the public policy in education and culture, or the official interpretation of the past.

The recent experience of Russian-Polish relations suggests that arguments over the assessment of certain events of the past, which hinder the development of a political dialogue between countries, can be successfully resolved to the mutual satisfaction of the parties [12]. However, this path chosen for resolving arguments over the assessment of historical events by Russia and Poland is not suitable for Russian-Estonian relations, where the problems of historical assessments and inclusion of Russian-speaking population in the democratic process of decision making are closely intertwined. More than 20 years ago, when Estonia's modern ethnopolitical model was being developed, the country's political elite was guided by the concerns that the Russian-speaking population residing in Estonia would become a "fifth column" and promote Russian interests. That is why they were excluded from the decision making process. As G. Smith and A. Wilson emphasise, similar concerns were expressed by the Ukrainian leadership [13].

Since the emergence of Estonia's ethnopolitical mode over 20 years ago, a reverse situation has developed. Russian-speaking population residing in Estonia do not promote the foreign policy interests of the Russian Federation. However, the protection of interests of Russian-speaking population — that is excluded from the democratic process of political decision making and thus is unable to guard their interests through the Estonian political institutions — has become one of the key objectives of Russia's foreign policy. It is not the Russian-speaking population that make Estonian authorities abandon the assessment of the events of 1940 as the occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union in order to legitimate Russia's current foreign policy towards Estonia. It is Russia that is not inclined to acknowledge the "occupation" to avoid the Estonian Russian-speaking population being labelled as "occupants" and further excluded from the democratic process of decision making.

While Russia's diplomacy continues to emphasise the stability of its position on the interpretation of the events of 1940 and the protection of the inter-

ests of Russian-speaking population, Russian scholars suggest compromise interpretations that would satisfy all the parties involved — the Russian Federation, the Republic of Estonia and the Estonian Russian-speaking population. For example, K. K. Khudoley believes that these events should be considered as “sovietisation” of Estonia — a unique process that could be possible only in the Baltics, only within the system of international relations that formed after World War I, alongside the equally unique process known as the Anschluss in European historiography [14]. However, it seems that, in a mid-term perspective, the Estonian elite will not be ready to discuss any compromise interpretations of these significant historical events.

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Therefore, the factors hindering the Russian-Estonian dialogue will prevail in a mid-term perspective. These factors include, first of all, the continuing exclusion of a significant part of the Russian-speaking population from the democratic process of decision making in Estonia and, secondly, the ongoing arguments between Russia and Estonia over the assessment of certain events of the past. If a political dialogue between the two states emerges in a mid-term perspective, it will not be a result of the elimination of the above factors but that of a decrease in their importance for Russia’s and Estonia’s foreign policy.

It is reasonable to expect a transition from trilateral cross-border cooperation projects (Russia — Estonia — Finland and Russia — Estonia — Latvia) to bilateral ones, which will also narrow their scope and reduce their impact on Russia’s foreign policy, which has not been significant in the conditions of the increasing role of Russia in international politics.

A decrease in the significance of Estonia for Russia’s foreign policy should be considered at this stage as a positive scenario and a change in the role of Estonia in Russia’s foreign policy. The “oblivion” scenario can result in the emergence of a new basis for further development of bilateral relations. It can even lead to the unfolding of the “improvement” scenario. However, it seems to be possible only in a long-term perspective. In a mid-term perspective, the most probable scenarios are “stagnation” and “oblivion”, which do not suggest the development of a political dialogue between the two countries. The “oblivion” scenario is considered as positive, whereas the “stagnation” scenario means that Estonia will continue to play a significant but negative role in Russian foreign policy rhetoric and mass media.

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