



Raivo Vetik is Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Tallinn, Estonia, and at times Director of an institute at the same university. His research focuses on ethnicity, multiculturalism and cultural studies. He recently published on 'Interethnic National Identity' and also on 'Migration and Integration in Turbulent Times', where he focused on the anxiety of the population.

Immigration and society

STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS ARE IMPORTANT TOO

For Estonian professor Raivo Vetik, immigration is inevitable. But progressives should not push their agenda too hard. The supporters of the right wing often suffer from real social and economic inequality.

*The interview was conducted by Dirk Bornschein**

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Bornschein: Could you describe in your words, are there social conflicts, social conflicts about immigration in your country? If so, where do they lie?

Vetik: Estonia is a very small country that has been colonised and occupied by numerous of its neighbours. We are a consequence of this history, with a rather conservative view of the world today, in which the issue of immigration is of course extremely important. Various political parties exploit this, as they certainly reflect the views of some sections of Estonian society.

Vetik: Estonia is similar to other EU countries, especially those from Eastern Europe. Our population is not homogeneous; it is divided along many lines. For example, there is the ethnic line and the perception of the immigration issue is very different in these groups, because some of them are migrants themselves who came here after the Second World War. Until 1945, Estonia was very ethnically homogeneous, 97.3% were ethnic Estonians. Then, during the 50 years of Soviet rule, the proportion of Russians rose from 2% to 40%. For this reason, ethnic Estonians and Estonian Russians have different views on immigration.

Vetik: The second line is of course age, the difference between younger people and older people, as in all countries. Young people, there are different sections, but basically I would say that they are much more open-minded. According to some academics we need more skilled migrants, while in fact the new immigrants they reflect about 0.1% of the total population.

Apart from the Russian Estonians.

Vetik: Yes, you know, after Estonian independence, most Russians became stateless at first, especially those who came after the war. According to a new citizenship law, they had to start the process of naturalisation, which meant that they had to learn the Estonian language, the constitution and so on. During the Soviet era, Russians in Estonia were not very eager to learn Estonian because they simply didn't need it. You could say that during that time Moscow created two parallel societies in Estonia, extremely segregated parallel societies.

Could you tell us a little more about the concerns of parts of the population?

Vetik: There are different types of concerns. One kind is the cultural one, and this is an issue that is highlighted by the far right, starting with the so-called migration crisis in 2015. The party is called EKRE in Estonian. It was a very interesting situation that during the Syrian crisis, Estonia had to take in about 200 refugees, and they started complaining, that they were overwhelmed and so on, but in reality the number of refugees was very small. But from that moment on, Estonia has become an attractive country for migrants.

Estonians are conservative, so there are cultural concerns. In addition, of course, there are also market concerns about the contribution of migrants and refugees in Estonia. And here, of course, you have to differentiate between average migrants and Ukrainians. Ethnic Estonians have a very warm attitude towards Ukrainians, which is why we are very supportive of Ukraine and many Estonian families have taken in Ukrainians.

Vetik: But if we talk about a broader picture, then on the one hand everyone understands that we live in a global economy where all countries are interconnected and we can't isolate ourselves. On the other hand, people are worried about how it works with salaries, jobs and so on.

Personally, do you think that these concerns are justified in a certain percentage?

Vetik: I'm a scientist and I do research on intergroup relations. And in that context, I would say that prejudices, stereotypes etc. are a normal part of how any society works. And in that context, I wouldn't say that there is anything right or wrong. There are just different parts of society that have certain interests, political interests, economic interests, cultural interests and so on. Of course we can talk about misperceptions and misinformation.

Vetik: This is something that far-right parties do in Estonia. And of course many people fall into the trap of these parties. But in a broader context, I would say that the views, values and perceptions that each person has basically reflect their experiences, background and interests.

You have already spoken about the historical perspective. Can you recognise other deep roots in the immigration debate in your country?

Vetik: Yes, definitely. There is a historical memory that has to do with Russia and the Soviet Union in particular, because when they came in the 1940s, they immediately started deporting certain groups. This is very similar to what is happening in north-eastern Ukraine.

Vetik: For example, my mother and her family were deported to Siberia when my mother was 10 years old, and this is true for almost every Estonian family. It is definitely the point of this historical memory that affects how you perceive migration issues.

We have mentioned the history. But we haven't talked about the use of the media.

Vetik: Young people are very interconnected, connected to the outside world. They use all the social platforms, they travel a lot, they learn English, etc. My understanding is that their perception is very different compared to the older generation. I don't see a lot of anti-migration sentiment among young people.

It almost sounds as if with the new generation, the nation state is also being called into question. What do you think?

Vetik: Definitely. They are open-minded, they see that Estonia is part of the global community, Estonia is part of the EU, they see that Estonia has gained a lot as being a part of the EU, as part of the world, and then they definitely reflect the national interest.

How successful have been the public measures to integrate migrants?

Vetik: This is quite a new topic. It started in 2015, and now we have more and more migrants. In the late 1990s, the Estonian government started integration programmes for Russians, with new institutions and funding. And now, in the last five or six years, it has introduced new measures for new migrants. The first survey was in 2000, and we had a section in that questionnaire that was aimed at new immigrants. I have been responsible for this project for 24 years. There were no practical measures, but compared to many other neighbouring countries, such as Sweden or Finland, the numbers are very low.

Vetik: This issue of integration is a tricky one, I don't think people think much about integration in their everyday life, they just live their lives and if they meet the migrants on the street, that's okay, no problem, but they probably do not think about integration.

What is the state of the migration debate as part of the culture of debate in your country? Is it still possible to have debates on that issue?

Vetik: Yes, it's not a big issue, it's a big issue for the far-right political parties. They try to push it, but otherwise it's not a big issue. So it doesn't have a big impact on the general culture of debate. It is not a central issue in our public sphere.

How do the media influence in this process?

Vetik: Estonia is a very small country. We have only two major daily newspapers. One is "Postimees", Postman in translation, and the other is "Estonian Daily". Postimees is quite conservative, while the other is more progressive. And of course both media platforms are trying to get clicks. But as I said, the issue is not so topical in our country, and this is also reflected in the media discussion. In the media discussion, the integration of Russians is much more important, especially now that the merging of the two education systems is underway. All pupils in Estonia must start learning Estonian in their first year of school. The decision was made when Russia started the war in Ukraine.

We have talked about the media, now I would like to mention academia. I would imagine that the academic world is not very big in a small country. But what role has academia played in the public debate on immigration? And do you consider that the academia provides the research the country needs to cover the complexity of the issue?

Vetik: Yeah, of course, this is exactly my own research topic. I've been publishing a lot, about inter-ethnic relations, conflict and integration. Like in most western universities, social sciences are rather progressive, a kind of left wing.

Are there aspects of the topic that need more attention? Because research also depends on interests.

Vetik: My own main concern is national identity. How to make sure that both the host society and the migrants feel at home in Estonia, that they have mutual respect and recognition, and we have been working with policymakers on this issue.

In 2014, I was asked to measure the level of integration of Estonian society and to develop a kind of index that summarises many indicators. And this was used. It is based on the concept of national identity. Another focus from my point of view is the fundamental issue of socio-economic inequality. During the Estonian independence, a systematic socio-economic divide has emerged, where the Russian-speaking population has a 20-30% lower pay gap, and much less access to certain positions in the public sector, and so on. This has also been researched.

One of the main changes in the European party system in recent years has been the rise of what others call right-wing populist parties, often less global. Do you see something similar in Estonia?

Vetik: Yes, definitely. I have already mentioned that our populist party is playing the migration card. And then we have a number of conservative parties, some of which are also represented in the Estonian parliament. The conservative line in politics is quite strong in Estonia, especially since the refugee crisis we had in the EU in 2015.

Basically, all parties are trying to keep the populist party out of the government. They used to get 15 or even up to 20 percent, now it's less than 10 percent. In that sense, it's good that there are so many conservative parties, it limits the possibilities of the extreme parties.

Apart from migration, what other issues are typical for the populist party, or far-right as you say?

Vetik: Migration is one of the core issues; Covid-19, and then strangely enough in the last national elections they tried to move closer to Putin's worldview, and as a result they have greatly reduced their representation in the Estonian parliament.

I'd like to ask you about immigration and democracy. How do you understand the relationship of immigration and democracy, theoretically speaking?

Vetik: This question has been debated in theory for almost two hundred years. In the mid-19th century, the famous English philosopher Mill said that multiculturalism was detrimental to democracy. But today we think that democracy and multiculturalism can coexist. If we want to maintain the capitalist type of economy, the global economy, then there will also be migration from poor to rich countries. And so multiculturalism is inevitable.

We talked about what is done in the migration issue. But, from your point of view, how should your country deal with immigration?

Vetik: Yes, there is no simple answer to this question, because there are both pros and cons. I understand that migration is inevitable. On the other hand, I also support the view that there should be a certain national identity that is shared by everyone. We do not want to have a very fragmented society with strong cultural conflicts. In this context, we believe that both sides have to make an effort, which means that the host society has to become more flexible. On the other hand, the migrants should try to integrate, they need to learn the Estonian language and so on.

For example, I have a PhD student. My demand to her was: you have to learn Estonian. And she attended the classes. Now she is finishing her PhD thesis. But to be honest. She understands Estonian quite well in our sessions, but she prefers to speak in English because Estonian is very, very difficult.

From your perspective, Estonian perspective, do you have recommendations for other European countries or the EU on how to handle migration?

Vetik: Well, I make a distinction between the radicals and the moderates, and if the moderates in the host country go along with the migrants, that would be the best way to keep the radicals away from having a big impact on national politics. On the other hand, and we see this in the USA, for example. Conservatives there are criticised for their views on immigration. "They are wrong." But it's not a question of right or wrong.

Vetik: They have their own experiences, and my recommendation to progressives would be that they need to be smarter and not just push their agenda too hard. They need to understand that conservatives, even the far right, have certain reasons. They often suffer from social and economic inequality. We need to focus on structural issues and then all these cultural issues will follow.

Raivo Vetik, thank you very much for this interview.

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