Accessioning Liberal Compliance? Baltic Elites and Ethnic Politics under New International Conditions

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1. Introduction

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 nationalism soared in the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Democracy and free elections were embraced as the main symbols of their regained independence and as an expression of shared basic human rights with Western democracies. However, in Estonia and Latvia the nationalists’ fear of the large Russian-speaking minority groups who had settled there mainly during the Soviet period soon challenged the ideal of inclusive democracy. The unique demographic situation highlighted the incompatibility of Western-style inclusive democracy with the exclusion by the indigenous population of major groups of permanent residents from the political process. Memories of the harsh experiences of the Soviet period led many indigenous citizens to equate universal political rights with providing the large Russian-speaking minority with the opportunity to challenge the political control of a narrow majority. Repatriation back to Russia was not successful and the main dilemma became how to include the minority, whom many regarded as former occupiers, without jeopardizing the newly born nation-state. From the mid 1990s the national elites responded to this quandary by ‘thick integration’ policies i.e. assimilation strategies. While at the same time opting for membership in Western organizations with traditions of ‘thin integration’ of minorities and requiring rather low thresholds for citizenship-status, the national elites came under pressure.

The main question here is how the Baltic elites accommodated international demands to extend political rights to the Russian-speaking minorities. First, I argue that an emerging ‘ethno-liberal’ type of democracy is a response to the integration dilemma that enables the national elite to safeguard the nation-state while at the same time providing for long-term assimilation of non-indigenous people. It is characterized by strict requirements for the acquisition of citizenship; however, those who pass the ‘naturalization’ test are accepted and considered trustworthy to hold the highest positions in the State. Second, I ask if we find empirical support for this type

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of democracy among the elite’s beliefs. A main test is to what extent combining exclusion and inclusion of minorities is reflected as a ‘dualism’ in the national elites’ attitudes. Third, I ask how amending the citizenship laws was connected to the EU and NATO enlargement processes where including minorities into the polity was a main condition for membership. Fourth, I relate the elites’ attitudes to their international activities, and ask if international contacts and orientations may lead to a more inclusive type of democracy through socialization of liberal norms.

2. Studying the Elite Political Culture

Surveys of elite attitudes raise the question of which elites shall be included. The validity of the results will depend largely on the sampling of the respondents. However, in seeking to cope with the complexities of the real world, elite studies necessarily involve a considerable number of ad hoc choices when it comes to selection. In this study, pragmatic considerations of who it is possible to include in a survey have been combined with regard to which institutions are important in decision-making processes. The selection criterion has included leaders from institutions with the greatest political, administrative and economic importance.

In aggregate the respondents from different institutions constitute a representative sample of the national elites. Thus, the intention is to study here what Robert Putnam has called ‘the elite political culture’, applied on citizenship policies in the Baltic States. First and foremost, he argues elites are more important than others in the political process since they possess important positions. However, according to Robert Dahl’s polyarchy thesis, it is less probable that the elite constitute a unified and self-conscious group who are controlling political processes to their advantage. Referring to Lucian Pye and Sidney Verba, Putnam argues that “the development of a political system is conditioned by the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values that defines the situation in which political action takes place”, or less formally, that attitudes matter.

The ‘elite’s political culture’, as Putnam formulates it, may be defined as a set of orientations towards society that inform and guide political responses and policy decisions. Accordingly, political influence is a question of establishing more or less stable alliances among various elite groups where it is more than institutional and...