



Ilmar Raag is an Estonian media executive, actor, screenwriter and film director, best known for his socio-critical film “The Class”. He was the CEO of Estonian Television from 2002 to 2005. Raag has been active in the Estonian public life as an opinion leader. He is a well-known columnist in several Estonian newspapers, where he has written extensively on the subject of immigration.

WE NEED A PRAGMATIC VIEW, NOT JUST HUMAN RIGHTS

Estonian film director and columnist Ilmar Raag believes that immigration will change the character of the country in the long term. But it is not a question of fighting it. It only has to submit to the ability to integrate and also to economic necessity.

Bornschein: What do you see as concerns and hopes of the Estonian population related to immigration?

Raag: In Estonia, we are connected to our recent history. After the Second World War, we were occupied by the Soviet Union. Then the Soviet Union brought in workers for the industry they wanted to support in Estonia. In the 1950s, the share of the Russian-speaking population was about 7 percent, maybe a little more, but less than 10 percent. By the end of the 1970s, the share of the Russian-speaking population was almost 30 percent, and it continued to increase. Especially in the north of Estonia and in the big cities, people felt that their own space and their own language, their own cultural space, was being restricted. It felt like an occupation or, as they call it, a colonisation.

Raag: Basically, I think that all the movements at the end of the 1980s were not so much related to the desire to get rid of the Soviet system or to have more democracy, but were based more on national or nationalistic reasons. Estonians were afraid that they would die out, to put it simply. And the second concern was that they saw all the riches of the other system on Finnish television. The fact that the composition of Estonian society has changed almost within a generation was not decided democratically. That was a big problem that still influences decisions in Estonia today.

However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, democracy was established as a political system.

Raag: When Estonia decided to become independent, it did so in a very special way, saying that it was not creating a new democracy, but restoring the Estonia that existed before the Second World War. And in terms of citizenship, this meant that only people who were directly descended from the pre-war citizens could become citizens as part of the Estonian Republic. Suddenly, a fairly large part of society had no citizenship at all. This is part of the roots of the immigration debate, but of course, time has passed on and now with the younger generation and their globalised vision we have almost antagonistic views, although the issue of immigration is not at the centre of the political debate.

To understand the situation, how large is the Russian-speaking population in Estonia?

Raag: In the 1990s, about 35 percent of the population was Russian-speaking, but of that 35 percent, about 5 percent were military personnel who left Estonia at the time. And then we have this 30 percent of Russians, which is about 330,000 people. Of this population, about a third decided to integrate into the Estonian society during the Estonian independence. They took the language exam, learnt the Estonian language and became Estonian citizens. Another third chose the Russian citizenship instead. Even now, almost 100,000 Russian citizens live in Estonia. And another 100,000 have decided that they do not want to take either the Estonian nor the Russian citizenship. These are only approximate figures.

But of course, this also means that a significant proportion of Russian speakers are not in favour of Estonia's policy, and at the same time that the integration policy has not been very successful.

To what extent is this history linked to the immigration of people from the Global South?

Raag: There are many connections. For example: During the European migration crisis in 2015, for many a migration crisis without any migrants, we had a big debate, but without migrants. Our government acted quite liberal. It said, okay, let's take in the refugees, but the public opinion polls at the time showed that two thirds of Estonians were more or less against taking in large numbers of migrants. But some attitudes have changed, due to two trends. First of all, younger Estonians have accepted the policy of a multicultural society, they follow the western media, they talk English. And we shouldn't forget, that we have a demographic problem. We need more workers if we want to keep our economy on the same level. We need immigrants as a labour force.

Raag: Then, when the war in Ukraine started, the Ukrainians were welcomed with great joy. You know, we don't like Russia, and anyone who fights them is welcome. And we already had some experience with them as economic migrants. They were fairly easy to integrate. And the war refugees also managed to find jobs quickly. From a business point of view, it was just pure happiness.

But Ukrainian immigrants, when at the same time 10% of the population is in favour of a Russian passport? How does that fit together?

Raag: Yes, there was a big difference between the old Russian migrants and the newly arrived Ukrainians, because most Ukrainians accepted the fact that they had to learn Estonian if they wanted to stay in Estonia, while the Russians had kept the Russian language schools until the war. And now, after the war, the new law was passed that the national language in Estonia is Estonian. This is our path for future migration. On the other hand, Russians and Ukrainians don't get along. But the Russians are holding back. In a mild way, they are repressed.

You mentioned the difference between younger and older people. Could this already be called a generational conflict?

Raag: In a way, yes. And between rural areas and the region of Tallinn. Because if we look at the Estonian far-right parties and see who their main supporters are, they are mainly people in rural areas who are usually less educated and slightly older than average. But it is not an extreme difference.

We have been talking about people's perceptions. On the political level, are there differences in the main political parties you can recognise?

Raag: There are, I would say, four different positions. The Russian-speaking society is known to see the newcomers as a threat. That they would take the jobs that the Russians currently have. On average, the Russian community in Estonia is more conservative than the Estonian community, and on average they are more anti-migrant than the Estonians.

Raag: If we take the right wing, we now have two parties that are similar, and their attitude emanates from right-wing racism, saying that all people of different skin colour are not worthy to live among us, the discourse of white supremacy and like that.

They express that openly?

Raag: They have a kind of doublespeak. In the mainstream media they make it a bit nicer, but otherwise they are openly racist. They adopt the narrative of Estonian politics from the early 90s. They said, we don't have that option, we're just a small nation. And the European Union is obviously behind this move, because it doesn't care about small nations.

These right-wing movements have become stronger, especially at a time when Estonia was trying to be very liberal. It's a provoked reaction, because in real life in Estonia, the migrant population is very small compared to the Ukrainians. It's more about fear.

Raag: Then there are the right-wing liberals, or classical liberals, who put forward the economic argument that we need migrant labour, but that they must be subject to very strict local rules. They have to integrate. We are not going to build several parallel societies, and I have to say that I am quite close to this line.

Then there is the middle way, which says that integration into the Western world is the most important political priority for Estonia. We should live by the rules of the Western world. Human rights are the cornerstone of all this, so we should have the kind of migration policy that is politically feasible in Estonia, while trying to find a compromise with the Western world. They try to align themselves with important countries in Europe. This is probably the current and strongest position in Estonian migration policy.

Raag: And finally, in the big cities we have a very liberal and progressive sector, hardcore liberals or left-wing liberals who, politically speaking, have no party of their own. They have some representatives in the Social Democrats and in some other parties, but they are very articulate and present in the media.

Sometimes the media reflect the zeitgeist, in other cases they move away from it or even from the thinking of the population. How do you see the mass media in Estonia and their attitude towards immigration?

Raag: If we read the media, we could even say that half of the public opinion in Estonia belongs to the very liberal wing.

How can you explain this?

Raag: I think that's because most journalists are quite young, under 40, let's say, in that respect. And they all live in the Western information sphere and in the Western mainstream media. And they embrace the political correctness of the big European countries.

Raag: But at the same time, the ideas of neighbouring countries like Sweden and Finland have also influenced our discussion. The Swedish model of immigration has failed because of the violence. The Finns, they have their own home-grown nationalist movement, the True Finns. They are shutting down the open Finland right now. Based on this experience, the media, in general, they don't reject the idea of limiting migration any more. The real hardcore liberals are now marginalised. They had their moment 10 years ago with the migration crisis, although you remember what I said, it was a migration crisis without any migrants in Estonia. Later we received about 200, but the debate had happened before that.

Does the issue of racism play an important role?

Raag: We need to understand that academics are mostly against populist narratives. They combine different problems into one package. They usually react to nationalist concepts with accusations of racism, but a smaller proportion of academics have joined the ranks of people who are more skeptical about immigration. The far-right wing in Estonia they doesn't want to convince anybody, they just oppose any immigration. In this way, I think Estonia represents the phenomenon that we see in many countries, where the most conservative people live in the provinces, where they have less contact with migration issues. And it is an interesting phenomenon that racism can sometimes be provoked.

Raag: Twenty years ago, the topic of racism was not discussed at all in Estonia, and at first no one even thought that someone could be racist, but as soon as this opinion became so prominent, an opposing wing was also activated. I can't say which came first, but I have to say that with your own narrative you provoke the existence of the other side, and to overcome the conflict we need dialogue.

Aren't we right in the middle of the debate culture? So the media seem to be against right-wing opinions. ...

Raag: Yes

... And this right-wing no longer wants to convince, it is simply against it.

Raag: Yes, absolutely. After the 2015 crisis, some interesting studies were conducted where we realised that the content analysis of the media did not reflect the same percentage of opinions that we had in surveys of the population. But then the question arose as to how they communicate, how they spread their ideas, and the answer was obvious: via social media. A lot of the discussion take place on social media. And social media in turn means that the discussion is very often very fragmented.

Another important actor, besides political parties or the mass media can be seen in the academia, related to migration?

Raag: I see two different main topics. There are people who are studying integration policies in regard to the Russian minority. Others they are trying to understand what is going on in Western Europe.

It sounds as if, despite all the difficulties, it is important to have a dialog on the topic of immigration in Estonia. What should such a dialog take into account?

Raag: I think the real dialogue has to be conducted for pragmatic reasons, for the fact that workers are really needed. And then the question arises as to the conditions under which we can attract these workers. Because one of the main issues is whether we participate in the global search for talent, which we would like to attract to Estonia, the best talent in science, this research and development part. But on the other hand, we don't want to have these workers that people simply don't trust as much. There is also the danger that the big cities will become more international in the future, that the predominant language will be English, but that they will be richer. Then the people in the Estonian language area will once again be second-class citizens. This is not without danger, but we have to understand that we have to integrate into the global economy if we want to develop economically.

Raag: If we want to support people in need, then we should do so where they are. We have to fight against the reasons why they are forced to flee instead of bringing them here. The main discussion in Estonia must therefore be of a pragmatic nature. The high ideals of human rights, as they were defined in very different times, I think they are less relevant at the moment.

... *But the Ukrainians?*

Raag: Yes, but I think that the way we receive Ukrainian migrants is an exception. They are so close to us and many people think that they have suffered the same as we have. It would be completely different if a major catastrophe had happened in the Middle East.

According to your personal convictions, what is the relationship between migration and democracy? And how do you understand the democracy in this context?

Raag: In a way, this is a key question, because in the long run it is obvious that the composition of the population will change if we invite international workers to Estonia. In that sense, if the nation state is a democratic choice today, it won't be so obvious in 50 years, because there will be enough new people who might think a bit differently. The fear of hardcore nationalists that ethnic identity will disappear is unfounded if we find pragmatic solutions. This identity will change, just as everything changes, but it is linked to democracy, and today a majority of Estonian democrats would primarily vote for nation-state laws.

And your constitution, what position can you find in it?

Raag: I think the problem is that the Estonian constitution is like a bible. I once argued that in the Bible you can find arguments for and against various issues. In the Estonian constitution, starting with the preamble, we have an attitude that emphasises the nation state. The primary goal of the Republic of Estonia is to promote the Estonian culture and language. And then, later, we have a paragraph stating that no one should be discriminated against.

Ilmar Raag, I thank you very much for this interesting talk.

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