Estonia: Coming Out of the Messianic Period

Vahur Made

Introduction

For Estonia development cooperation and humanitarian assistance are new tools of foreign policy. Since 1998, and particularly during its first ten years in the EU, Estonia has utilized that policy instrument rather enthusiastically. The amount of aid, the number of recipient countries and the spheres and forms of assistance have constantly increased. For Estonia, giving foreign aid has been an element of its ethical and geopolitical reasoning, international visibility and gradually penetrating global outreach.

However, if one is to search for the historical sources of Estonian development cooperation the outcome would be rather disappointing. There is no colonial past. There are no glorious conquests. Estonia has never dominated any territory beyond its borders, regardless of whether it be overseas or in its geographical neighbourhood. That makes Estonia different from, say, Poland and Lithuania, which can address the historical heritage of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. The Commonwealth also included Belarus and Ukraine, which are currently major recipients of Polish and Lithuanian, as well as Estonian, development aid.

Estonia has strong historical ties to Scandinavia, Germany and Britain. For the Scandinavian countries giving development aid has been a visible political priority since 1945. The background for this has been the Christian mission in Africa and Asia which started in the 19th century. Scandinavian missionary organizations have longstanding traditions of cooperation with German and British organizations.
During the 19th century, and up until 1940, this Scandinavian German British cooperation triangle also involved individual missionaries from Estonia (Hiiemaa, 2000; Saard, 2005). Missionaries from Estonia went to Africa (to German and British colonies), the Middle East, India, China and South America. However, the 1940 Soviet invasion of Estonia brought a sharp end to this tradition. Throughout the Soviet period Estonia did not have a policy of development cooperation as such. Still, Estonians participated in various cooperation projects of the USSR that also involved its allies and client states: Cuba, Nicaragua, Angola, Algeria, Ethiopia and Vietnam, to mention just a few.

Also, different regions of the Soviet Union were among the destinations of Estonians who were deported in the context of the mass deportations during the Stalinist repressions. Estonians were cultivating arable land in Northern Kazakhstan, providing medical help in Turkmenistan, building the railway in Siberia and briefly participating in many projects in various parts of the USSR. It is today argued that the common past of the annexed Baltic states within the Soviet space provides a distinctive identity background for today’s Estonian development cooperation with many countries of the former Soviet Union – the countries of the EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Central Asia.

After the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 Scandinavian civil society organizations first started to put forward the idea that Estonia had to become a donor of development aid. But it was not until 1998 that, due to the process of EU accession, Estonia officially launched its aid policy (Andrespok & Kasekamp, 2012, p. 2). The question of whether Estonia could become a donor on its own initiative, without the need to launch its development cooperation as an EU membership requirement, is therefore perhaps irrelevant. However, given Estonia’s general desire to be a part of the Western world and to follow the values and ideals of democracy and liberalism, it is rather predictable that even without EU membership Estonia would have established an aid-giving policy (Kudzko, 2014, p. 45).

Estonian public opinion addresses development cooperation rather positively. Public opinion polls carried out in 2005 and 2008 indicate that more than 80 per cent of Estonians consider development cooperation very important or important (VŠliministeerium, 2014e). This can be explained by different factors.

First, Estonians identify themselves with the West, and with liberal but also messianic values. The Estonian aid ethic includes both the elements of the Kiplingian white man’s burden and the feeling that during its transition and state-building in the 1990s Estonia received