Russian parties and electoral behavior
Cultural-historical background and prejudice as determinants of electoral behavior of Russian-speaking voters

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Introduction

The present paper is concerned with the research of relevance of Russian parties in Estonian party system, which is determined by several factors: the institutional influence, the success in elections, the activity of Russian population in elections.

The research is based on the theoretical study of electoral choice and voter behavior and the data from public opinion polls held in February 2000.

The main purpose is to reveal the reasons of small representation of Russian parties in the Riigikogu stipulated by the peculiarity of the Russian-speaking electorate behavior.

The primary assumption is that non-Estonian electorate should support and vote for non-Estonian politicians and parties who directly can represent their interests in the Riigikogu. The research question in the simplified way is why non-Estonian electorate does not support absolutely (100%) Russian parties?

Russian parties

Though Russian political movements have begun the activity in Estonia in 1991, as year of birth of Russian parties can be considered 1994, when was based Vene Erakond Eestis (Maspanov) and Ühendatud Rahva Partei (Andrejev), who participated in elections of 1995 to the Riigikogu together. In 1997 was based Vene Ühtsuspartei (Sedashev).

The question of functioning of Russian parties should be considered in terms of factors that limit parties’ opportunities to be represented in the Riigikogu. These are parties’ narrow orientation only on Russian-speaking electorate, considerable percent of non-Estonians non-citizens that can not participate in elections to the Riigikogu but only in local elections, the dissociation of Russian political elite, Russian-speaking electorate voting for Estonian parties. The result is small Russian
faction in the Riigikogu 1999 (6 mandates) and absence of Russian parties’ representatives in the Riigikogu 2003.

Concerning Russian parties is clear that their target group is Russian-speaking voters, though Russian parties try to avoid ethnical matters (Toomla 1999).

Summarizing the principles of parties programs and various publications from national daily newspapers is possible to define more precisely, who are represented and protected by Russian parties.

Russian people and their interests (Vene Erakond Eestis) – one of the aims of the party. It represents and protects Russian people and their interests and those to whom Russian language and culture are especially close. Comment: the status of a small party is the result of initially limited orientation and limited electorate.

1. Non-citizens as a target group of Ühendatud Rahva Partei. Comment: the danger is whether the question of citizenship is still important for those, who had already received Estonian citizenship.
2. Russian culture and language – comment: is clear that carry out this principle at a state level is necessary, but how it is real at a local level?
3. All non-Estonians – comment: if till now the parties could not effectively mobilize Russian electorate, how probably they could be representatives of all non-Estonians?

The problem is that despite of precise orientation to the Russian voter, Russian parties could not effectively mobilize Russian electorate, because Russian electorate supports not only Russian parties, but also Keskerakond and even Reformierakond and Mõõdukad (Social-democrats). This leads to diminution of number of the Russian voters, who could vote for Russian parties.

Question is, why the situation is so? There can be an answer that the Russian voters do not trust or are disappointed with Russian politicians or may be they proceed from a principle of strategic voting.
Even if Russian parties could protect and represent everybody they’d like to, it is necessary to recognize, that Russian parties nevertheless are not the representatives of Russian Diaspora in Estonia, because Russian Diaspora as such in Estonia does not exist.

The consolidation is not possible for Russian parties due to their inconsistent leaders but also for all Russian community. Why?
Theoretical basis

In total all approaches studying voting process are divided into two groups: social and institutional.

The social approach including the theory of a rational choice, pays attention to behavior of the voter, where the behavior of the voter is dependent variable, and independent variables are social status, ethnic and religious belonging, partisanship and so on.

Scholars from the Columbia School defined the sociological parameters of electoral choice (Berelson), and the Michigan School extended this knowledge to include the sociopsychological influences on political choice (Campbell, Miller and Shanks, Dalton 2000).

Institutional approach

The research object of the institutional approach is influence of rules of electoral system, electoral formula, size of a district, the effective threshold (Lijphart 1994).

As the main body of the research is devoted to study and explanation of Russian electorates’ behavior concerning the institutional approach must be said as much as Estonian proportional electoral system does not limit either reduces the representation of Russian parties in the Riigikogu. The change of electoral formula wouldn’t radically alter the distribution of the mandates.

The distribution of mandates in parliament are proportional to percent of the received votes in the elections, which can be controlled by Loosemore and Handy index of disproportionality that is not significant (Taagepera 1989).

Social approach

The social approach - basic question is what influence voter’s decidability.

1. The pessimistic approach - voter is initially politically not competent, can not understand thoroughly parties, candidates, politics. The voters do not know what they want and can not
estimate that good that parties have made for them (Dunleavy1995). \textit{Comment}: the language problematic could be the cause of political illiteracy, but the result of this case should be support of Russian parties.

2. Rational voter – A. Downs, who uses microeconomic principles analyzing party competition. The voter is a rational actor, the social value of competitions is responsiveness, and the voter is not obliged to be informed, but has to be sensual, concerning the offers and programs of parties (Bartolini 1995). \textit{Comment}: in theory the voter calculates maximal net profit for himself from elections, but for the Russian voter it is difficult to calculate individual net profit by the reason of not knowing of Estonian language. It is logical to assume that the implementation of the programs of Russian parties would give the maximal profit.

3. Cleavages – based voting – the assumption is that many voters are ill prepared to deal with the complexities of politics; thus, voters rely on shortcuts - such as group cues or affective partisan loyalties (Dalton 2000). The sociological approach also stressed the underlying stability of party competition because people supposedly base their political decisions on enduring social cleavages.

Franklin, Mackie, and Valen (1992) tracked the ability of a set of social characteristics (including social class, education, income, religiosity, region, and gender) to explain partisan preferences (Lane 1991).

\textit{Comment}: it is necessary to distinguish ethnic structure and ethnic consciousness that is identification and relations inside ethnic structure. The behavior of the Russian voter would be possible to explain by weak ethnic identification (absence of Russian Diaspora), but it does not give the answer to a question - why.

Also it’s impossible to rely on ethnical cleavages describing voter’s behavior because in many Western democracies in the beginning of 90-es one of the major findings was that social position no longer determines political positions.
The declining influence of group cleavages on electoral choice has been paralleled by a weakening of affective party attachments (or partisan identifications) that were the basis of the Michigan model of electoral choice (Dalton 2000).

4. The decline of long-term predispositions based on social position or partisanship should shift the basis of electoral behavior to short-term factors, such as candidate image and issue opinions. There is evidence that the new electoral order includes a shift toward candidate-centered politics.

Photo opportunities, personalized interviews, walkabouts, and even televised candidate debates are becoming standard electoral fare (Dalton 2000).

The example with success of Savisaar (outstanding candidate image) in elections confirms the last findings. But it is not the sufficient explanation of Russian voter behavior.

In author opinion the application of the theory (Downs, Schumpeter, Lane, Swanson and Mancini, Lipset and Rokkan, Dalton) helps to define the tendency and the likelihood of electoral behavior but doesn’t give an answer to the question ‘why’.

Due to such inferences the answer could be found in studying of Russian cultural-historical background and its influences on Russian-speaking electorates. The main point of cultural-historical background is importance of the principle of equality, which is traced during the whole Russian and Soviet Union history.

**Cultural – historical background**

The Russian political forces in Estonia repeatedly emphasized principles of equality, validity and solidarity. It is not surprising because in Russian culture the principle of unity (*соборности*) was always one of major bases of the Orthodoxy, which defined vital organization of the life of Russian people (Pantchenko 2000).
From the slogan of the French revolution “freedom, equality and brotherhood”, Russia supported only equality and brotherhood. Freedom associated with abyss. The abyss meant emptiness and fall; also it was considered as a place, where the devil lived.

The equality and brotherhood – people are all together and equal. The principle of equality influenced Russian culture during all Russian history (its maximal display was Russian Revolution). It is significant that Russians could be equal in one case - when they are in equal socioeconomic conditions - when all of them are poor. None is rich - all are rich. Therefore Russians see equality through a prism of poverty, the Russian man hasn’t got used to be rich.

Summarizing all that have been said above it is possible to assert that while the Russian politicians represent equal - poor people, there is no hope for support and trust.

Improving of the socioeconomic status of individual leads to the dropping out of the community of equal people that automatically means the loss of trust.

But moreover the Russians like when somebody cares about them. This could be the reason why Russian electorate prefers eventually to vote not for the Russian parties, but for the Estonian ones (so-called Rjurikovich’ syndrome – to invite someone to govern from outside the community).

Other situation would arise with occurrence of strong Russian Diaspora, where the representatives of Diaspora are equal - rich. Only rich Russian businessmen would be interested in creation of associations of the businessmen functioning together with political and public organizations of Diaspora, rendering financial support.

So the parties are used for access to authority and creation of favorable conditions for business (lobby).

Nobody considers weak and poor Diaspora. Only solid financial potential, high economic level of Diaspora development give a real opportunity for lobbying in corridors of authority, where the lobbying will be carried out by a strong Russian party (Poloskova 2000).
Data analyzing

The statements are especially relevant when they are substantiated with the empirical data. The public opinion polls held in February 2000 reveals important peculiarity of discrepancy between political elite behavior and voters’ expectations.

One more question that would be interesting to study is why and depends on what Estonian and non-Estonian electorate prefer to see Estonian and Russian political representatives participating in one political party while Russian political elite shows separation within parties.

Table 1. Respondents’ attitudes towards participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crosstabulation</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% within EME</td>
<td>1,00 Estonians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Estonians and Estonians are together in one party</td>
<td>57,4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Estonians make their own party</td>
<td>22,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not matter</td>
<td>18,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we may notice from the data a significant percent of respondents would like to see non-Estonians and Estonians politicians participating in one political party. This is also the explanation of the success of Savisaar’s party Keskerakond among Russian-speaking voters.

The question is what variables to use for describing of people’s attitude towards participation. Independent variables can be divided into two main groups: exogenous factors (age, education, income, socioeconomic status, marital status) and attitudes (interest in politics, attitudes to elections,
party attachment). As far as the author is interested in ethnic factor’s influence on electoral behavior, the above mentioned groups of independent variables are viewed through the ethnical differences.
Figure 1. An analytical model

Exogenous factors

Ethnicity

Attitudes to participation of politicians

Attitudes

As the data shows, Estonians and non-Estonians have equal attitude to participation of politicians, but if they think the same way and proceed from equal assumptions, the effect of ethnic factor on voter behavior through exogenous factors wouldn’t show up.

Table 2. The influence of education on attitudes to participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Estonians</th>
<th>Non-Estonians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>66.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows equal distribution of percents between groups. The same situation is concerning age, income and occupation. The distances (Δ \( \hat{Y} \)) between group means are small that allows to doubt in considerable effect of ethnic factor on voter’s behavior.

However if to analyze further the distances (Δ \( \hat{Y} \)) between group means of attitudes we find differences.
Figure 2.

This figure shows significant difference between attitudes of Estonians and non-Estonians to politics (the distance between means is big). The Estonians prefer to see in politics people who are smatter than them, while non-Estonians consider politics dirty game (which is an explanation of Russians’ political apathy).

Those independent variables, which show differences, are participating in elections, determinants of participation in politics and prejudices.
Figure 3.

This figure shows that Russians are sure that Estonians have more possibilities for success in politics, while Estonians average answers are sometimes or opportunities are equal.
Distances

What do all these distances show? We have two groups – Estonians and non-Estonians. Statistical average (mean) shows average situation or average attitude of each group in the relation to different variables.

If we take variable – attitude to politics – then Estonian group’s mean shows average answer (prevailing attitude) of Estonians to politics and the Russian group’ mean accordingly shows attitude of Non-Estonians to politics.

If the distance between means of two groups is big, then we can say that these two groups are different (they differ from each other).

The analysis of distances between group means of Estonians and Non-Estonians revealed that concerning exogenous factors (age, education, income, socioeconomic status, and marital status) the distances were small – groups are not different. But the analysis of attitudes (interest in politics, attitudes to elections, party attachment) showed big distances between group mean – groups are different.

If groups differ from each other then the division to an ethnic cleavage is reasonable.

If to order distances, we can receive the following tendency.

Figure 4. The tendency of distances
Actually this is the opposite variant of Maslow’s pyramid:

On the one hand this figure shows structure of Estonian society.

On the other hand exogenous factors reflect real situation and real life, so concerning exogenous factors we can say that distances are small, groups are not different, the real situation (occupation, education, income) of non-Estonians is almost the same as for Estonians.

But attitudes are different. Why? In author opinion the attitudes of Russian-speaking electorate are influenced by prejudice. It’s rather difficult to control the success of non-Estonian politicians in politics. It is impossible to control it now because Russian-speaking electorate has prejudice that there is no possibility for non-Estonian politician to be successful in politics. The result of this prejudice is
the wish of Russian-speaking electorate to see Estonian and non-Estonian politicians cooperating together in one party and to vote for Estonians parties.

Estonians would like to see Estonian and non-Estonian politicians cooperating together because it’s better (for them) to have Russian politicians in Estonian parties than to have one strong Russian party in Estonia.
Summary

Different attitudes towards the success in political life reveal very important variable, which is prejudice. Russian voter has prejudice that a Russian politician has much more obstacles on the way to imperious structures.

Prejudice is the reason why in Russian voter opinion non-Estonians and Estonians should participate in one party in order to avoid those obstacles. Keskerakond could be an example of a party who corresponds to voters’ expectations instead of the dissociation behavior of Russian politicians.

So together with influence of cultural-historical background prejudice is an important variable for explaining Russian-speaking voter behavior and why non-Estonians doesn’t support absolutely Russian parties.
References


