

Mobilization of Estonian and Russian-speaking women in contemporary Estonia.

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Abstract

With the fall of the Soviet Union a huge Russian-speaking population found itself being “economic immigrants” with seriously limited rights and legal status, even though they did not change their place of living and some of them do not have a passport at all.

This thesis explores the mobilization of Estonian women and Russian-speaking women in contemporary Estonia. The Estonian society is full of serious anti-Russian attitude that can be clearly depicted in the agenda of Estonian women's NGOs. These organizations do not incorporate the agenda of Russian-speaking women, although claim the universality of women's needs.

Russian-speaking women in turn form cultural organizations only which do not pursue an openly politicized gender agenda. This mirrors the inferior position of the Russian minority. Their needs are accommodated only in both-sex human rights based internationally funded consulting agencies, which also marginalize and neglect the gender issues, following patriarchal similar logic of domination, admitting the supremacy of ethnicity over gender – as the Estonian women's NGOs do.

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1. Introduction

With the fall of the Soviet Union Estonia became an independent country. This independent country has a huge population of Russian-speaking minority, the accommodation of which is a problem that needs a solution in Estonia.

The Estonian state makes some efforts to integrate the Russian-speaking population in the Estonian society. The way how this minority is positioned vis-à-vis the Estonian state and how integration is envisioned by the Estonian authorities will be discussed in details in this thesis.

Women play a key role in construction of the state identity. In my research I will show that Estonian and Russian-speaking women are positioned differently vis-à-vis the Estonian state, reproducing the domination of ethnic Estonians and the anti-Russian approach of the whole Estonian society.

Women in various contexts of oppression choose different mobilization strategies. The main task of my research is to find and analyse the strategy of Russian-speaking women in this context of domination. For this strategy I search in the agenda of Estonian women's NGOs and in Russian-speaking women's NGOs, coming to the conclusion that the stand-point and interests of Russian-speaking women are not incorporated into the agenda of Estonian women's NGOs. Russian-speaking women unite on the basis of their cultural activities, without having an active political agenda. The only choice they have at this point in Estonia is to unite in both-sex NGOs together with the Russian-speaking men and seek human rights assistance in internationally funded consulting agencies. These agencies also do not incorporate the gender

interests of the Russian-speaking women into their agenda, following the intra-community patriarchal male logic of the supremacy of ethnicity over the gender interests.

1.1. The structure

The main part of this thesis is the analysis of the agenda of Estonian and Russian-speaking women's NGOs in Estonia. But in order to build-up the analysis I introduce the methodology of my research and the domestic and international context of contemporary Estonia. Discussing the literature of nation, state and gender and mobilization strategies of women in various contexts of oppression leads my research to the practical analysis of the agenda of Estonian and Russian-speaking women's NGOs, concluding that the needs of Russian-speaking women at this point are accommodated only in internationally funded human rights consulting agencies on the basis of both-sex mobilization, that is gender-blind and is built on the same logic of the supremacy of ethnicity over gender as in the case of Estonian women's NGOs.

1.2. The method.

In my research I have made intrinsic case studies of Russian-speaking women's NGOs and Estonian women's NGOs. In analysing these case studies I have involved phenomenological approach¹, as participants in these NGOs experience issues related to women's rights, their experience gives "first-hand" access to their perception of the social phenomenon of "womanhood."

I have conducted in-depth, topical, open-ended and semi-structured

interviews on Skype and in person. Beside that I have prepared question to my interviewees in written form that I sent to them. Thus, those who were unable to give Skype interview could answer the question. This answering in some cases has induced a long e-mailing process, where my interviewees answered further questions that I have posted. Their contribution has been extremely valuable, as my own questions and focus has undergone through refining process as I have conducted the interviews.

In my research I have taken a constructivist approach, as I agree with Scott² in the question of the social construction of the experience and the task of the interviewer to explain the constructed political nature of the personal experience of the reality. From this perspective the specificity of my research is that I have listened and read the topical stories of women (and in some cases men), thus I have created a virtual forum where both parties (Estonian and Russian-speaking) were able to put down the corner stones of their opinion thus my research facilitates and maybe induce communication between these groups with diverse backgrounds.

Reinharz³ claims that “by listening to women speak, understanding women’s membership in particular social systems, and establishing the distribution of phenomena accessible only through sensitive interviewing, feminist researchers have uncovered previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience”.

In this framework my position as the interviewer is problematic, as I understand my position as one of the means of communication. Portelli⁴ claims that the power relations in the interview cannot be equal and the interviewer-interviewee situation has its pre-established hierarchies. In my

case it is important to note, that my interviewees through me as a mean have spoken to a broader “public” audience (Grele⁵) through linguistic and literary structures taken from the cultural repertoire of the individual as a member of a particular social group that needs to be kept in mind when analysing the interview. Besides that, as I have dealt with an ethnically divided country I should be aware of my biased position as a person, who has various personal connections to Russian peopleⁱ. Thus, I have to keep in mind my bias and state it when I analyse the narration.

My task was to capture the situated understandings created in the interview situation. Thus I have taken up a “mirror” position that is closer to the psychoanalytical relation to reality and will try to pay special attention to interactions⁶. I have supported the circle of the interview by mirroring the interviewee on the level of voice, tone and vocabulary, paraphrasing the narration making it comfortable and trying to get access to the perspective of the interviewee from which she is speaking. In this sense I have paid attention and registered the voice levels attached to stories, the emotions that are following the narration. Using these parameters I have tried to depict the position that the interviewees are using when speaking about issues. As these positions vary according to the emotional content of memory of the experience I have tried to see if they victimize, rationalise or positively affirm it. I think this position is useful from phenomenological perspective as it shows specificities of individual identity construction. As I think that identity is constructed in response to social stimulus my task has been to give voice to

ⁱ I have been socialized in a purely Russian community. Although I am Hungarian, I see Russia as my second home. From the perspective of the research this issue is also important because I have conducted some interviews in Russian. This knowledge of Russian provided me with a symbolic bridge to my interviewees, enriched and improved the quality of our

these responses.

In order to avoid generalization I have searched and referred to studies and reports that represent the social phenomenon in response to which the individual narration is constructed.

The practicalities:

I have conducted one hour long interviews on Skype and in person. My first task have been arranging the appointments and in case of personal interviews to suggest a quiet place for the interview if it is not suggested. The second task has been gaining of the informed consent from the interviewees, which required channelling some information about the project I have been working on. In order to build trust in some cases I have told some details about my background and explain my biased position in terms of close relation to Russians. I supposed that my interviewees will not refuse the interview as they are mostly social actors and giving interviews was their professional duty.

After the introduction part during the interviews on Skype I opened the interview by a channelling question: "I am interested how your NGO contribute to the improvement of women's position in Estonia. Could you please tell me about your experience?". As this was an open question I have set up only the direction of the answer without pushing the respondent to a particular issue. After this first question I have gone for a more concrete answer by channelling the conversation to the issue of Russian-speaking women and minority rights if it has not appeared automatically. I have paid special attention to the word that is used for the Russian-speaking minority, as in official discourses in Estonia they are called "Russian-speaking

communication.

immigrants” and not “minority.” I suppose that the word “minority” suggests ties to the state and dismantles the notion of the homogenised nation-state - that is why it is substituted in the official rhetoric.

In case of written interviews I have collected 10 questions and sent them to my interviewees. As I have conducted interviews this way with representatives of Estonian and Russian-speaking NGOs, the questions were in English or Russian, contextualized, targeting the experience of that particular NGO I have worked with. After getting the answers I had to compare the Russian and the Estonian case study in order to detect issues that are discussed in both texts. The commonalities and differences in rhetoric, linguistic patterns, the topical preferences, strategies, perception of the position of the minority women and their opinion on the official policies targeting them are the sources that I have documented and described in the chapters about the Estonia women NGOs and Russian-speaking women NGOs.

I am aware that any interpretation is again a social construction even if I am maximum self-reflexive. I have therefore also tried to juxtapose factual data about the contemporary situation in Estonia regarding the Russian-speaking population and especially women with oral history and written interview case studies and offer it to the attention of the audience that is able to build up interpretations and connection if it wants to.

2. The domestic and international context of Estonia.

On the 20th of August 1991, Estonia gained independence from the collapsing Soviet central government.⁷ Thus Estonia, with a number of other “new” countries, had to re-build its domestic relations, state apparatus, and structure

and find its place within the broader international agenda.

Contemporary Estonia has historical roots that pre-date the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the 24th of February 1918, in the time between the withdrawal of the Russian troops and arrival of the German troops, Estonia declared its independence as a republic. This declaration was recognized by the Soviets in the form of Tartu Peace Treaty in 1920, which defined the borders between the two countries. The date of the declaration of Estonia's independence in 1918 is of a symbolic importance for Estonia, as after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it chose to restore its state as the successor of the 1918 independent nation-state.⁸ This view is of key importance in relations between Estonia and Russia. It also influences Estonia's position in the international arena: the country's leadership often claims that Estonia has tradition of democracy (although former Prime Minister Konstantin Päts in 1934 introduced an authoritarian regime) which was undermined by occupation of the Soviet Union that Estonia envisions as humiliation of the international law.⁹

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia in its domestic policy has taken the path of right-wing nationalistic orientation, embodied in the governing coalition of the national-radical alliance of the Union of Pro Patria and Res Publica (Estonian: *Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit*, or IRL). Small, fragmented political parties have governed in short-term government coalitions, sweeping the center-left Centre Party (Estonian: *Eesti Keskerakond*) to the opposition. According to Peter Gowan, this a pattern of turning to the "right", establishing

a number of small parties, that ally in short-term coalitions is the one that follows most of the post-socialist countries.¹⁰

The Centre Party is the only “mainstream” party that incorporates into its agenda the issue of rights of the Russian-speaking population, as parties of the purely Russian-speaking population could not collect enough votes to get into the Parliament. Its chairman - Edgar Savisaar - is frequently perceived by the Russian-speaking population as the “czar.”¹¹ His pro-Russian rhetoric, largely vague promises of wider social rights for the Russian-speaking population, and maintenance of close relationship with Putin’s “United Russia” are understood to be populist rhetoric that is directed toward gaining more votes and power. Interestingly, Savisaar is also the supporter of government assistance to pensioners, whom he promises the same social change as to the Russian-speaking population, just “without ethnic tincture.”¹²

The Russian side in the bilateral relations with Estonia considers important the need to tackle the issue of Russians in Estonia – in particular, the stateless status, the “improvement” of the minority status, and the issue of a simplified process for the acquisition of citizenship that may be automatically granted to ethnic Russians residing in Estonia. The EU supports Estonia on resisting Russia’s demand on this issue, and Tallinn expects this strong support in the future also. According to Thompson, Estonia continues to expect that Russia - when it deems its interests – will again pull out the “ethnic card” in the multilateral forums, as 17% of the population of Estonia is classified as non-Estonian citizens, 32% of the population is non-Estonian speakers, and 25% is of Russian ethnicity. (there are also Ukrainians,

Belarusians in the country.)

According to Hernád, the Russian minority in the Baltic Countries are of special historic importance both in terms of the domestic policy and foreign policy. The source of persistent tension in relations with Russia is the situation of the Russian minority, in protection of the interests of which Moscow sometimes applies pressure using political and economic instruments. Estonia does not consider Russians to be its national minority in the traditional sense; rather treats them as “economic immigrants.”¹³ With this classification, Russians are seen to reside in Estonia on their own volition, such as to seek financial gain, and thus potentially can be returned to their “home country.”

According to Poleshchuk¹⁴, to qualify as “eligible” for minority status Russian-speaking individuals should prove their ties with Estonia, should have active knowledge of the Estonian language and culture and be loyal to the state. This is for a number of reasons problematic for the Russian-speaking population. To establish ethical integration of the society, the state actions, which were designed to integrate the Russian-speaking population, are seeking to establish these ties via linguistic and cultural trainings. This strategy, according to Vetik,¹⁵ has a number of shortcomings, as the level of proficiency in Estonian within the Russian-speaking population has not increased. According to his point, the Integration Strategy should resolve three contradictions. First is the need to have a common public space and the wish of ethnic minorities to preserve their identity. In this sense, the understanding of the role of the language as a means of public

communication and the understanding of the language as belonging to the private domain is in question. Second is the necessary educational transformation, in order to establish a common education that shapes the identity construction, which is perceived among the Russians as a threat of losing their mother-tongue. The third contradiction is assuring the state's sustainability based on common views about the history, international aims and relations between Estonia and Russian. Overwhelmingly, Russians hold completely opposite views on these issues than do Estonians.

Vetik, one of the designers of the Integration Strategy 2008-2013, offers broader cultural rights instead of political inclusion. He claims that in long-terms if the Russian-speaking population adapt to the "mainstream" thinking, they would be more loyal and "same minded" as the Estonians. Needless to say, that the Russian-speaking population in this Strategy is treated as a homogeneous mass, it does not refer neither to gender, nor to other grounds of inequality. The Presidential Roundtable on National Minorities (a committee of national minorities consulting directly the president) was a forum, where member of different minorities could raise issues that were relevant for them. This forum could have gone further than simply minority rights, and could have incorporated various inequality grounds, like gender, class, etc., but it has unfortunately dismissed its functioning with the emergence of contemporary nationalist radicals in political power. Vetic explains this in my interview with him as follows:

"....the Roundtable was meant to consult the Estonian President, it had a very constructive role for example during the aliens law crises in Summer 1993 when Narva declared that they will carry out a referendum on regional autonomy as an answer to the law on aliens. After that the role has been more or less symbolic, it gathered regularly, organized conferences etc., discussed laws and political

initiatives related to the minority issue. I think that Russian minority is not happy that the Roundtable is not functioning any more, but Estonians even do not think about it....the current government is not active in minority policy, they think that there is no problem. Right now there is an idea that the Roundtable will be recreated and it will be affiliated to the Cooperation Council, which used to be affiliated to the President of Estonia, but now is more or less an independent NGO.”

According to Hernád¹⁶, new opportunities related to EU and NATO membership, as well as Estonia’s rapid economic growth, resulted in the Russian-speaking population’s increasing interest in the acquisition of Estonian citizenship. Despite that interest, the tendency of growing of the number of naturalized citizens of Estonia has slowed down each year. This suggests that there are additional relevant issues in the relation of Estonians and Russian-speaking people that cannot be overcome simply by a more “attractive” citizenship.

One of these issues is the anti-discrimination legislation of Estonia, which Poleshchuk interprets as “those who are equal must be treated equally and those who are unequal must be treated unequally.”¹⁷ Although the Estonian legislation on equal treatment should conform the 2000/43/EC Directive, it allows exception from the ban on direct discrimination based on ethnicity and race, whereas the Directive allows it only in cases or determining special occupational requirements or in cases of positive discrimination. According to the Estonian legislation, unequal treatment based on language proficiency should not be regarded as discrimination if it is indicated in the Language Act. Poleshchuk claims that disproportional language requirements can lead to indirect discrimination based on ethnicity and he sees not total conformity with the EC Directive as refusal to apply an international norm. The chancellor of Justice is the responsible for acting in cases of discrimination, but his

competencies are falling outside the issues related to practicing of faith, family and inheritance relations – the sphere of private life.

According to European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) reports,¹⁸ the diffusion of international human rights norms and their internalization in Estonia has been slow. The Estonian government before EU accession was particularly reluctant to adopt these norms. Although nowadays the list of the signed agreements is nowadays relatively long, it is worth to notice, that Estonia did not sign the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, the convention that protects the rights of their “economic immigrants” that Estonia has in a large proportion.”¹⁹

The social segregation of the society locates the Russian-speaking population in a marginalized position. The low-qualification jobs (taxi driving, cleaning) are performed nearly almost by Russian-speaking people, and the highest number of unemployed are among them, who because of the lack of social protection has no access to medical services. These people are segregated also geographically, residing near the border with Russia.

Poleshchuk proved that even those Russian-speaking young people, who speak Estonian well and were born in the country, are not treated equally in the labour market. Especially young women aged from 19-26, who have the required qualification, face denial in the labour market on the basis of ethnicity - thus this stratum is the most vulnerable even among this marginalized minority. Deriving from that, these women are segregated also in the distribution of social benefits and childcare. Accordingly, neither linguistic capacities, nor cultural adaptation brings better social position and higher

level of integration for the Russian-speaking population of Estonia.

3. Women's mobilization in various contexts

Gluck gives a definition of feminist activism that is “women's groups (including formal and informal communities, subcommittees and caucuses) organized for change whose agendas and/or actions challenge women's subordinate (or disadvantaged) status in the society at large (external) and in their own community (internal).²⁰

According to this definition, the range of possible forms of mobilization as well as means and aims vary from context to context serving the purpose of fighting oppression or domination. This broad definition incorporates women's movements into the feminist historical discourse, which have been previously neglected or ignored.

Gluck discusses in details various feminist movements, but in this thesis I would like to mention only the case of ANC (Aid to Needy Children) Mothers Anonymous of Watts in California. This organization, although it has been established in the US, I think has some parallels with Russian-speaking women's organizations in contemporary Estonia. This organization was established by Johnnie Tillmon, a black woman, who because of being ill was advised to seek welfare and take care of her children. Being socialized in a working family she did not want to rely on welfare, but had to. That is why she soon became equitant with the harassment of caseworker, who went into her apartment monitoring foul and designing how the money should be spent.

This social experience led her to the fight against harassment and she organized first her neighbourhood community on welfare in the housing

project in 1963 establishing the ANC (Aid to Needy Children) Mothers Anonymous of Watts. This local initiative soon began to spread and become a part of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) with Tillmon at the leadership. Their union as welfare mothers fought for to get what they deserve, dignity, justice and democratic participation. Tillmon's extraordinary contribution to the movement has been her article "Welfare Is a Women's Issue," published in *Ms. Magazine*, where she sheds the light on the issue of how the welfare system controls and monitors the lives of women on welfare, and how authorities abuse them in order to establish the governmental scrutiny.²¹ According to this article her agenda was to redefine feminist movements by incorporation the standpoint of the "poor" women, claiming that poverty was a "women's issue".

Although the ANC (Aid to Needy Children) Mothers Anonymous of Watts started its work as an ethnicity and class based organization, it step by step has turned into a human rights movement. Although the first and most important issue for these women was access to benefits and education they deserve and to survive, the range of priorities step by step has moved to preserving of dignity, social justice and incorporation of the agenda to the national feminist women's agenda.

One of the peculiarities of ANC (Aid to Needy Children) Mothers Anonymous of Watts was that they did mobilize together with men, thus it was a both-sex, ethnically and class bounded community based organization.

Gluck claims that women who have socialized in ethnic communities do articulate gender interests, but they often do that framing it through the community survival rights in cooperation with men. But even within these

both-sex organizations women challenge patriarchal oppression through confrontation with men on gender issues and become the dominant force.

I think, particularly in case of Estonia, the mobilization of ethnically and class segregated women in alliance with men increases their chances of being heard and provides them more visibility in the society. In some cases, this means that, women (and men) are able to challenge not only the patriarchal norm of the welfare state, but also the “welfare chauvinism” of middle-class women from a dominant ethnicity. In such cases, the intersections of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and relationship with the (welfare) state shapes the ways in which women mobilize.

Gordon,²² counting the number of differences between the black and the white women welfare activities in 1960s US claims, that because of the assumption of the race responsibility black women are more community sensitive, seek to achieve universal, federal level programs and their welfare claims focus on legal entities. These claims are to a large extent similar to the equal rights demand, whereas white women care less about the community, are oriented toward means-tested project based programs. The vision of the place of women is also a point of difference among them – the black women do not protest against the women’s work, whereas white women claim that home is the natural place of women. The means of mobilization are also different. Black women engage in small scale volunteer community building activities with strong moral and financial involvement of the church, whereas white women patronizes the “needy” and the “deserving it” from money gained through wealthy men.

This difference of the hegemonic/majority and subordinated/minority

dynamics of women's welfare activism from different contexts is also represented in the case of Estonia. This difference of the dynamics of women's activism will be traced in a subsequent chapter.

Naples²³ claims that community activists develop their political sensitivity through socialization, social networks, the cultural context of which is shaped by ethnic and class backgrounds. This political *sensitivity*, I think, is synonymous with *awareness* of their dominated position that constructs responses to injustice and inequality. These responses are individual responses, but they are socially constructed, as the cultural repertoire of the individual is constructed through broad social forces.

The collective responses are developed through discussions and dialogue between the individuals involved, but they are again social constructs that are constructed by the political agenda leaving space for that activism.

Naples also claims, that racial processes positions people of different ethnic groups differently, how class embodies and is an important aspect of the construction of race. These positions contain some common points, deriving from the intersection of basic social forces as race, class and gender, but they are also individual, as these basic forces can intersect with sexuality, disability or age and so on, creating a unique human-being, whose experience of community construction should be learnt. This human-being defines herself, the world around, builds coalitions with those who are felt legitimate to be a community member and also excludes those who are not worse of belonging to it. Thus, I think this is a form of self-reflection that draws upon and derives from the dynamic between the local context and the broader context, represented by the politics and the economy. This dynamic

gives a feed-back to the self-construction of the human-being and the construction of the community, as a participant in the broad power relations, which form the community agenda.

Bell Hooks²⁴ provides an inclusive and wide perspective on feminist movements and its goals, stepping aside from the “individual interest” to broad-scale social issues. She gives a theory of oppression hierarchy, claiming that the basic practice of oppression is the sexist oppression, traditionally supported by Western culture, philosophy and religion in order to establish and constantly re-establish the superior/inferior divide in the society. This type of oppression practice is the one that most people experience; it is the basis and the driving force of existing social order. Hooks claims, that sexist oppression is the one from which all other forms of oppression derives and challenging it means that a serious step taken in order to build a more fair and just society. But this step does not mean that oppression and domination will not exist anymore, as other dimensions of oppression are produced and performed by the actual structures, institutions, actors of the hierarchy of power.

The basis for developing an inclusive type of feminism according to her is - open and honest communication between women with different social and ethnic background, this communication should “update” the feminist movement, promoting diversity and cooperation within the feminist movement as well as respecting and learning each other’s cultural and ethnical heritage. This open and honest communication seeks to create unity among the feminist movement to make it more effective in fighting injustice of the social structure construction.

Hooks makes this powerful argument, because she elaborates the complexity of the position of black women in relation to the men of the community and to white feminist women²⁵. Based on the primacy of the sexist oppression she claims, that black men, if they see black women involved in feminist movement and it comes to challenging the patriarchal relations within their community, they accuse them in being not “loyal” to their community, to their common fight against white domination. Based on racial oppression white feminists are also reluctant to incorporate the agenda of black women beyond gender issues, or more precisely, when it comes to the intersection of gender and race, as well as minority related issues, white feminists neglect the black women’s agenda that would challenge the white supremacy and the racialized hierarchy between the black and the white communities. Accordingly, black women face some sort of trap, which means, that they are confronted within their own community because of taking up solidarity with white feminists who because of their racial supremacy dominate the black community through their white feminism; and they are neglected or battered within their own community for being in solidarity with ideas, that seeks to dominate the black community and that were taken from the whites.

To make it simple, according to Hook, black women who took up feminism, are not “enough white” for the white feminists because they have particular, and common with black men – black interests, and they are also not “enough black” for the black community, as they push white, feminist ideas that challenge the patriarchal construction of the black community and forget about their solidarity with black men in their fight against the racial oppression.

As a solution for the “trap problem” of black women, Hooks seeks to establish the basis of an inclusive feminism, but for sake according to her some steps should be taken and some core ideology should be re-thought.

First, the family social model, in which from early childhood through means of punish and shame both sexes learn to accept and internalise the orders of the authority (in family context – parents), should be “unlearned”. If we do not learn that our opinion matters and we can make a change, we will never develop that kind of self-esteem, which would be independent from the messages of our actual context. Since we will be able to act as independent “adults” with internally driven self-esteem and motivation, we will be able to find the way to shape directly the characteristics of the authorities (social institutions). In case of women this would mean to move from the dependant position to the neutral – equal one and to set up the negotiation of issues from that position using a new and mature voice that is universal in a sense, that it incorporates voices that have been previously in silence.

Second, in the same family model (white, middle-class, heterosexual), women should “unlearn” their prescribed social role, that puts them into the position of subordinated, weak non-adult position, in which they define themselves through men and by men, thus - in opposition to all other women. This women’s social role prevents real solidarity among women and turns the feminist solidarity into an occasional “support group”, united to fight *against* a temporary perceived “common enemy”, instead of the united fight *for* social justice based on real feminist solidarity, eradicating individual, group and social interests in order to transform the social order. A good example for the difference between the real solidarity and the “support group” would be the

playground mothers temporary or topic friendships. The real solidarity would transcend individual social boundaries and interests, would be constantly aware of the sexist nature of the society – even when it is invisible. The “support group”, in my example the playground mothers’ friendship - is located (even territorially) on the playground while the mother shares precisely the same interests as the fellow mothers. It is a topical friendship; it structures and re-creates the mothers’ shared temporary interests (and time!) – if someone has ever a child knows, that close friendships can emerge between the mothers of small children on the playground, but they not frequently “go out of the playground” and last until the mother shares the same topic with the fellow mothers – as the topic ends, the friendship ends entirely. Feminist movement I think should be not about temporary interests and united time structuring, instead – about invisible ties that connects women in the fight for social justice in a win-win game.

This win-win game can be established if the feminist movement incorporates another task to “unlearn” racism or the “white supremacy”. The difference between racism and “white supremacy” is that the first one is hostile and built on prejudice, the second one is passive and frequently unconscious, deriving from the fact, that all the rules of the society were and are dictated by the Whites to reinforce the binary opposition of the society, contributing to the unjust redistribution of the wealth and keeping the economy going by creating the strata of “unprivileged”, who will voluntary serve as the “oppressed” in order to survive and whose exploitation will increase the gap between the strata to push down the wages, increase the demand and enrich the wealthy by running the “dark economy”, serving the capitalist economy.

The social policies serve to the capitalist project of economic growth, providing the “oppressed” people the chance to assimilate to the dominant group and to become exploited in a less visible manner. According to Hooks the strategy of assimilation is the way to legitimize the white supremacy, to state clearly, that those who are different should be mobilized and should express solidarity with their group and with other oppressed groups or otherwise the society will legitimize their ongoing exclusion without the right to veto. The “oppressed” voluntarily accept that they should be “assimilated” to the white or dominant norms in the name of higher economic choices. Hooks claims that one of the basic battles of feminists is to resist this assimilation of the “oppressed” in order to set up a win-win game. This game would mean that the dominant group should acknowledge its supremacy and should reshape all the social institutions, the connected services should reflect that it is no more about the dominance, oppression and white ideology, rather about an inclusive and just society. The oppressed should negotiate their position on equal terms with the dominant ones enriching and diversifying the actual political agenda in a transformed and just society, in which all the voices are heard and everybody is included in redistribution equally.

The next essential point, that Hooks makes is that class oppression can be also divided into two types, namely that the well-known class oppression that serves as the basis of the capitalist economy coexists with the class oppression that is reproduced within the dominated group. I would call this second field of class oppression welfare chauvinism. A practical example for the complexity of these two ways of class oppression is given by Susan Parkinson Stern²⁶'s study on schooling of a middle-class Black community. In

this study she shows, that even if we take a Black community with improved economic choices, this improvement does not affect directly the socialization of the community. This community remains segregated in racial terms, white children avoid studying together with blacks. Blacks perceive themselves having lower intellectual capacities than the Whites, and this perception is not only imposed from the dominant society as racial oppression, but also internally by the Black teachers in their school (in this case one feature of these teachers is that they work in their own community with low connections with White teachers) and by parents themselves. The perception of the lower intellectual capacities will remain until community activism would not transform the school requirements into equal with the white school requirements, and this transformation would not be verified by intellectuals (black or white) active in the dominant society.

The welfare chauvinism is a peculiar phenomenon of the dominated ethnic communities where “honorary whites” – those who became assimilated to the dominant society - oppress and devalue the less-adapted and economically privileged peers in their ethnic community and this devaluation and discrimination recreates the same dichotomy of the oppressor/oppressed as in the case of dominant/oppressed society.

Within the feminist movement this welfare chauvinism is performed by the movement leaders, who when in power follow their own personal career goal and disrespect the position and interests of the lower-class peers. Thus women leaders follow male-type of leadership model and according to Hooks it is never obvious that these male-type leaders would do anything tangible for the prosperity of universal womanhood.

The last powerful argument of Hooks that I would like to use here is related to the position of men in the feminist struggle. Hooks, using a wide perspective and claiming that all the above mentioned oppression happens because the society is constructed in an unjust manner serving first of all the economic interests of the dominant group, claims that men are not “enemies” of the feminist movement as they have been labelled previously. I think Hooks would never agree with any kind of “labelling”, she would say that it is another form of the social construct that is needed for reproduction of the binary opposition. Hooks approaches men firstly as also vulnerable players in the existing capitalist game, who choose various ways to survive. According to her the male role has undergone changes, men either become vulnerable and disadvantaged, or they become passive by pushing the responsibility for the prosperity of the family towards women. All two strategies show that they also try to get adapted to the unjust social order. If men would stand for the transformative power that feminist movement can bring and if they get aware of their dispossession by the existing social order and the economic order that is primarily based on it - they would fruitfully contribute to the feminist movement as “comrades in struggle”.

Finally, Hooks main argument is that feminist solidarity should be socially neutral in a sense, that it should not reproduce within itself the existing model of social reality, it should give voice to all every experience that has been silenced – race, class and sexuality – and it should develop unity despite difference, defining itself in opposition to the discriminatory, oppressive and nationalistic social existence outside.

4. The position of Russian-speaking women vis-à-vis the Estonian state.

Nira Yuval-Davis ²⁷ argues that women's position is constructed through state policies and legislations. These state policies target specially defined groups, like women and ethnic or religious minorities, positioning them differently vis-à-vis the state and other groups among women. One practical example of this is the Parental Estonian Act, which categorizes different "kinds" of mothers.

In Estonia the Parental Benefit Act regulates the "mother salary" that is given to those on parental or maternal leave to increase the birth rates, which is a priority and long-term objective of the Estonian state.²⁸ According to this policy the mother or the father of a new born child can get up to 100% of her of his salary as a child-case benefit during 535 days.

This benefit is being calculated on the basis of the average salary of the previous year divided by 12. There is also a minimum salary that should be provided if the person has small earnings, that is 4350 kroons (about 268 Euro).

Although this regulation seems to be supporting and indeed providing better living conditions for young families in comparison to other European countries, it has a number of shortcomings, which channels the conclusion that this policy was designed to support reproduction of certain ethnic groups over the others.

According to the "mother salary" legislation, benefits can be issued to all permanent residents of Estonia, who have had legal employment, and the employer has paid all the taxes to the state.

Benefits are distributed according to four different groups.

The 'stateless' or 'illegal' mostly Russian-speaking population receives no maternity benefits, although in the official rhetoric according, as Poleshchuk pointed out in our interview, lack of status does not mean lack of social protection. The second disproportionally benefiting group is the group of self-employees (for example taxi drivers or the service sector, where Russian-speaking people are frequently employed). This sector is likely to get minimal salary according to the options of the employment, thus the "mother salary" would also be considerably lower, then that of the managers (the position, where Russian-speaking cannot get based on ethnical discrimination). The third group refers to unemployed people, who are not eligible to have any maternal benefits, as in the "mother salary" program only those can get benefits, who have worked. The case if the state pays taxes as in case of unemployment does not count as eligible. The fourth group consists of those who have temporarily left Estonia for working abroad. The calculation of the benefit is based only on work performed in Estonia with the exception of the European Union, Norway, Liechtenstein, Iceland or Switzerland, that also provides the basis of calculation. Accordingly, if a person has left Estonia to work in Russia even for a short period, the "mother salary" cannot be calculated and provided.

As it is obvious, in the above-mentioned case of the Estonian "mother salary" the state supports the reproduction of the wealthy women who have stable high positions and who can get out of the labour market for having a child as there is no fear of losing the position. The "mother salary" is given also to lower-class population providing the above-mentioned minimum salary,

although the amount given during such a short term is less likely to support the reproduction of the lower-class without stable positions in their jobs.

Thus, this group is clearly bounded by social factors, and these social factors are peculiar only for middle- and upper-class ethnic Estonians. Accordingly, the access of the Russian-speaking women to this benefit is socially restricted, financially limited or even prohibited.

The state has sent an imaginative message to its Russian-speaking women that it does not envision them of the same values as the Estonian women, thus they should reproduce in a lower numbers.

Yuval-Davis based, on Anderson's concept of "imagined communities," describes the conceptions of the state. She claims that there has been a shift from viewing the state as a managerial structure, or as a central force of oppression to the vision of the state as a domain where interests of different capital possessors are competing with each other and the winner is the one who possesses the biggest influence.²⁹ According to her definition, the state is rather a "machinery" of government over a bounded and defined (territorially and nationally) population and the kind of that "machinery" depends on the kind of government and the kind of the governed. The "machinery" acts through coercion and repression through the juridical, ideological and executive power.

According to Yuval-Davis, ethnic processes are related not only to those concerned, but rather are a form of social process that is also relevant for the majority group. The "national" interest in the project of nation-state building can be characterized by the interwoven nature of class, gender and ethnicity. Ethnical groups are established by natural right of belonging, the common

culture, history and fate. Beside that “ethnicity” and “nationality” is always understood in relation to the “nation-state” and national identity and citizenship. This ethnical status frequently has a negative, minority associated connotation, synonymous to oppression or inferiority and a particular relation to citizenship, as certain ethnic groups can be “second-class” citizens if they not share the ethnic origin of the dominant group.

The Russian language has an interesting solution on the issue of ethnical belonging and its characterizing connection to citizenship. The word “*natsional’nost*” in Russian is a neutral signifier of belonging to a biologically inherited community. In this case this characteristic is not applied or limited to a particular minority group within a certain state context, rather it is a neutral signifier of social relations.

One issue concerning “ethnicity” is the delineation of the boundaries between the state and the nation, and the state and economy. Brubaker’s³⁰ description of the difference between the citizen and the denizen, according to what the nation-state creates an invisible border line between its dominant ethnic group and the minority by the means of distribution of rights. According to Yuval-Davis women have a special role in relation to the state, as they are acted upon, expected to reproduce the state both biologically and economically, thus constitution a special social category.

Although women have such a complex role, the subjects of the welfare state are gendered constructions and their gender is predominantly male.³¹ This shared relationship to the subject of the state does not grant them a unitary position vis-à-vis the state, as other forms of social characteristics and the responses of the state to them creates diversity within the group, the main

feature of which is ethnicity. Thus one can argue, that Brubaker's imaginary line lies in the bodies of women, those of different ethnicity, who are differently positioned vis-à-vis the state – those who are supported of oppressed.

Yuval-Davis summarizes the ways in which women participate in ethnic and national processes and their relation in the state practices:³²

- as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities
- as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups
- as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture
- as signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories
- as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

The historical context and the constructed state identity positions and constructs these roles differently, putting emphasis on some of them within a certain ethnically bounded group of women and restricting others in other ethnically bounded ones. This differentiation, or inclusion and exclusion can be performed with various tools ranging from forced sterilization to population control though limiting the social wellbeing and encouraging the growth of the “right kind” of population.³³

Estonia, as other nation-states, follows the last mentioned tool. This population control in the Estonian case it is not just about restricting the reproduction of the Russian-speaking population in order to limit their high reproduction in comparison to the Estonian. Rather it is a cultural issue, as

through Russian women the transmission of the Russian language, culture, ideology, historical thinking and behaviour is transmitted, that falls outside the long-term ethnic strategy of the Estonian nation-state building. In this process according to Yuval Davis women participate actively, contributing to the reproduction of their constructed roles, modifying them and restricting the roles of other women. I think in this sense, majority and minority women reproduce the Marxist dichotomy of the oppressors and oppressed, bourgeoisie and working-class, wealthy and poor, the majority women contributing (even silently through exception of the state policies) to the subordination of the minority women.

Yuval-Davis, describing the construction of the British national collectivity claims, that “.... the “myth of the one British nation” has postulated that women are its members essentially in and through their relations with men, as dependants, particularly in their capacity as wives and mothers”.³⁴ According to this, the construction of the collective British identity as “Britain for white British” has been performed and achieved national laws in which racism and sexism intersected, the mixing of ethnic and non-ethnic British was restricted and prevented through policy and moral instructions.

As it is shown, the Estonian case of positioning Russian-speaking women differently vis-à-vis the state and ethnic Estonian women is not a unique phenomenon. In the welfare nation-state building project the constant reconstruction of the state boundaries through social policies, immigration and naturalization shows just the dynamic of national identity and collectivity construction. As the Estonian nation-state is relatively new in comparison to other European nation-states, it applies its national project in a very dynamic

manner. According to Yuval-Davis, the explanation for that can be that not only the shared common historical tradition and culture, the imagined shared values can construct the “imagined community” of the nation, the shared common goals, the perceived interwoven future is also a big motivator of that construction.

These different types of national collectivity construction Yuval-Davis divide into three types: the *Staatnation* (the territorially bounded project of nation-state building), the *Kulturnation* (the culturally bounded project of nation-building that I see as a borders transgressing project) and the *Volknation* (the ethnically bounded project of nation building, which differentiates and excludes even among its citizens based on ethnic origin)³⁵. Following this typology, I think Estonia has chosen the last type of nation-state building, which is the source of interethnic tensions.

5. Agenda of Estonian and Russian-speaking women’s NGOs.

5.1. The Estonian women’s NGOs.

This discussion of the agenda of Estonian women’s NGOs I will base on the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) report on Estonia (2007) and responses of Estonian women’s NGOs to the weaknesses indicated in that report. I will use interviews that I have conducted with a representative of ENUT³⁶ (Estonian Women's Studies and Resource Centre). I use these sources because the CEDAW report and the responses to it provides some insights to the official rhetoric and situation of gender equality in Estonia, and using ENUT as a big Estonian women’s NGO and research centre will give me a chance to find some Russian-speaking

women in itself or in its agenda.

The recommendations made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women are mainly focusing on the weakness of institutionalization of gender equality, the disproportional focus on urban Estonian women, and the issue of protection of stateless.

CEDAW acknowledges that Estonia has implemented its Gender Equality Act on the 1st of May 2004³⁷ (studies on the adoption on gender equality and domestic violence legislation from other CEE countries shows that this timing is not coincidental) and that the status of the Gender Equality Commissioner has been established in order to monitor the compliance with the Act. Despite these positive steps, CEDAW claims that the provisions of the Act are not transferred to the level of local decision-making, the juridical authorities and the state apparatus has no adequate practices in dealing with provision of the Act. The information about the recommendations of the Convention has not been sufficiently disseminated, even women themselves are not aware of the remedies available for violation of their rights. This can be supported by the fact, that there have been no court cases referring to the Convention³⁸.

The CEDAW Committee also recommend the state to establish a more sufficient strategy on implementation of the Convention on institutional level, as the Gender Equality Commissioner lacks sufficient authority, human and financial resources to carry out his/her tasks, furthermore these tasks has been increased by dealing with discrimination in other areas. The Committee continues to be concerned with the patriarchal attitudes of the Estonian society (stereotypes regarding the roles of men and women in the public and private domain, women's educational choices, and their underrepresentation

in the decision-making position in the labour market or political sphere). Thus it calls the state to revise its educational textbooks, establish teachers training programs of gender equality and implement a strong cooperation with the media to promote equal positions of men and women in all spheres of life. The Committee also calls the state upon to combat segregation between women and men in the labour marker, to ensure availability of means to empower women, such as vocational trainings and to collect data on that paying particular attention to the rural areas.

The Committee also calls the state upon the constant monitoring of the health need of women, particularly in rural areas, and to implement a gender perspective in policies related to HIV/AIDS, to promote awareness about family planning and prevention of unwanted pregnancies. As in discussing the health specificities of the Russian-speaking population it is clear, that the target group of the above mentioned health provision recommendations are the Russian-speaking women of Estonia. The request of the CEDAW in this field again shows that the issues related to the Russian-speaking women are not adequately addressed by the Estonian state; even there are no data on women's health disaggregated by ethnicity, geographical location and age.

One of the most important recommendations of the CEDAW Committee from the perspective of this thesis is its explicit demand of providing full-citizenship to the stateless women in Estonia and its call upon the ratification of the one (and the most important from the perspective of the rights of the Russian-speaking population) human rights instruments, which Estonia has not ratified yet – namely, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, as mentioned previously

in this thesis.

Analysing the statement of Estonian women's organizationsⁱⁱ to the CEDAW Committee³⁹ in response to the report's critique, I would like to highlight the following. In response to the weaknesses of the gender equality related institutional mechanism and the inadequately addressed issue of equality between men and women, the statement of the Estonian Women's Associations Roundtable negatively assesses the steps made by the Estonian state to address gender equality. The NGOs do recognize, however, that progress has been made in the field of gender equality – mainly thanks to the pressure of international organizations, the ignorance of the gender equality law continues, the failure to implement the provision from the highest level still takes place, the incompetence of the state officials in the field is still high. Additionally, the NGO report emphasizes that the state has decided not to establish a separate institution for gender equality, thus, the message to the public has been sent that gender equality is not important.

The establishment of the Gender Equality Commissioner is perceived as victory for Estonian women's NGOs, but it is important to notice, that they perceive this victory being under threat, as the state intends to add to the office of the Commissioner other equality grounds, such as ethnicity, sexuality, disability. This, according to the statement will further marginalize women's issues – that is in this case clearly Estonian women's issues.

The wage gap between men and women in Estonia is 25%. The state does not intend to deal with this gap, at the same time it expects to increase the national reproduction (that is, the reproduction of middle-class, ethnic

Estonians), as I have shown using the “mother-salary” example. According to the statement of the Estonian Women’s Associations Roundtable the main problem of Estonian women’s NGOs is, that the state does not provide institutional basis for elimination of segregation in labour market and family, it provide programs on a project-oriented basis that is not the solution according to them. The problem of reconciliation of work and family is I think a common problem for women of both ethnicities, but however is more actual for the middle-class Estonian women, as the Russian-speaking women constitute a different social stratum. It is important to notice, that while the CEDAW report highlights the need of providing full-citizenship to the stateless people, particularly women, the responses of the Estonian women’s NGOs, do not contain even a word about stateless people or International Convention on Protection of Rights of Immigrant Workers and Members of Their Families. This I think nicely correlates with the minority rights in Estonian in general and with the position and perspectives of Russian-speaking women in particular.

Another peculiarity of the Estonian society is also reproduced in these documents. That is the duality between the state rhetoric of progress in gender equality and the Estonian women’s NGOs collective opinion, that a serious contradiction exists between the official rhetoric, factual data and lived experience, showing that in Estonian the division between the center/local, rhetoric/experience, urban/rural, majority/minority persists and can be expanded any further.

This logical duality is reproduced also by two of my interviewees in particular, who are active members of the ethnic Estonian civil society (and civil society

ⁱⁱ Estonian Women’s Associations Roundtable, which consists of almost 170

is, as my findings show, and ethnically divided sphere): one of them, a woman active in a number of women's NGOs, is a former member of the Presidential Roundtable on Minorities who clearly, represents the state official rhetoric on Russian-speaking population; the other one is a middle manager of one of the biggest Estonian women's umbrella organizations, who represents factual data on these issues.

The representative of the state official rhetoric in response to my questions provided me with a number of useful internet links, but did not answer to my questions in detail. Her general position on the agenda on women's NGOs in Estonian is that the Estonian civil society is developing well, the Estonian women's NGOs do intend and make lots of efforts to integrate Russian-speaking women, as the state itself is democratic, which means that "you can get lots of diverse opinion, each group would express different views." She also claimed, that "with Russian-speaking women we've been around for nearly 20 years and made friends with lots of non-Estonian women...", and they are incorporated into general Estonian women's NGOs, although less actively. Her main concern about the Russian-speaking women in Estonia is that they are properly targeted by Estonian women's organizations, the issues related to them are similar to Estonian's ones (gender equality awareness raising, gender equality, engendering education, gender age gap) and their interests are also the same. Thus according to her, Russian-speaking women "are definitely not left aside because of their ethnic background", and they are active also in cultural issues. Clearly, she drew a distinction between 'us' (Estonian) and 'them', (non-Estonian) women, which in a way shows the

different women's groups.

ethnic Estonian supremacy. Interestingly, while recognizing a “difference” within a shared gender (women), she did not think that this difference (ethnicity) has been translated into different experiences and demands. She has proposed that the gender equality efforts can cure all, while ignoring the intersections of ethnicity/gender/socio-economic status and legal status. Ironically, she was not able to speak about engagement with Russian-speaking women in a concrete and detailed manner, channelling the conclusion, that Estonian women’s NGOs are not reaching out to target, involve and represent the agenda of women of other than their own ethnicity, although the gender interests are the same.

My second interviewer gave answers to a large extent contradicting to the statements of my first interviewee. She is not an NGO leader, as the former interviewee; she has more “hands-on” and local experience and factual data about the issues concerned.

She claimed that the Estonian civil society is developing, but it does it in a project-oriented manner⁴⁰. This peculiarity does not give even a chance of getting funding for small and new NGOs, as they would not be able to survive from project to project, do not have a surplus 10% of the funding to give back to donors, do not have human and financial capacities to run 3-4 projects at the same time to ensure salaries of the staff. This means, that the profile of the new and small NGOs are “cultural club” or “housing project” like, meaning that people gather to perform or do activities together in their leisure-time, or unite to run their house-block legally together. This particular situation regarding Estonian NGOs in general suggest, that big and long ago established NGOs are priorities in getting funding and they have access also

to EU donations. Moreover, it is difficult for a bunch of stateless women to run a fundable NGO under these options, in large part (but not solely) because only Estonia's citizens or those with residence permit can register an NGO and thus get funding.

About the gender equality agenda, my interviewee claimed that without the EU accession they would not have gender equality in any form today. In this regard she claimed, that Estonian women's gender issue are mostly related to reconciliation of work and family and that they would like to implement to Nordic model of gender equality. She acknowledged that the Russian-speaking women are not included into Estonian women's NGOs not even as members, as 'targets' (despite the response of my first interviewee) or as 'priorities'. According to her rhetoric, she is sincerely aware of Russian-women ethnically constructed subordination, but she said, that "Estonian women's NGOs are deaf to the needs of Russian-speaking women".

Thus, in different ways, these two interviews have shown that the specific needs or interests of Russian-speaking women are not incorporated into and represented in the Estonian women's NGOs, not even on the level of their agenda. The first interviewee, while clearly recognizing a difference between "us" and "them," stated that there is "no difference" in the experience of Estonian and non-Estonian women, and that efforts to promote "gender equality" alone will solve the problems that women as a group face. The second interviewee was more aware of the intersections between ethnicity and gender (and socio-economic and legal status), and that non-Russian women face particular challenges that have emerged because of the state's policies toward, and defining of, "non-Estonians." However, Estonian NGOs

have not adequately worked with the Russian-speaking population to address these challenges. Thus this stratum (of Russian-speakers) is marginalized ethnically even if some sort of “unification” occurs on the basis of gender. Accordingly, ethnicity overcomes gender in the Estonian context.

5.2. The Russian speaking women’s NGOs.

The agenda of the Russian-speaking women's NGOs is much simpler if we approach it from the practical side, than of Estonian women’s NGOs, mostly because NGOs *specifically for Russian-speaking women* are rare in Estonia.

The task of this chapter is to describe the Russian-speaking women’s NGOs in Estonia, to see how the existing ones mobilize, what is their agenda and also to see how this phenomenon fits into the Estonian-Russian relationship both in domestic and international terms.

One of my interviewees is a Russian-speaking women, representative of a Human Rights Consulting agency in Estonian closely working with Russian-speaking population, the other one is Vadim Polechshuk, the author to the research on the situation of minorities in Estonia of whom I have made references previously.

First of all it is interesting, that my interviewee have not discussed with me the issue of her Russian origin, although I made it clear immediately after getting into contact her, that I did not intent to reproduce the nationalistic anti-Russian approach of many Estonians as I took a stance of solidarity and equality when it comes to the “Russian question” in Estonian. Second, it is important to notice, that I have suggested her to do the interview in Russian, but she denied my suggestion, claiming that in this topic her working

language is English. Third, she has been previously working precisely on gender issues in Estonia, but she did not refer on her involvement not even with a word. I tend to think, that she has strategically gone outside of the circle of my gender related topic taking up a position of a neutral expert, establishing distance from the topic, from the problem and from the community and I tend to think that establishing her “intra-community” supremacy, that combines elegant discretion with cold neglect. I think that in her personal path of life and career trajectory being of Russian origin was a problem in Estonian community and being a woman was a problem within the Russian one, as both obviously limits the chances. Thus I think her “genderless” strategy makes her bagging in-between the two communities, in both of which she is in a position of a neutral expert and that preserves her from mixing with any of the two, keeping her in her supremacy.

Her background status overlaps with the problem of mobilization of Russian women in Estonia. She follows the strategy of having no “gender” and no “ethnicity” – like the problem of the black women mobilizing in white feminist and in black male community – and she takes up a neutral position of an expert, for which she cannot be confronted and that belongs to the field of law – something neutral, international and universally true for everyone, transcending borders, empires and nationalisms.

She claimed that the Estonian state has defined its citizenship as “privilege” in order to make Russian-speaking people work hard to deserve it. She claimed that all current policies of Estonia should be seen with this logic. If an international organization issues a critique on Estonia in the human rights framework, state will care about it if the organization has a punishing function

– in other cases never.

About the position of Russian-speaking women she claimed, that Russians as a minority are not active in the NGO's world, because they lack a "culture" the civil society, they have no funding and because Russian-women support Fraser's⁴¹ Universal Breadwinner model, according to which the position of women is defined in the patriarchal society, in which gender equality can be achieved if women update themselves to be able to compete with men in the labour market⁴². The lack of the culture of the civil society I think is peculiar to a strong state, which pushes its agenda in an authoritarian manner without allowing even the existence of even a weak counter dynamic.

Russian-speaking NGOs face numerous specific challenges. They face a language barrier, meaning that members are often unable to follow trainings in Estonian or English or to network with authorities and other Estonian NGOs. Even if a Russian-speaking NGO passes all the following barriers, it still would need to have a strong political influence in order to be supported and funded for issues, which are specifically applicable for the minority community – and which obviously falls outside of the interest of the Estonian officials.

The experience of my interviewee shows, that practically-oriented activities are the most useful among the Russian-speaking community, such as hotline services for victims of discrimination, provision of legal aid, consultation, media awareness raising on how to protect ones human rights. But this activity is performed by a both-sex NGOs (men and women), run by Russian-speaking people on the basis of international funding, my interviewee could not name even one active Russian-speaking women's or even a minority

NGO besides them. Although my interviewee herself works in an NGO that deals with Russian-speaking population's issues, she would not label her NGO as "Russian", I think because of the international funding and management.

She said that the Russian community is not united; they need an active and creditable leader, to compromise the Estonians, independent media and a civil society to be a "watchdog." According to her, for Estonia, the best would be to follow the Finish model with two official state languages existing and availability of funds allocated for the minority not just to preserve their culture, but also to develop their citizenship affiliations. She claimed, that in Estonia only the culture preservation has some basis in accordance with the official rhetoric, that in practice means, that Estonian culture is run by Russians, that is why a few people from Russian background can be granted "free" citizenship for their extraordinary achievement in culture or sports – an institution established for Russian-speaking artists and sportsmen to guarantee their staying in Estonia. It is interesting to consider that a number of Estonian theatres and galleries are run by Russians, with mostly women that are active.

Regarding Russian-speaking women activism my interviewee said, that they are united with men in community based manner within the human rights framework, seeing gender equality agenda as a minor issue. According to her there were efforts to locate and mobilize minority women within women's NGOs structures with the following results:

"...the International association of national cultural societies LYRA (*Lüüra Naised*)⁴³ several years ago formed a roundtable of minority women. Their main aim is to unite women of different ethnic backgrounds and create a common table for discussion and problem

solving. Being a part of LYRA in general they are able to put on the agenda some specific issues for the discussion. There was also a project that would united minority women NGOs and would try to cooperate with the Estonian similar structures. However it was a project for both sides (Estonian and Russian) and at the moment practically they do not really exist (theoretically indeed they do). Also because cooperation with Estonian women's NGOs is extremely hard, as they often tend to be working with so called "comparative discrimination" (i.e who is more discriminated rural women or minority) and moreover the position of organization is often dependent from the attitudes of the leader i.e. in case she/he is rather nationalistic the general rhetoric the general perception would be rather nationalistic."

In searching for Russian-speaking women NGO I found out that they form only and exclusively cultural associations, such as the *Lüüra Naised* - the Women's Club of the organization Lüüra⁴⁴. This club, although deals explicitly with Russians do not have even a Russian name. According to the statement on the website of the organization it is established not to harm each other, to unite, take care, protect and make happy multicultural Russian-speaking women-members, and their main activity is singing. This self-colonizing rhetoric has not explicit political meanings, but I think the rhetoric on care taking and not making harm represents an opposition for example to the nationalistic best-sellers in Estonia, a kind of a silent resistance to the aggression in the society. As this is the only Russian-speaking women's organization that I have found on the internet and my interviewees could identify, although even this NGO has updated its website the last time in 2007, it is clear that in contemporary Estonia, Russian-speaking women are not particularly politically active, they do participate in civil life in a community-based manner relying on their cultural background or in both-sex internationally-supported NGOs pushing the minority rights agenda – again ethnicity overcomes gender and the remedy for all – internationally funded human rights agency, building on universal neutral issues not challenging

neither the ethnical hierarchy of oppression, that we have seen not doing the Estonian women's NGOs and not challenging the patriarchal structure of the Russian community, as none existence of the active NGO does not mean that there is no problem, as we have seen, it just means that there is no forum that would elaborate the issue because it would not fit into the existing structure of the Russian society and it would make the Russian women internal "enemies" in the ethnical fight of the Russian men.

According to my interviewee:

"The easiest option for the non-Estonian women would be to be represented by the general organization that is deeply involved with promotion of minority rights. They would not apparently be able to achieve high results, but at least they would have a chance to work for change and have their interests mentioned. The main obstacle, however, would be to persuade this organization to be involved and find alliances within the co-workers, especially if the leaders do not in particular believe in gender equality. Second challenge would be to be able to separate gender issues from general minority issue as often it is hard to do, especially due to the lack of statistics and research that would be just gender –minority related. In most of the cases if exists it is either gender or just minority. The biggest challenge is also to be able to make your work seen amongst locals that are unintentionally paying attention to those structures that are bigger and better seen and having better contacts. It is also a challenge to be asked for an opinion or invited to international meetings that are regulated by the local authorities or bodies as again the competition might be very big and indeed the bigger and stronger will be invited."

The projects run by my interviewee's NGO follow a strategy of giving international publicity to the human rights violations and to shape the young generations thinking about the democracy and human rights:

in one of the projects we have educated Russian-speaking Teachers of civics about fundamental rights and equal treatment and also how to use informal education at schools. As a result of this training I have been contacted by several of the teachers and asked to come to their school and do some interactive classes for the secondary school children. Because the kids liked it we have continued with the whole set of sessions that aimed at their improved understanding of their rights and obligations, equal treatment including gender equality,

democracy, VAW, mechanisms of protection against violation of their rights etc. There was another project run by the Youth Union Siin in which they have created a school of democracy for the Russian-speaking kids. It was a year-long (if I am not mistaken) project where they used interactive workshops, supported young people shape their opinion on various processes taking place in Estonia and Europe, they have also supported those of participants and motivated them as well to try to write for the local weekly newspaper. I should admit that several very good articles on various issues related to Human Rights have been published as a result.

About the priorities of issues of Russian-speaking population my interviewee claimed the following:

If we talk about the issues that Russian-speaking community considers to be mostly articulated. Then it is definitely citizenship rights, Linguistic rights. It is important that it is not that bilingual state is being seen as the only remedy, but at least taking into consideration that 1/3 of the population considers Russian to be its mother tongue or language used at home and providing possibilities to use the language in access to health, education and often services. It is also request for the language proficiency to be proportionate towards the real needs of concrete employment (not just we say it is this level of proficiency and we do not care that in fact this level is not needed, and a lower level could be implemented). We also ask for the equal treatment provision in access to employment, education, services. There are some certain social issues that are being discussed, the most important of which is the pensions of those who ever worked outside Estonia and military pensioners.

Accordingly my interviewee confirmed that Russian-speaking women do not participate in Estonian women's NGOs and they do not pay particular importance to gender equality agenda. Instead, they unite in both-sex organizations on ethnical basis. There two types of organizations that are formed this way – first is cultural clubs as a leisure-time activity and mean or community building, second is a minority rights consulting agency donated by international organizations, providing legal aid and remedying ethnically based discrimination (Russian-speaking people more frequently approach international organizations with human rights violations that the local Estonian

authorities), running projects on minority rights awareness raising.

This type of mobilization correlates with the ANC movement discussed in chapter 3 in some points. Both of them are initiated by the need to survive, to improve the social circumstances, to give back the people dignity on a both-sex basis. In case of the ANC we have a slow transformation from the small local organization into a human rights protecting organization. In the case of the Russian-speaking NGOs we have only the two core stones of the former –the beginning as a local community activity based organization (as the Lüüra Naised), and the end (the internationally donated minority rights consulting agency), that means that the transition is not done yet and there is still no Russian-speaking NGO that can target wide strata of society, even the Estonian one.

In the next section I will provide extracts for the written responses of Vadim Poleshchuk, who goes one step backward and sees the puzzle for broader international perspective.

Poleshchuk claimed that Russian women cannot be separated from men into a particular group in the civil society – they share all the difficulties of life with men. This highly romanticized view would first look like something unique for the Russian community. But if we look closer, it is clearly traceable, that Poleshchuk in this way (implicitly) denies the relevance of gender interests thus representing a patriarchal stand-point, similar to that of black men in black communities. By neglecting the recognition of the specific needs of Russian-speaking women, he does something structurally similar ... that of the Estonian women's NGOs: While in the latter case gender comes before ethnicity, i.e. the relevance of ethnicity is neglected or actively denied, in his

case ethnicity comes before gender, especially when it comes to challenging the patriarchal hierarchy of the Russian-speaking community. Not acting is also an action in this case.

“There are no parties or big and influential NGOs, that would represent exclusively Russian women (instead of so to say “women organizations”). The institution of school should be mentioned within intuitions dealing with women, there are mostly women working. The role of women is seen also in case of local press. In both cases this is a historical tradition. Russian women (as Russian men) influence particularly rarely the political processes on the national level.

Estonia the society is ethnically divided, as well as social institutions. There are no “strong” women organizations, special problems of Russian women are not falling within interests of the “mainstream” women organizations. There is no even a strong women lobby in Estonia, although its influence has been perceptible when the diffusion of EU anti-discrimination legislation has taken place.”⁴⁵

Russian-speaking people do not rely on Russia’s help even when arguing with authorities, the cooperation between the countries is project-based, mostly cultural ones. Russia helps just in a rhetorical manner, this has led to an opinion within the Russian-speaking elite, that

“...the Russian elite has spread a common opinion, that Russian has forgot the local Russians and they must take care of themselves alone. Their opinion would not change even if small project or envious public critic on the question of minority rights Russian will raise in UN or OECD. This of course does not change the fact, that a range of Russian public actors like to act “through Russia”. But they do not influence the mood of the Diaspora. Beside that a part of the Russian population have an “immigrational” mind and are very much like the first generation immigrants in Western countries, so they are ready to stand a lot of things for modest economic preferences. They fill their political alienation from Russia (we cannot speak about cultural alienation). This is also peculiar for that part of the young generation that had socializes after 1991.”⁴⁶

According to Poleshchuk Russian-speaking women are particularly in difficult position:

“...women in the labour market are more vulnerable than men, and

non-Estonian women more the Estonian. In recent years they have smaller salary than men, but the level of vulnerability is higher. In the beginning of the 1990s, after a huge worsening of the position of non-Estonians in the labor market (also because of the official language policy), many women have left the labor market, but got there back when the economic situation got somewhat better. During the contemporary economic crisis non-Estonian men have lost their jobs more frequently than women non-Estonians. The women's place or position in the labor market nowadays is more stable, although brings less income."⁴⁷

This subordination is supported by the state with the following rhetoric that I think reflects those of Russia and Estonia also:

"The Estonian authorities frequently claim, that the Russian population is not loyal, is oriented toward Russia and is repeating the ideas of the Russian propaganda. The first two statements are easy to oppose based on the sociological research. With respect to the last one, indeed the view and positions of the local Russians and Russian Russians are the same in many issues (but not in all). This is supported by the Russian media, that has its certain influence but it is not absolute. For example, the relation to the WW II. Is rather a family issue, that a media one. As in case of Estonians in soviet times, nowadays in case of Russians also in families there are alternative histories to the official rhetoric. In general, Estonia is mentioned in the Russian media very rarely."⁴⁸

Poleshchuk clearly argues, that the Baltic countries has invented a special "solution" to the preservation of the majority privilege by the subordination of the minority with the institution of "statelessness". This balance of forces lead to a specific fight, that Poleshchuk describes the following way:

"... Estonia and Latvia the main issue of the 90s was the fight the national elite against accepting of local Russian-speaking population as the countries organic part – they could be occupants, colonizers, former army of citizens, but not national minorities. The fight of the Russian-speaking elite for the "acceptable" status for their group, and deriving from that set of rights connected to that status, the categorical rejection of declaration of existence of the linguistic minorities by the "mainstream" politicians (so the initiative of the artificial division, re-ethnification of Russian-speaking population), and finally the activities of the international organizations activated as "ethnic" self-identification of non-Estonians and non-Latvians, have introduced to the everyday lives of the people the discourse of human rights and rights of national minorities."⁴⁹

Poleshchuk envisions the solution of the ethnic discrimination using the tool of law:

“The value of using law definitions in researching the position of the Russian speaking population is that it can be demonstrated with reference to the problem of ethnic discrimination. Outside the field of the law the terminus “ethnic discrimination” is less likely to be filled with permanent (adequate) meaning. Practically all projects of our company (Informational Center on Human Rights) were based on intention, that the position of Russians and other minorities can be changed in Estonia using the international norm and standards of human and minority rights. Because of that for us it was natural to deal with monitoring of the legislation and practices of law application, writing “shadow” reports of the UN, European Council and EU, development of recommendations. This strategy is followed by other organizations also, that are not afraid of criticizing the power. This strategy can be recommended also to women organizations.”⁵⁰

Although Poleshchuk provided some alternatives to the solution of the problem of ethnic discrimination and nationalism in Estonia, he remained full of bitterness towards the short and middle-term perspectives of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia. Thus, the subordinated position of the Russian-speaking minority and the anti-Russian nationalistic mood of Estonia are likely to be fixed at least for the upcoming years reproducing itself both on the national and international level.

As in other successor states to the Soviet Union, as Brubaker describes, the political leadership in particular in independent Estonia has used various tools to define the state’s state identity as an ethnically bounded nation-state which, despite its small size, has a developed national consciousness. Its huge “immigrant” population is approached as a threat of denationalization.⁵¹ This threat is frequently followed by nationalistic rhetoric of various actors.

In the international arena, as I have already discussed, Estonia, views itself as a relevant actor, aiming to achieve more influence than its territorial and economic size would seem to suggest. It clearly defines itself as democratic; what is more, it accuses other EU states in prioritizing their economic interests above democratic, environmental or moral commitments.⁵²

If Estonia discriminates its Russian-speaking population and if it promotes European democratic, morality based values, I would be curious if the international domain of human rights law, as remedy for the Russian-speaking population (in this case women), does represent a third domain – stepping aside from the internal issues and from the bilateral matters.

Would this mean that they will be used and abused by any political power they have connections with as “economic immigrants” who have no “home” country? Although most of them did not emigrate at all – they live on the same piece of land since their birth, just the borders and country names have changed behind their legs... If so, would they have to step in a row with the “economic immigrants” of the rest of the World - even without having a passport at all? If so would they take a stance of solidarity with other oppressed “economic immigrants” and represent together an “alien nationality” that can and should be reasonably accommodated only by international law and international structures? And if so would they all together be deported to a particular place in the World if the target-country would not accommodate them properly? Don't you have a feeling of déjà vu? Would these people be still men and women or the most vulnerable among them – the women - will have to take up an “international” or “neutral” gender, in order to get reasonable accommodation and remedies for their inequality

grounds accepted both by the feminists of the white or dominant community/society and by men of their own one?

6. Conclusion

When I started to work on this topic my first intention was to search for women NGOs in Estonia and give voice to the experiences of women with different ethnical background within them. Immediately after having done the first steps in this research I realized, that I need to expand my topic, as it turned out that I will not find a common, whole embracing NGO structure, that would incorporate women from different ethnic backgrounds. Rather the voice of women appeared to represent the dominant Estonian ethnicity only. These women's "unfair" approach when they marginalize or even do not even take into account the needs of Russian-speaking women while at the same time claiming the universality of gender based women's needs is highly nationalistic in the same manner as the dominant society in contemporary Estonia. Thus although they argue against the patriarchy and men's domination, they do not practice all- embracing women's solidarity and equality with Russian-speaking women. These Estonian women reproduce the same dominant/oppressed dichotomy, in which they themselves live and against which they fight as feminists.

Russian-speaking women, being marginalized in women's NGOs, mobilize together with Russian-speaking men in minority organizations. Based on their minority status and discrimination on this ground they seek assistance from the internationally funded consulting agencies, which operated in the domain of law and human rights. These both-sex organizations marginalize gendered

needs of Russian-speaking women in as similar way as the Estonian women's NGOs do, in that they simply do not admit the difference in their needs – according to their stand-point the ethnic interests comes before gender interests.

Russian-speaking women unite in cultural organizations; sing together and put emphasis on peace and their harmless intentions. This activity shows the inferiority of the position of Russian-speaking women in Estonia, where they have to prove not only to feminist and other Estonians their “harmlessness”, but also to men of their own community.

This double oppression, based in a perspective shared by Estonian feminists and Russian-speaking men, according to which ethnicity comes before gender, does seriously hinder at this point the creation of active, self-formed and strong Russian-speaking women's NGOs from the ground. The only remedy at this point they have is the set of tools provided by the human rights law, UN-racialized and UN-gendered.

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