Information about interviewee:

Yana Toom. Member of European Parliament. She is a member of the Estonian Centre Party, part of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. Interview conducted in Tallinn, Estonia.

R= Respondent – Yana Toom

I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton

I: Why is dual citizenship prohibited here in Estonia?

R: Because it would result in thousands of dual citizenships with Russia. Which they are afraid of. The last proposal was by the Reform party, if I remember correctly, it was the previous year before the elections. It was to allow dual citizenship with United States, the member states of the European Union, Canada and somebody else, I don't remember. Not with Russia of course. On the other hand, we have ten to seventy thousand dual citizens in Pechory, this is a former Estonian territory which belongs to Russia now, according to an agreement. And we have lot of ethnic Estonians in Russia. Some of them went there during Tsar times and some of them went there later and we don't want to let them have two passports. That’s the problem.

I: Why is it so important that the Russian speaking population have citizenship?

R: It is not just about the Russian speaking population, it is also about Estonians living in Russia. Here the politicians the Estonian politicians believe they are under the influence of Putin, propaganda whatever, I don't know. I don't share these concerns. This is the political consensus here.

I: Do you believe there could be a political impact of allowing dual citizenship?

R: Absolutely. We have seventy thousand people. Seventy-five thousand people from Estonia who are working abroad, some in the member states. Some of them definitely applied for dual citizenship from the state where they work and live. That will lead to a situation where they have to give away Estonian citizenship, which is not good. When you have a small country, it is much better to compatriots living abroad. On the other hand, according to our constitution, no one can take away your citizenship that you get by birth. Which means for those who get it by birth, it is allowed. But not from naturalisations.

I: Do you believe that there could be another wave of passportization by Russia here in Estonia?

R: I don’t believe this. I think that after Crimea events in 2014 we had kind of controversial questions and I was asked ten times to whom belongs Crimea? And if Russia invade, on which side will you defend Estonia or will go with Russia. This is the main concern for some of Estonians about Russian community. This is about dual citizenship. I had this discussion yesterday, an old lady asked me, is it not possible to get to passports? On which side am I supposed to serve? So these are things linked to defence and security.

I: Do you think they shouldn’t be linked to defence and security?

R: I think the problem is, that we have more than 100,000 of Russian citizens in Estonia. This amount is increasingly all the time. Due to the fact that according to some grey passport holders are getting Russian passports. Grey passport is not a document basically. There are a lot of countries in the world that just don't recognise it and people are just tired of waiting for the problem to be solved and are taking Russian passports. And on the other hand, according to Russian citizenship law, if you have a new born baby and you have Russian passport this new born baby is automatically a Russian citizen. And they are not allowed to get out of Russian citizenship before they are 18 years old. According to information from Russia embassy, every year, we give to Russia two to three hundred new born Estonians, basically. The amount is increasing and, in my view, it is a bigger security risk than dual citizenship.

I: You previously argued for greater cultural autonomy? What would this involve? Could it be interpreted as a pre-cursor to political or territorial autonomy?

R: I would not say that I argued for autonomy. Yesterday, before the elections, and also afterwards, it still continues, there was an idea to switch all schools to Estonian language by 100% which is definitely assimilation. What according to the idea of cultural autonomy, that if you have assimilation prohibited, Russians do not have cultural autonomy, Jews have, Swedes have, Finns have, Russians do not and that there will be the evaluation. But of course, everyone panicked and I had a million calls, from Prime minister, 'what did you say?' It would lead to crisis. Nothing happened of course. But I believe this is not doable, unfortunately.

I: Why?

R: There were several attempts to create Russian cultural autonomy. But nothing happened. I know that the last pack of documents was in the Ministry of Culture for 3 or 4 years. They just don't answer. They are afraid of all kind of Russian organisations.

I: What would be the first step towards this?

R: It's easy. Described very clearly in the law. We have to make kind of list of Russians who believe that they are Russian and then have kind of elections. Elect a board and that’s basically it. And then we have official representatives who are speaking with all governments, local governments on behalf of Russian speaking community. But it is the problem of Russians of everywhere in the world. Russians emigrated a hundred years ago to Paris after the revolution. They could never greet each other. It’s always a problem. So it will never happen unfortunately.

I: It seems that language is becoming an increasingly salient issue for politics in Europe?

R: They’ve tried to do it for twenty-five years. As you know we have a language inspectorate, to check whether people are speaking Estonian or not. We have absolutely stupid language requirements. I mean they are disproportional. They are discriminatory unfortunately. My favourite example. A taxi driver has to speak Estonian at B1 level. B1 basically allows you to study at the university. From a foreign state, it is enough. You have to be able to write an essay in Estonian, and so on and so forth. I think that if you are able to write an essay, then probably, you would not be taxi driver in any language. So this is relative and it’s a problem. And for its a problem in campaign, we have parliaments elections at the end of May, and I just visited 11 small cities in southern Estonia where I go not very often. Absolutely no Russians at all. Just Estonian public everywhere. Nobody asked me about Russian problems. Nobody asked me about Putin. Absolutely not. When I asked 'why don't you ask'. They said 'we don’t have problem'. I still don’t see where are these people that the politicians are representing. Maybe they don’t come to meet me. I had a very clear impression, that this politics lives somewhere separately from the people who basically have no concerns. I have a feeling, maybe but maybe I am not right.

I: Would you say the Russian population are excluded from Estonian politics?

R: I think people are excluded. They cannot vote in parliamentary elections. They cannot vote in European parliament elections. Those who have grey passports, or those who have Russian passports. The problem is that the grey passport was invited, but was invented twenty-two years ago like measure for several years. They just needed to give people something, to give them opportunity to travel. It was a temporary measure. But now, where are we? 76,000 grey passport holders. My own father came to Estonia in 1956. He doesn't speak Estonian which is sad, ok fine, he is 84 years old, he is very sick and they won't give him Estonian citizenship now, he will die with grey passport. Is he a security risk? He is in the hospice right now. It’s very very stupid. I have 5 children. One of them is adopted. When I adopted the boy he had a grey passport. He was 6 years old and had a grey passport. Due to the fact we adopted him, as Estonian citizen, he got Estonian citizenship. I hate it.

I: How has the relationship between the state and the Russian speaking population changed over the years?

R: You know I am politician and I am from the central party. Central Party is definitely number one. Now it is much worse and we are in the position for ten years and in this position, you can promise everything. We always have coalition in Estonian and we in power for two and half years and nothing has changed, and people are very dispositioned. The party we stand for did nothing unfortunately. In this coalition agreement there are some who think that citizenship, Estonian citizenship for these children, which I described, with one parent is with grey passport and another with Russian passport. We can then give them Estonian citizenship which we will then wait until they are 18 years old, and then they can edit it if they want. For dual citizenship, it is basically nothing. It is about 3 to 5 thousand children and that is all, and we can do nothing for them in our coalition. Which is sad. Which is maybe kind of dangerous. Only one state in the world is defending Russian speakers in Estonia, and this is Russia. And we hope that the European Union can help with this problem, but often it does nothing. That was the reason why I was elected to be successfully in the European parliament. People hoped Brussels would help. Brussels did not. People will not vote tactically in European elections, but if people are looking for some political power to help them, basically they don't have an alternative except Mr Putin. Which is very stupid. From the point of view from the EU and Estonia and so on and so forth.

I: Rhetoric from Kremlin appears to disregard territorial borders when it comes to Compatriots. What are your thoughts on this?

R: No, I have no idea how this stuff of Russian compatriots works. I even do not know who Russian compatriots are. I thought that they are Russian citizens, but yesterday I was told, ‘no, no’ ‘no’. It is absolutely everybody who believes that he is a Russian compatriot. It basically can be me. I have no idea, really. I know that they have congresses. They have kind of resolutions. So I have no idea about how it works about what are the real things, I do not know. When I was journalist about ten years, I spoke to the former head of Foreign Affairs Committee of Duma, or something like that, and there was a plan that these Russian compatriots can visit museums for free or something. As i know, it never happened. It was just a plan that was never realised.

I: Do you believe that Russia should have a say in how the Russians are governed in Estonia?

R: I think that to a certain extent, yes. But I don’t know, but now, I am repeating myself. We have 100,000 citizens who still can't vote in local elections and of course they don’t live on the moon. They are members of their own family, and each and every family in Estonia we have Estonian citizens, Russians citizens and non-citizens. We are basically eating breakfast with each other. The influence is very high.

I: How does the Russian Federation influence Estonian politics?

R: I believe it doesn’t influence Estonian politics. Every time they try to defend Russian speakers, it is getting worse. I'll give you an example, we have hearings about non-citizens in the European parliament. We submitted a petition for voting rights in European parliament for non-citizens. According to EU agreements a number of mandates granting to EU membership states depending on the number of populations, but number of citizens, which means that after Brexit vote, we will get the 7th mandate, it will come, due to the fact that we have people who are not allowed to vote, basically it is just not fair. We had this petition and this discussion and we had 3 resolutions of EU parliament. It was said that they have to solve problems of non-citizens. Then Mr Labrovki, press conference, said no no no. They are discriminating. Then they closed the petition. This is Russian influence. What was the need to say that? Of course they don’t know they are doing something. But every time they try to defend us, it makes it worse.

I: How does this situation here in Estonia compare with other states?

R: They don't have this problem in Lithuania, but they have 6 to 8% of Russian speakers. They granted citizenship to absolutely everybody. Because they didn’t' restore the pre-war public, not due to the fact they are so kind. But because Lithuania was very small and even Vilnius was in Belarus. So if they restored the former territory, they would lose half of it. But in Latvia, it’s the same. Ukraine. You know, Estonian national identity is based on language. Due to the fact they never had a state, for 30 years between the wars, but before that, never. It was Denmark, Swedes, Russians, Germans. So identity is based on language and it is really, really serious. But the problem for Russian speaking minority in Estonia, and now our identity is based on language, for they nothing except language. If you don’t have rights, and you are excluded from politics, ok I’m not excluded but my parents are. I am somewhere in between. Our identity is based on language. Now we have conflict of these identities. In Latvia they have the same.

I: Is there a difference in interpretation of historical events between Estonia and Russia?

R: In my view, it is kind of naïve to think that there can be a future relationship between Russia and Estonia. We are member of EU and can speak about relationship between EU and Russia. Kind of, relations between Estonia and Russia, maybe of some level, a minister will come or something like that. But we are a member of EU and we have common foreign policy. It will change nothing basically.

I: How would you describe the relationship between Estonia and Russia?

R: We don't have relations at all. Our president visited Moscow previous week, something like that. She met Putin and everyone. It’s good that she did it. Every time our ministers got an invitation to the economic forum to St Petersburg, they never took a risk. Now they tell me, if you go to Russia as a politician, they will just kill you in the media. Now the president has opened the door. In that case I can agree. But basically, we don’t have relations. We don’t even have a border agreement.

I: Are you not optimistic about future?

R: It will sound maybe cynical but I believe our relations will improve if that they will be decision and political will of the chairman in France. I can believe estimate Estonian rule in the EU quite adequately.

I: You have been criticised in the past for visiting Assad in Syria. Can you comment on these criticisms?

R: First thing, I am former journalist. There is no such thing like a journalist. If you have an opportunity to go, you just go. It is really interesting. The information was so contradicting, that I had a feeling that I just had to go. Of course, they blame me everywhere, but now look at Syria now. Everybody agreed that Assad had to stay and European countries opening their embassies in Syria. Which means that now, in politics if we speak about values, we always have to look for oil or money. If you are speaking loudly about values it is basically about oil and money.

I: Some have criticised you for breaking with Estonian foreign policy.

R: I am not representing Estonia. I am representing my voters. This is about parliament and mandate of parliament. We have diplomats to represent Estonia. I am not one of them.

I: Would you say that the Russian speaking population here in Estonia are aligned better with Russian objectives and policy then Estonia?

R: I would say not. If we are speaking about what is identity. If you brush your teeth in the morning. You don't brush your teeth for a researcher from Oxford university. You brush them as a brother, husband whatever. What makes you feel like you are a researcher? The fact that we are having an interview. If you go for a beer, then it is different. This is what it means identity. Russians in Estonia are Russians. But the time they enter Russia, across the Russian border, we turn into Estonians and we are Estonian. We cannot buy these cheap tickets to museums or theatres. They say we are speaking with an accent. They can really define that I am speaking with an accent. I don’t know how they do it. We have to buy twice price to Hermitage. We are not Russians in Russia. Every time I am blamed in Estonian media that I take part in Russian TV shows. Vladimir Slarov, a pro-Putin journalist, he has a huge talk show, 20 million people are watching it. Every time I go there I defend Estonia and EU. Which is a problem for my voters? Why? I will say nothing bad about Estonia or EU in Russia, as they cannot solve our problem. The place where I criticise Estonia is Brussels, due to the fact we are member of EU. This is about identity. Here you they say you are foreign between your people, like an alien in New York, something like that. Not at home here, not at home there.

I: Is there a community between Russians here in Estonian with Russians in the other Baltic States?

R: We have good cooperation between my colleagues in the European Parliament. We have 4 Russian speakers in European parliament. 751 members and 4 Russian speakers. Of course sometimes we meet and drink wine, but that is basically all. We have the same problems with Latvia. They have non-citizens. Same problems with Russian schools and so on. Absolutely no community. We don’t even have ethnic political party here in Estonia, which is good in my view. If you have small, dangerous enemy, it is very good to be alliance against them, which means if we have small Russian party, and now there is a trend, then we not solve a single Russian problem here. For all other parties, will have a natural enemy.

I: How symbolic would dual citizenship allowance be for Russian population?

R: I believe that if the state proposes that for a year, from 1st January to 31st December you can come and ask and we will give you. Those who would use this opportunity would be happy. and those that would not choose, it is there choice and then there is nothing to discuss. But it will never happen I am afraid.

I: Do Russia provide any platforms for Russian cultural association or funding?

R: They provide some funding, as I know, but it is really small. As I have heard, there are always problems. There is huge corruption in Russia. Not as huge as Ukraine. But still. I don't know how it works. But I know several NGOs who were supposed to get Russian funding, but they applied 5 times. After 3 times they said 'no, no, no we don't have money any more'. It is not very secure so to say in financial times. And another thing is of course, our favourite. Our security and defence policy, they don't like this basically. I was also in their book once, kind of enemy of state, but I won at court.

I: What is the objective in providing more opportunities for Russian speakers to obtain Russian citizenship? Is territory or demographics at the heart of this?

R: Maybe it is, maybe it is not. Yes, I think it is. This is what each and every state is doing. This is what Estonia did in Pechory 25 years ago, giving passports to absolutely everybody. People were not asked to prove if they were Estonia. They just got these passports. Hungary, look at them. This Hungarian card, is absolutely everywhere. I think Russia is doing the same, but just in Russian way, you know. Provocation. It was the next day after Zelensky was elected, now they are giving Russian passports, why. But these people don't really have these documents. I have a lady from Luhansk, with her children, they wanted asylum, because we are not giving asylum to Ukrainians. There is a war in one corner, just go to another corner. If you are from Luhansk to Carpathia, it will be really dangerous. They don’t like them I would say. So they came here and registered at my place. They are kind of living in my home but they don't have documents. A stupid passport of Luhansk and to get this Ukrainian one, you have to go to Kiev, which is extremely far, dangerous and expensive. They really don't have them. So the Russians just use the momentum. For Ukrainian authorities didn’t solve the problem, so.

I: How do you think this will develop in Ukraine?

R: I have no idea. I have tried to understand what is Mr Zelensky. I didn’t understand reading his interview. Before the interview it was clear that he created my Mr Kolomsky and his money, and Mr Kolomosky was interested in negotiations about Donbas, but after several interviews, I just don't understand. We just need to wait for other messages from that said. Now I was invited to Donbas, I had the same temptation to go and have a look. I will definitely go before the elections. I will go. I visited Syria 3 times, so to say, from different sides. It was really interesting. I believe that my picture was more adequate what was written in Estonian media at least.

I: What is the ideal model for Russians in Estonia?

R: In fact we are part of all kind of conventions, which are supposed to protect minorities. Linguistic minorities, national minorities. But we are not protecting them. In rhetoric we are saying of course, we have to teach better Estonian to give you better opportunities on the labour market. After we introduced this discrimination requirements we have to give you equal opportunities. And I have to say that this protest from Russian speakers is not that high as it was ten years ago. This kind of politics leads to marginalisation of society. Really. In a normal society, the children and grandchildren of emigrants are higher education then their parents and grandparents, in Estonia it is not the case. In Ira-Vadu county, there is the highest of 60 % higher educated. We have this oil show there. But their children are not educated. The children have 9 plus at the school and they do something really primitive. So we have difference. If you have marginalised part of society, you don't have protest. You don’t have Russian intelligence, Russian media. We don’t have a single Russian daily newspaper, which means, of course what I am reading and listening to is coming from Moscow. There is just no alternative. Our journalists are just not able to write in Russia, it is getting worse and worse.

I: What is the perfect situation to try and achieve?

R: In 2007, after these events about these soldiers. One of my colleagues wrote a brilliant interpretation programme. It was one sentence, leave us alone please. Don't touch. We have one education, we pay taxes, we are fine. We are learning Estonian and living by law. Just don't push all the time.

I: Could this lead to further marginalisation?

R: Why? Why? I was in Volga the previous week. I spoke to people, problematic people, teenagers and so forth. It is terrible. Latvians now coming to Volga. Latvian and Estonian. In Latvia they switched to Estonian language one hundred percent. They are going to Volga, entering Russian schools. The fact we have this system, 60% in Estonian, 40% in Russian. But it is still very complicated. The result is that 14 or 15 years old, they just quit, they just don't study any more, they don’t work. They just do nothing. What will happen to these people in ten years. In twenty years? Go to prison or what? Nobody is dealing with this problem. Not in Latvia, not in Estonia. If they just give them an opportunity to study in their mother tongue. Ok, you can learn Estonian, but you have to have something to say in Estonia, not just to learn it.

I: Are they learning Estonian for no real purpose?

R: No. Absolutely not.

I: Is the perception of the Estonian state in these communities entirely negative?

R: No, it's not entirely negative. I believe that they didn't spend 40 years in the dessert just for fun. They were waiting for the last slave to die. They have the slave mentality. Now we just have 15 more years to wait and maybe it will be better, but I am not that optimistic at all.

I: How much of the population have left?

R: I don't know. I think that they are basically going, not to Russia, but to Germany, France, Great Britain. Soviet people during Soviet times. It was a joke about passport of Soviet Estonia. This is the west of my passport. This was the Soviet West and the identity was Western.

I: Has Estonia’s definition of Soviet Union as an illegal occupier of the state shaped the relationship today?

R: Yes definitely. Definitely. Estonia and Latvia were using our sufferings of the past to get some benefits from the EU all the time. When the quota system for the migrant crisis, to send these refugees, what did Latvia and Estonia say? No no no, we already have them, they came during Soviet times. We have a lot of them. The Russian community have a feeling, can imagine, yes, a refugee, some today came. How did they come here? It was the system in the Soviet Union that if you graduated from the university, they just sent you somewhere for 3 years. It was absolutely obligatory, you could not refused. Just went and you worked there. And those people who were sent to the Baltic states, they were happy, because it was the Soviet west. And no someone compares them with refugees with Iraq. It was an argument that was used two years ago in the Council of Europe. We already have refugees. Funny.

I: Is there a nostalgia for the Soviet Union among the Russian community in Estonia?

R: Yes, there is to a certain extent. Definitely. Yes, yes. But not in Russia. I know that every time I go to Russia, I have debates, saying, it's a totalitarian state, no freedom of speech, nothing. Which is true. Which is basically true. Russia is kind of a miracle. They will never criticise it. Not a single politician is allowed to criticise it. I said in several interviews, that Russia definitely violated international law with Crimea annexation, and da facto Crimea belongs to Russia but de jure belongs to Ukraine. I believe that I lost a certain percent of my voters, just like that.

I: What is the relationship like between Russian Federation and Russian population in Estonia?

R: No relationship at all. Sometimes they say, you have to stop this kind of discrimination and that is all.