Information about interviewee:

Ruth Annus, Head of Citizenship and Migration Policy, Department of the Interior Estonia. Interview conducted in Tallinn, Estonia.

R= Respondent – Ruth Annus

I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton

I: Why is dual citizenship prohibited in Estonia and how has the debate around the subject developed over the years?

R: Estonian's citizenship policy has always had the principle that no dual citizenship, according to the citizenship act, but still we have according to our constitution that no one can be deprived of citizenship by birth. So, this is how we in fact we have people with dual citizenship, basically those who acquired Estonian citizenship by birth and maybe acquired by birth another citizenship or later by naturalisation. So, according to our basically constitution, it doesn't say anything about dual citizenship. So it has been really a politics debate. It is not a constitutional restriction that we can't have dual citizenship or we can, or we should. It is just really the politics that has been a debate as we have in fact we have in fact people with dual citizenship. Why wouldn't allow it then. Let's change the citizenship act and say, ok for those who have acquired Estonian citizenship by birth, then they can have dual citizenship basically. I would say that, it is not the wisest thing to do basically. Then we say that those people who have naturalised, they have gone through a lot of trouble, like Estonian language exam, constitution and citizenship act exam, then they have lived in Estonian with a residence permit for at least 8 years and then we say that they can't have another citizenship. What would be legitimate aim behind that? When we say we don't allow dual citizenship the reason behind that is that when a person is a citizen, he or she is supposed to be loyal to the state and if two states of citizenship have conflicting agendas or policies, then it is impossible for a person to have dual mindset. And of course, Estonia and Russia have different conflicting agendas. How is our history, what is the current foreign policy, internal policy? We say that the policies are conflicting, which means for us, we don't know which mindset a person will pick with dual citizenship, so obviously it is ok that a person shares an ideology or politics or policies of his or her citizenship, most people do. You can't have two conflicting ones. When we come back to the dual citizenship, we say it is a threat to state security. That a person might have a mindset from, let’s say, the Russian Federation and exercise the rights and obligations of an Estonian citizen, with the foreign mindset it might, in certain cases, pose a threat to state security. When we come back to regulating or providing that those citizens have acquired Estonian citizenship by birth and take another citizenship, and we take those that have naturalised and have another citizenship, then from the perspective of posing a threat to state security then there is no difference. The loyalty won't work. Those who have naturalised, they have to give an oath that they are loyal to the Estonian state, in a written form. Those who just acquire citizenship by birth, they can have whatever mindset. It wouldn't be logical if we take that the legitimate aim to avoid dual citizenship, is to avoid conflicting agendas, then that is no different whether the citizenship was acquired by birth or by naturalisation. Another thing is that we can kind of provide two sorts of people, those who have acquired citizenship by birth they could be considered privileged ones, and they haven’t done anything to get Estonian citizenship. Those who have been through a lot of trouble to get Estonian citizenship by naturalisation, they would become a second sort or second category. It wouldn't be very wise at least from the state's point of view, it won't help them feel part of the society and integrate to the society, to not having two communities, which has been the ideology of integration since 1998 when we had the decision of integration taken by the parliament. It really wouldn't help.

I: Are Estonians who acquire another state's citizenship, are they required to renounce their Estonian citizenship?

R: Basically we say that you can't have two, but of course, if another state grants it's citizenship to an Estonian citizen, and that citizen has acquired Estonian citizenship by birth, then what can we do? Basically we can say that our citizenship act provides that you can't have Estonian citizenship. We can always say that the person may not be very law abiding, but of course, there is no sanction or fine or something, that the person should give up Estonian citizenship. When a person who has got Estonian citizenship by naturalisation, gets a citizenship from another state, then the police and border guard will give some time for the person to decide which citizenship wants to keep. Then the person won't choose, then the state will take away Estonian citizenship.

I: What happens in this case with regards to their right to reside?

R: The person can get a residency permit, no problem with that.

I: In Estonian there are large number of Russian citizens and non-citizens. Has there been any problems between these people and the state with regards to citizenship policies?

R: I would say actually that we have the same integration policy for all people living in Estonia. When Estonia became an independent state in 1991, again then, one third of the population were not Estonian citizens. Basically there is no difference whether they finally took Russian citizens, or stayed with undefined citizenship, we work towards integration and we have done quite well I would say because, currently we only have 5.5% of the population who are with undefined citizenship. Currently it the problem with elderly people. So we changed our legislation in 2016 and now all children who would be without citizenship of any state, and whose parents have resided in Estonia both for at least 5 years, and of course, if there is one parent then it’s one parent, and they are also with undefined citizenship, then the child gets Estonian citizenship and the parents have one year to renounce the child's citizenship. Currently the parents of three children have chosen that. Of course when the children become 18, they can still apply for Estonian citizenship without any conditions. We call it restoring Estonian citizenship. For whatever reasons the parents had, for not wanting Estonian citizenship. The child will get it, if he or she wants, when he or she becomes 18.

I: Can you please describe to me the difference between the non-citizens and citizens here in Estonia?

R: The grey passport with undetermined or undefined citizens. The difference is that they can't exercise, political powers, they can't elect or to be elected to the parliament, they can't be in public service. That is the only difference. They can vote at the local government elections. All social, cultural, economic rights are the same and their passport is recognised as well as all the same states as Estonian passport, so they can travel. They have one privilege I would say, this is why people might want to keep their grey passport and not apply for Estonian citizenship; they can travel visa free to Russia and visa-free to the European Union. It is a very practical thing. People that reside near the border area, from both sides have families there and have relations and they have to visit cemeteries there. It is obvious that the cross-border communities are quite close. If they become Estonian citizens it would automatically mean they need a Russian border. It is kind of difficult if half of your family need a Russian visa and the other doesn’t. But still according to our integration monitoring, the more people have been connected to Estonia, the more they would like to become Estonian citizens and the more they have become Estonian citizens. So for the third-generation immigrants. 81% of third generation immigrants are Estonian citizens. I would say it is quite good. It is up to the education system. All the rights and obligations are the same, except the political rights. Which is normal. If you not a citizen of that state, you can't vote for, or be elected to, the parliament. A little bit less than one third, I think it was 28%, said that they are happy with that current legal status.

I: Are there any regional differences with regards to integration?

R: Of course in east Vilma, the situation is specific there and the state makes extra effort to provide language courses and make the people feel the state is present there. Our president decided to work for 2 weeks or a month and moved her whole office to Narva. I have heard only good words about it. From this year, we had an amendment, to our citizenship act, that the state would provide not only free Estonian language courses, but also for paid leave from work, so people could go to the Estonian language courses. The condition is that they would finally apply for Estonian citizenship when they have finished with the language courses. They would provide up to A1, A2 and B1 language courses. Every person when he or she comes to the programme, his or her language skills are evaluated and maybe not everyone needs all three levels, but the state is prepared to provide all three steps. We thought that maybe we can achieve up to 400 persons this year, but even before we started the courses, at the beginning of February, we already had 1600 applicants. So people are very interested in learning Estonian and getting Estonian citizenship. Of course it was not only people with undefined citizenship but we also had third country nationals there as well, not only Russians, but all sorts of ones. Because people have moved here since 1991 and they really want to become Estonian citizens. It is up to the state to grant enough possibilities and to facilitate so that people can learn the Estonian language and pass their exams and become Estonian citizenship.

I: Are the number of Russian citizens in Estonian increasing?

R: It can't be so because we have very precise statistics. The number of Russian speakers has been decreasing and is decreasing. Most of them are of the same origin as those with the grey passports, they just decided to become Russian citizens and the ones with grey passports didn’t. They are all Soviet Union citizens, which means that they are quite old so the number is decreasing. I don't think we have very precise up to date statistics, but it won't change the big picture. The number of Russian citizens and those with grey passport is decreasing and the reason is that they die. The second reason, is that they become Estonian citizens and the third reason is that they become citizens of another state.

I: Does the state require proof when someone renounces another citizenship?

R: it is in two steps. To avoid that person becomes stateless. First a person has to provide a letter of confirmation that he or she has started renouncing its current citizenship. You can get a letter confirmation from an embassy. Then we grant the person citizenship, but the decision will come into force, when the person provides another letter confirming that their citizenship has been renounced. And from the next day, he or she is considered Estonian citizen by the police and border guard. We have had this practice for definitely more than 10 years, maybe more like 15 years. It definitely works, because people won't become stateless to decide whether to keep its current citizenship and to reside with a residence permit. Our policy is more like facilitating Estonian citizenship, not pushing it onto people.

I: How has language affected Estonian integration policy?

R: Our state language is Estonian. So everyone who wants to become an Estonian citizen has to learn Estonian language to at least B1. Estonian citizens, most state officials, all state officials, have C1 language requirements. Of course it is understandable that people might use their other languages, Russian and English, and if possible, yes, we won’t' provide offical documents, but for example, in residence permit cases, we provide a small brief, summary, either in Russian or English or in both. So that people would understand basically what is about, then he or she if they don't know Estonian, they can ask for some interpretation from that. It is quite natural, that if you have different mother tongues, it is up to the state of course, if possible, use other languages as well. It is not that people can't or shouldn't communicate in other languages, but they have to be able, if they are providing services, they have to be able to provide the service in Estonian. In how many cases that it is needed, is another thing. In Tallinn of course, most of the time, I would say in Narva, to keep the state present there, so from the historical point of view, definitely there are not so many Estonian speaking people there.

I: There appears to be a global trend of an increasing tolerance towards dual citizenship, but not here in Estonia. Do you see this changing or is it against the logic of the state?

R: Basically it is a highly political issue. It is not a policy issue. From the policy side I would say, don't put people into clusters that you allow for one group and not allow for another group. We always have a legitimate reason to treat people differently. It is a highly political issue. I think it was the Reform Party again and again submitted the draft to legalise dual citizenship to people who have acquired Estonian citizenship by birth, but it was not accepted by the parliament. The current coalition stated black-and-white that they won't allow any dual citizenship. Of course the situation will be the same, because no one can be deprived of citizenship acquired by birth. If the coalition would have been different, most probably the political view would have been different. So the debate goes on and on. More and more people acquire at least two citizenships by birth already. In a globalised world its a fact. But as everything else the same in Estonia, only the political rights, from the internal security policy, of course we see threats from dual citizenship, especially Estonian/Russian citizenship. Still it is up to the politicians to decide. When the political decision has been made, then it is up to the government to find compensative measures.

I: How has EU membership affected Estonian citizenship policy?

R: When Estonia became an EU member, then there was an increase in applications to become an Estonian citizen. It lasted for two years, and there was a decline between 2006 and 2008, because then Russia stated that people with grey passports can have visa-free travel to Russia. It immediately worked. Of course what we say also, that Estonian citizenship policy has been natural accelerator. For people who really wanted to become Estonian citizens and wanted to participate more actively in the community life, they became Estonian citizens. Before 2016 who were born in Estonia who had both parents with undetermined citizenship who resided here, at least for 5 years, the parents had to apply for it, so we flipped the procedure because there were no grounds to refuse citizenship to a child and we also thought that if we keep the possibility of the parents to interfere, because we very much believe the state doesn't make better decisions than parents do, so that Estonian citizenship shouldn't be, by all means forced on children, so we flipped the procedure and it worked. There are very few cases, if the parents were not doing very well with the taking care of the children, obviously we tried and the local government tried to push the parents, please apply for citizenship for a child. Some of them didn’t do that and the local government couldn't do it instead of the parents, so I think the system we have now is a very logical one and it works. The final say is that the parents will have. We currently have, exactly, 135 children who didn't qualify who are not considered citizens of any state. We will definitely find a solution for them as well. Most probably for this coalition. In some cases, another parent was a citizen of another state and the other one was stateless, so we couldn't define citizenship. Or the parents had not resided in Estonia for 5 years. As far as the political will is concerned, the political will is present when we drafted the legislation and was adopted by the parliament. But our previous minister of the interior, wrote to the parents, and the children if they were 14 or 15, also to the children, a personal letter informing them about how to become an Estonian citizen. Of course, when a parent applies for Estonian citizenship, he or she can automatically apply for the child as well. It is not the case, that the children didn't have the possibility to become Estonian citizens. But it would have been this way, that either together with the parent, or when they are 15 they can apply by themselves.

I: What is the biggest challenge facing your department?

R: From a citizenship perspective, citizenship policy has been stable, so we don't have any specific challenges. We just have to keep the policy side stable, we considered our task to make sure the politicians make decision that are based on adequate information, they understand the consequences good and bad, the different changes in politics and legislation will have. But the citizenship issue is so highly political, that is not really up to the ministry of the interior to make these. Our citizenship act needs the majority vote at the parliament. So 51 votes to change it anyway. So there has to be quite a high consensus in the parliament. Since there are very different political views, so citizenship policy has been stable I would stay. We have challenges in the immigration side.

I: I have heard in a previous interview that the Estonian state considers the Russian non-citizens in Estonia are refuges and therefore impacts the quota of refugees with regards to EU's migrant numbers. Is this correct?

R: It is not that they are considered. They are considered immigrant population. No they not considered regular immigrants which is true. They are second or third generation immigrants.

I: So even if they arrived prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union in Estonia, they are still considered immigrants?

R: Yes. Basically we can consider all people residing with a residence permit, immigrants. Because in 1991, those who had moved to Estonia within 50 years, they were considered non-Estonian citizens. So they were not Estonian citizens. They are foreign citizens, they reside in Estonia, whether they considered an immigrant population or not, from a legal point of view, it doesn't matter. Whether you are a citizen or a foreign citizen, it doesn't matter.

I: If we can return to the argument that an Estonian citizen might be considered as a security threat. What is the logic of this argument?

R: It is logical that a citizen is loyal to the state of citizenship and it is logical that a person shares the ideology of the state of citizenship and says that yes, the internal policy is ok, the foreign policy is ok. Yes, they share the mindset and rhetoric and ideology. If a person has two citizenships and the ideology of the states is conflicting the person cannot have two competing mindsets. Carrying out the rights and obligations of an Estonia citizenship, sharing the mindset and ideology of Estonia, but carrying out the rights and obligations of a Russian citizen, having another mindset, a person can only one mindset. It could be either, but we don't know that. Basically we say that a person's loyalty is undividable in case their ideology is conflicting. Then a person has to choose. It could happen easily that a person with dual citizenship, that they carry out the rights and obligations of an Estonian citizenship with the mindset of a Russian citizenship. It might, in certain cases, pose a threat to state security.