

# ALIENATED NEIGHBORS

## THE INTEGRATION OF THE RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MINORITY IN LATVIA

*Ivars Ijabs*

The last 22 years after the restoration of independence of the Republic of Latvia have been a period of almost incessant change and reform. After 50 years of Soviet occupation the country has become a democratic, European state, a member of the European Union and NATO, a country where human rights and rights of minorities are protected and respected. However, the very swiftness and intensity of the change sometimes make it difficult to fully apprehend its particular extent, form and Economic changes affect the flows of migration; newly-established party democracy influences ethnic relations; the increasingly global media landscape influences the cultural self-perceptions of Latvians. One of the important spheres, where the changes have been fast and closely intertwined with other factors, is minority policy and the social integration.

Without any doubt, the issue of social integration has been one of the most salient questions in Latvian politics and in public life in general. It concerns mainly (although not exclusively) the relationships between the Latvian majority and the Russian-speaking minority. Although all European countries have their minorities and all new EU member states have introduced their minority policies after the end of communism, the Latvian situation is in several ways particular. Firstly, it concerns the size and origin of the Russian-speaking minority. During the Soviet era, the ethnic composition of Latvia changed drastically: ethnic Latvians, who composed about three quarters of the population in 1939, by 1989 made up only a scarce



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majority (52 per cent) of the population (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in many cities, including the capital Riga, ethnic Latvians had become a minority in absolute terms.<sup>2</sup> This change was caused by the massive immigration into Latvia of people from other Soviet republics, mainly of previously rural Russians, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians, who migrated to economically more developed regions of the Soviet empire. After the restoration of independence, most of them decided to stay in Latvia, thus becoming a part of society and politics in the newly re-established state.

Table 1  
**Total population and ethnic breakdown 1935-2011,  
in thousands**

	1935	1959	1970	1979	1989	2000	2009	2011
Total	1,950.40	2,093.50	2,364.10	2,502.80	2,666.60	2,375.30	2,261.30	2,070.30
<b>thereunder (shares in per cent)</b>								
Latvians	75.40	62.00	56.80	53.70	52.00	57.70	59.30	62.10
Russians	10.60	26.60	29.80	32.80	34.00	29.60	27.80	26.90
Byelorussians	1.40	2.90	4.00	4.50	4.50	4.10	3.60	3.30
Ukrainians	0.09	1.40	2.30	2.70	3.50	2.70	2.50	2.20
Poles	2.50	2.90	2.70	2.50	2.30	2.50	2.40	2.10
Lithuanians	1.20	1.50	1.70	1.50	1.30	1.40	1.30	1.20

Source: LR, n. 1.

Secondly, what also makes the Latvian situation specific in the European context, is its relations with the Russian Federation, which has an expressed interest in preserving its influence among the diaspora. Due to the historically problematic nature of relations between Latvia and Russia,

1 | "Centrālās statistikas pārvaldes datu bāzes", Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (Centrālā statistikas pārvalde, LR), <http://data.csb.gov.lv> (accessed 10 Jun 2013); Juris Rozenvalds, "The Soviet Heritage and the Integration Policy Development since the Restoration of Independence", in: Nils Muižnieks (ed.), *How Integrated is Latvian Society? An Audit of Achievements, Failures and Challenges*, University of Latvia Press, Rīga, 2010, 34.

2 | See Romuald Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, 1940-1990*, Hurst & Hannum, London, 1993.

this dimension also plays a significant role in the fates of Latvian minority policy. On the other hand, also other international actors, such as the EU, NATO, OSCE, Council of Europe, and others, have exercised considerable influence on Latvian minority policies, especially during the period preceding the accession to the EU and NATO in 2004.

Like many post-communist countries in Europe, the Latvian state emphasises its legal and political continuity with the independence of the inter-war period. Moreover, Latvia is the only country in the region that after regaining independence in 1991 reinstated its interwar constitution (*Satversme*) of 1922, which still serves as an important element of Latvian identity.<sup>3</sup> The thesis of state continuity has implications for the minorities' policy. Importantly, it affects the status of the Soviet-era immigrants, who came here during the period, when Latvia was unlawfully annexed by the Soviet Union. All these aspects must be taken into account when analysing Latvian minority policies and the future challenges to the integration of the Russian-speaking minority.

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## **POLICIES AND LEGISLATION**

As many different factors have made their impact on Latvian policies of social integration, it is hardly possible to speak of one, consistent integration policy. What can be observed instead is a combination of ideologically driven measures, situative decisions caused by the immediate political situation in the country, and willingness to adopt to external pressures. As a result, in Latvian policy of social integration there might be several trends at once which are inconsistent and sometimes even contradictory. E.g., the citizenship policy has been gradually liberalised during the whole period; the state language legislation, on the contrary, was tightened and has become more conservative. For this reason it is necessary to examine major policy spheres separately, addressing citizenship, language, and education spheres individually.

3 | Ineta Ziemele, *State continuity and nationality: the Baltic States and Russia. Past, present and future as defined by international law*, Martinus Nijhoff, Leiden/Boston, 2011.

Citizenship policy has been one of the most hotly debated issues in Latvian integration policy, which has gained wide international resonance. When the Latvian preliminary parliament (Augstākā Padome) restored the status of Latvian citizenship on 15 October 1991, according to the doctrine of the state continuity it was given only to the citizens of the inter-war Republic of Latvia and their direct descendants. Around 750,000 Soviet-era immigrants were left without any comprehensible legal status. Although politicians promised to soon introduce a naturalisation procedure for them, this promise was left unfulfilled for at least four years. Moreover, the situation was complicated by the Russian army, who postponed its withdrawal from Latvia. Many Russian-speakers, who sought to legalise their residence in Latvia by reference to marriage or family reasons, were denied citizenship because of their possible linkage to the Russian armed forces. In 1994, the Latvian parliament finally adopted the Citizenship Law, to a great extent because of the pressure from the Council of Europe. This law provided for a procedure of naturalisation according to a strict timetable for different age groups (so-called “windows of naturalisation”), whereby younger people could get their citizenship earlier. Not much later, in 1995, a special law on the status of non-citizens was adopted, stating that the Soviet era immigrants without Latvian or any other citizenship enjoy in Latvia all civil and socio-economic rights but cannot vote and work in a number of public sector jobs, such as civil servants, notaries, and others. Latvian non-citizens have internationally recognised travel documents, and enjoy the consular protection of the Republic of Latvia abroad.<sup>4</sup>

Since the naturalisation, which began in 1996, was rather unpopular among the corresponding groups and the international pressure to liberalise the naturalisation process grew, the government decided to abolish the windows of naturalisation altogether in 1998. The initiative was also confirmed by a popular referendum. At this point Latvian naturalisation policy became very much like most European citizenship policies, however, without giving any privileges

4 | Nils Muižnieks, “Government Policy Towards the Russians”, in: idem (ed.), *Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions*, University of Latvia Press, Rīga, 2006.

to non-citizens *vis-a-vis* other foreigners. Although often born and having spent all their lives in Latvia, they have to pass tests on Latvian language, history, and the political system. However, since 1998, the children of non-citizens were given a right to acquire citizenship by registration. In 2013, Latvian parliament liberalised the legislation further, abolishing the requirement, which demanded the consent of both parents in order to register the child as a citizen of Latvia. Still, the children of non-citizens do not acquire automatic citizenship, which means that, up to this day, the Republic of Latvia is still producing new non-citizens. There remain some 320,000 non-citizens in Latvia, which make up approximately 16 per cent of the total population.

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Looking back to the development of citizenship policy during the twenty-odd years of Latvian independence, it can hardly be called a success story. On the one hand, the initial decision to limit the scope of citizenry was fully justified from a legal point of view. It had also a significant political dimension. The automatic provision of Latvian citizenship to the large community of the former Soviet immigrants, who at that point in time had very little relation to the state of Latvia, to the Latvian language and culture, was justifiably seen as a source of potential instability. There were legitimate fears on the part of Latvian politicians that the aim was to “achieve by democratic means the same result achieved in 1940 by Soviet tanks”, as some Latvians say. However, over time, many mistakes were committed with the introduction of the naturalisation policy that initially was excessively restrictive – and belated. It took seven years for Latvia to introduce a more or less liberal naturalisation policy. This prolonged period also alienated many non-citizens from the Latvian state institutions, and remains a cause of poor naturalisation rates.<sup>5</sup>

Although citizenship is the most acute legal and political issue in the integration of Latvian society, the language question has much more social and cultural relevance. It is also much less exposed to political engineering. On the one hand, the Latvian language has always been an important

5 | See also Ilze Brands-Kehris, “Citizenship, Participation and Representation”, in: Muižnieks (ed.), n. 1, 93-124.

marker of the Latvian identity and enjoys strong support from the Latvian state. Russian, on the other hand, is one of the mega-languages of the world, which, after the collapse of communism, turned from the imperial language into a minority language in the independent Latvian state. During the Soviet era, relations between Russian and Latvian languages can be described as “asymmetric bilingualism”: Latvians needed to be proficient in both languages; Russian-speaking immigrants, on the contrary, had very little motivation or pressure to learn Latvian and in most cases remained monolingual. This situation was also supported by the increasing role of Russian in public communication during the Soviet era.

For these reasons, claims about the rights of Latvian language were among the main issues of the pro-democratic movement Popular Front of Latvia in the late 1980s. As soon as 1989, the Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR adopted the Law of Languages, which made Latvian the sole state language in Latvia, retaining, however, Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication. After the restoration of de facto independence in 1991, knowledge of Latvian was made mandatory for most posts in government and also in the private sector. At the same time, state-financed university education in Russian was abolished. Also, the Latvian state, in cooperation with the United Nations Development programme, introduced free Latvian language teaching and a special state agency for this purpose. It was intended mainly for those Russian-speakers, whose insufficient knowledge of the state language threatened them with loss of employment in public-sector jobs – teachers, doctors, policemen etc.<sup>6</sup>

The main long-term purpose of these policies was to transfer the burden of bilingualism from Latvians to Russian-speakers, reducing the role of the Russian language in the public sphere. However, there was significant disagreement on the particular measures to be taken in order to achieve this aim. In the late 1990s, Latvian politicians decided to adopt a new Language Law, more suitable for the long-term perspective. Since at that time Latvia was

6 | Angelita Kamenska, *The State Language in Latvia: Achievements, Problems and Prospects*, Latvian Center for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, Rīga, 1995.

already engaged in consultations about the country's possible accession to the EU and NATO, the new language legislation attracted a lot of international attention – especially, from the EU, OSCE, and the Council of Europe. A radically nationalist version of the law was adopted in 1999, which also provided for strict language regulations in the private sector as well. Since such provisions contradicted internationally recognised norms and minority rights, the newly-elected State President, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, did not promulgate the law and sent it back to Saeima for reconsideration. Finally, due to the involvement of the President and international organisations, a revised version of the law was adopted, which limited the interference of authorities in the private sector. At the same time, it strictly required the use of Latvian in most spheres of public life, and all languages except Latvian, Lettgallian (a regional dialect of Latvian) and Livian (a small Finno-Ugric minority of 150 speakers) were recognised as foreign languages – including Russian, which is the

mother tongue of a considerable proportion of the population of Latvia. Since then, this legislation continues to serve as the basis of the language policy and has constantly provoked repercussions both among politicians

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and in the broader public. In 2011, the Russian-speaking extremist party Par Dzimto Valodu (For the Native Language), initiated the referendum on changes in the Latvian constitution, making Russian the second state language. This initiative had broad support also among mainstream Russian politicians, and, although the initiative failed, more than 270 thousand Latvian citizens voted in favor of it.

The language question also partly overlaps with the question of education and reforms in this sector. Latvia inherited a segregated school system, divided on the linguistic basis that was established during the Soviet era and was divided on the basis of language. During the Soviet period there were Latvian-language and Russian-language schools, both at elementary and secondary levels. After the restoration of independence, this divided system was retained, at the same time introducing state-financed schools for other minorities (Jews, Poles, Lithuanians, and others) that did not exist during the earlier period. The system of bilingual schools with two working languages was also

introduced, still popular, especially in the rural regions. In higher education, state universities were not allowed to teach in Russian. Private universities were allowed to open Russian-language programs still functioning in Latvia.

The most hotly debated issue in the area of education until now has been the regulation of the use of the Latvian language in the Russian-language schools. The main reason was the necessity to increase proficiency in the Latvian language in order to integrate the younger generation into Latvian society and the labor market. As of 1995, all Russian-language primary and secondary schools were required to teach several subjects in Latvian. In 1998, however, a new Law of Education was adopted, requiring

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all Russian-language secondary schools to teach primarily in Latvian, beginning in 2004. As this date approached increasing dissatisfaction was expressed by the Russian-speaking community, supported also by Russian politicians in the parliament. In 2003 and 2004 Latvia saw the most extensive mass protests since the restoration of independence, including demonstrations, hunger strikes, and acts of civil disobedience. Mainly because of these protests and the international pressure, the Ministry of Education decided to mitigate the law, so that now 60 per cent of the instruction in secondary schools must be given in the Latvian language. Although protests subsided thereafter, there is very little information about the extent to which this norm is enforced.

After the events of 2003 and 2004, the language issue in the educational system maintained its political relevance. Many Latvian conservative politicians continue to insist that the segregated school system does not promote social integration in any way. At the same time, all simple solutions to this problem, e.g. the full-scale Latvianising of Russian-language schools, are virtually unthinkable for both domestic and international reasons. The year 2010 saw a referendum initiative of the Latvian nationalist party *Visu Latvijai!* (All for Latvia!) to abolish the state-financed Russian-language school system altogether. Although this initiative eventually failed, the changes in the language balance in the Latvian educational system are often used in the political game, and will be in future.



Looking back on the last 22 years of Latvian independence, it can be seen that the discussion about minority integration has centred mainly upon questions of citizenship, language, and education. Taking into account the specific historical and socio-demographic situation, the main challenges have been to harmonise the legal continuity of the Latvian state and its citizenship with a viable naturalisation policy, to strengthen the role of the Latvian language, and, while retaining education in minority languages, to promote the integration of and career opportunities for young Russian-speakers in Latvian society. However, these tasks until now have been solved only in part, and questions of citizenship and language will most probably

dominate the Latvian integration debate in the future as well. In 2005, when Latvia ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe, it was done with significant reservations concerning language and citizenship.

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First, the meaning of the term "minorities" was limited and referred only to the citizens, not to all permanent residents of Latvia. Second, the use of minority languages in communication with the administrative authorities (Article 10, Clause 2) and in traditional local names, street names as well as other topographical indications intended for the public (Article 11, Clause 3) was made dependent on Latvian national legislation, which is very much restrictive.<sup>7</sup>

## SUCCESSSES AND FAILURES

A look at the successes and failures of the Latvian integration policies reveals a mixed record. Although Latvians themselves are often excessively critical about the results of their policies, there are also some significant achievements. The first concerns the knowledge of Latvian language among Russian speakers. If, in 1996, 22 per cent of non-Latvians did not know the Latvian language at all, only seven per cent reported this in 2008. The same year, 57 per cent of non-Latvians reported good Latvian language skills (36 per cent in 1996). The most significant changes

7 | See Council of Europe, "List of declarations made with respect to treaty No. 157", <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ListeDeclarations.asp?CL=ENG&NT=157&VL=1> (accessed 15 May 2013).

have taken place among the younger generation. Among people aged 15-34, 73 per cent report good Latvian language skills.<sup>8</sup> From this particular perspective, education reforms have succeeded in promoting the knowledge of Latvian. Not only the knowledge, but also the usage of Latvian has increased. The self-sufficiency of the Russian language, which was characteristic for Latvia in the early 1990s, has significantly decreased. If in 1996 the majority of non-Latvians spoke exclusively Russian at work, in 2008 only 28 per cent did so. The use of the state language has especially increased in areas regulated by the legislation – for instance, in the workplace or, when dealing with the authorities. In informal communication, however, the Russian language still dominates among non-Latvians. Among the factors strengthening the position of Latvian is also the decreasing knowledge of Russian among ethnic Latvians.

However, the positive role of linguistic competence should not be overstated. Although knowledge of the Latvian language steadily improves among non-Latvians, this does not mean that both largest ethnic groups are united as regards the significance of that language in integration processes. In 2010, when asked whether all residents of Latvia must know the Latvian language, 93.1 per cent of ethnic Latvians and 72.2 per cent of ethnic Russians responded positively. However, when asked whether Latvian language and culture should be the unifying factor for all citizens of Latvia, 89.1 of Latvians and only 46 per cent of Russians responded positively.<sup>9</sup> This difference

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shows that the concentration on language, typical for the most Latvian politicians, does not guarantee successful integration. Although most Russian-speakers agree that the Latvian language is important, they do not accept it as the legitimate basis of social integration. Many of them see state language regulation as artificial, and activities of the State Language inspection – which monitors the use of the Latvian language also in private enterprises of “legitimate public interest” – as repressive and obsolete.

8 | Brigita Zepa et al., *Language*, Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, Rīga, 2008.

9 | Brigita Zepa and Evija Kļave (eds.), *Human Development Report, Latvia, 2010/2011. National Identity, Mobility, Capability*, LU SPPI, Rīga, 2011, 25.

Also the political context does not increase the prestige of Latvian language and the willingness of Russian-speakers to use it outside of those institutional settings where it is required under the law. Especially, when, after the 2012 referendum on Russian as the second state language, the Latvian political elite increasingly began emphasising the privileged role of Latvian language and culture in Latvia.

Similarly ambiguous results have been achieved in the field of citizenship and naturalisation. The number of non-citizens has decreased by more than twice: in 1995, there were some 740,000 non-citizens, in 2012 – less than 320,000. More than 130,000 people have acquired Latvian citizenship by naturalisation.<sup>10</sup> The naturalisation began in 1995, and the peak was reached in 2005 when 19,169 people acquired Latvian citizenship by naturalisation. After that, however, naturalisation has virtually come to a halt: in 2012, only 2,213 people acquired citizenship in this manner. Of course, many non-citizens do not naturalise due to purely practical reasons. They do not need Latvian citizenship in their everyday life, and Latvian non-citizens can travel to the Russian Federation and other CIS countries without a visa. A significant proportion of non-citizens (27 per cent) are sceptical about their capacity to pass the naturalisation exams (many of them are older than 60 years of age). Nevertheless, there are also significant ideological reasons for people not acquiring Latvian citizenship. Although the majority of non-citizens express the willingness to acquire Latvian citizenship, a significant proportion of non-citizens (24 per cent) still believe they should become citizens automatically, without naturalisation. Another 17 per cent are waiting for the easing of naturalisation requirements. Only four per cent of non-citizens responded stating they do not want to have Latvian citizenship.<sup>11</sup>

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10 | "Statistika: Naturalizācija", Pilsonības un migrācijas lietu pārvalde (PMLP), <http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/statistika/Naturalizacija.html> (accessed 15 May 2013).

11 | „Pilsonības un migrācijas lietu pārvalde, Nepilsoņu viedoklis par Latvijas pilsonības iegūšanu”, [http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/par\\_pmlp/publikacijas/Nepilsonu\\_attieksme\\_2011.pdf](http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/par_pmlp/publikacijas/Nepilsonu_attieksme_2011.pdf) [17.06.2013].

One of the important factors that influence the course of naturalisation long-term is party politics. Unlike Estonia, a country which also has a large Russian-speaking minority and a considerable amount of non-citizens, Latvia has an ethnically divided party spectrum. There is a clear division between "Russian" and "Latvian" parties in the parliament, and both sides tend to address only "their" ethnic part of the electorate. The "Russian" parties have never been included in a ruling coalition, and, consequently, have

been kept out of the executive power. For this reason they constantly use the issues of language and citizenship to criticise the government, presenting the language and naturalisation policies of the state as illegitimate and "assimilating" on behalf of ethnic

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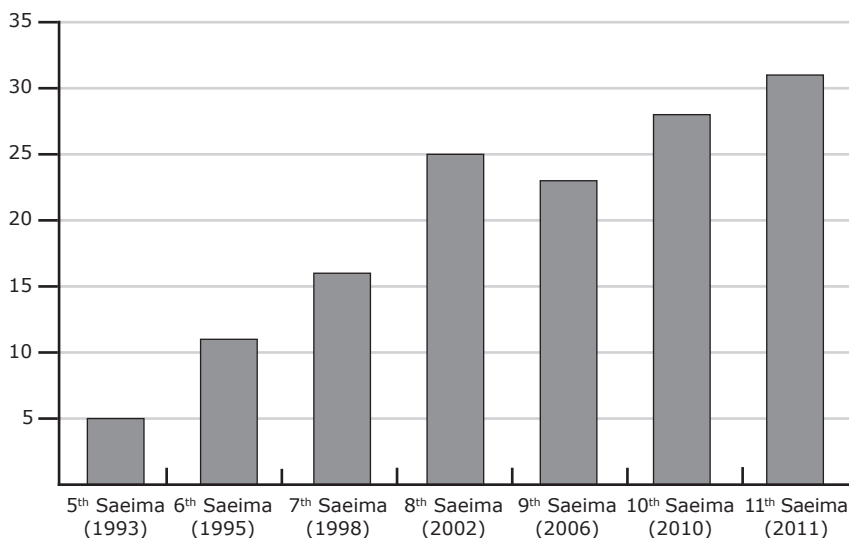
Latvian politicians. Needless to say that this approach of the "Russian" parties does not facilitate naturalisation. On the contrary, it tends to promote the perception of current language and naturalisation policies as only temporary injustices, which will be eliminated in the nearest future, when the "Russian" politicians come into power. For this reason many non-citizens do not acquire Latvian citizenship, waiting for the seemingly possible introduction of automatic citizenship, or for significant simplifications of naturalisation procedures in the nearest future. Since neither of these options are in fact realistic, party politics is a significant obstacle to further naturalisation of non-citizens.

Ethnic division in Latvian politics has a long history. Its roots go back to the period of the "singing revolution" of 1988-1991, when a group of Russian-speaking activists (the so-called Interfront) openly opposed the Popular Front of Latvia and the restoration of independence in general. When the democratic regime was reinstated, some of these people remained active in politics, attracting to themselves also those Russian-speakers and some Latvians who disagreed with the ethno-political line of the Latvian government. Their main ideological topics were: first, the language issue, whereby they bitterly opposed the Latvianisation of public life; second, the citizenship issue, where they advocated the so-called zero-option and citizenship for all Soviet-era immigrants; and, third, the geopolitical orientation of the country, defending close relations with

the Russian Federation and opposing the integration of the country in NATO. Until around 2000, the “Russian” parties did not play a significant role in Latvian politics. But, when naturalisation began and ever-increasing numbers of Russian-speakers acquired citizenship and consequently the right to vote, the significance of the so-called “Russian parties” increased (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1

**Number of seats of Russian parties in Saeima 1993-2012  
(out of 100 seats altogether)**



Source: CVK<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, starting from 2002, we observe a significant consolidation of the Russian-speaking electorate. In the 1990s, there were three relatively significant “Russian” parties, who competed for votes – the moderate Tautas Saskaņas partija (National Harmony Party) and two more radical ones – Latvijas Sociālistiskā partija (Socialist Party of Latvia), led by the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Soviet Latvia, Alfrēds Rubiks, and the party Līdztiesība (Equal Rights) of the former Interfront activist

12 | “Saeima Elections”, Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija (Central Electoral Committee, CVK), <http://web.cvk.lv/pub/public/28757.html> (accessed 11 May 2013). Number of seats of parties Līdztiesība, Latvijas Sociālistiskā Partija, Tautas Saskaņas partija, Saskaņas centrs, and Par cilvēktiesībām vienotā Latvijā are summed.

Tatjana Ždanoka. In 2013, there is only one relevant Russian party represented in Latvian Saeima – the Harmony Centre, represented with 31 seats out of a total of 100.

The consolidation of the Russian-speaking electorate and the increase of its electoral weight has a significant impact on the process of social integration and on Latvian politics in general. To date, Russian parties have been kept out of the ruling coalitions, and Russian-speakers have never been represented in any government. This stigmatisation does not help the integration in any way. Russian-speakers do not see themselves represented in the executive and often see politics as an exclusive business of ethnic Latvians. This situation alienates Russian-speakers from the state and lends legitimacy to the rhetoric about the ostensibly “ethnocratic” regime in Latvia. However, it would be a mistake to reduce the exclusion of Russian parties to the willingness of Latvian politicians to monopolise the political landscape for themselves. Although this factor undoubtedly plays a role, the ideological profile of the Russian parties is of no less importance. Some liberal Latvian parties have attempted to integrate the Russian parties in formation of governments; these attempts have failed because of the difficulties to find common ground on several important issues.



Nils Ušakovs (r.), talking to Latvian Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis: Ušakovs' Harmony Centre is the only relevant Russian party represented in the Latvian Saeima. | Source: Latvian state chancellery (Valsts kanceleja) (CC BY-NC-ND).

First, there is the question of state continuity and its consequences for the citizenship policy. When speaking of the Soviet invasion in 1940, most Russian politicians avoid using the term “occupation”, since the recognition of occupation on their behalf would signal support to the existence of non-citizens. Second, language rights and the status of the Russian language are still important to most Russian politicians, although the salience of this question has decreased during the last ten years. Thirdly, most politicians of the “Russian” parties have geopolitical views that considerably differ from those of most Latvian politicians. In general, friendly relations with the Russian Federation seem to be more important to most Russian parties and politicians than deep integration in Western structures, the European Union, and, especially, NATO. For this reason, Harmony Centre does not support the participation of Latvian soldiers in missions in Iraq and Afghanistan; unlike most Latvian politicians, the party did not condemn the Russian invasion in Georgia in 2008, and has a partnership agreement with Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party.

In conjunction with the growing electoral weight of Harmony Centre, these ideological differences provide plenty of grounds for Latvian right-wing radicals to denounce the Russian party as subversive and “disloyal” to the Latvian state. By creating the atmosphere of constant threat and image of Russian-speakers as the “fifth column”, they successfully exploit fears and precautions of the Latvian majority. Since in the Latvian parties the ethnopolitical agenda is “owned” by the radicals (like the Nationalist Alliance All for Latvia!/TB/LNNK), most Latvian voters are against the participation of a Russian-speaking party in the ruling coalition. If the situation will last, it will probably lead to further isolation and radicalisation on both sides, whereby the party relations may also start to influence the interethnic relations in the broader public.

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However, this relation cannot be understood without taking into account the “triadic” relationship, described by Rogers Brubaker.<sup>13</sup> The relation between the state and minority

13 | See Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

is often influenced by the impact of the kin-state of that minority, in our case, by the impact of the Russian Federation. Russia has often acted as a self-professed protector of the Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states, and is still willing to use them as an instrument of political influence in these states. Russia often criticises Latvia in different international foras, such as the Council of Europe. It also actively promotes its own version of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, which in many ways contradicts the historical master-narrative of the Baltic elites. The Russian governmental program of the so-called compatriots (*Sootechestvenniki*) provides various forms of assistance to Russian NGOs in Latvia, promotes the use of Russian language for teaching, engages in different cultural programmes etc.<sup>14</sup> Taking into account the historically problematic nature of Latvian-Russian relations, the growing influence of the Russian soft power on Russian-speakers in Latvia are met

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with precaution by most Latvians. Of course, not all aspects of Russian influence can be traced back to the deliberate actions of the Kremlin. First of all, many Russian-speakers feel themselves alienated from the Latvian state. The Russian Federation and its media provide them with a possible source of positive identification, especially when the Russian regime's self-presentation grows more assertive, pompous, and anti-Western.<sup>15</sup> It concerns the use of historical dates and symbols, mostly associated with the "glorious past" of the Soviet Union. Symbols and narratives of the Soviet era, manipulated by the Russian media, provide an alternative identity to those Russian-speakers, whose role in Latvian society has been defined only negatively, as non-citizens or non-Latvians.

The most visible expression of this process is the annual celebration of Victory Day on 9 May.<sup>16</sup> This date and the Soviet involvement in World War II in general is increasingly used by the elites of Russia in order to increase their own

14 | Nils Muižnieks, "Russia's Policy Towards 'Compatriots' in Latvia", in: Muižnieks (ed.), n. 4, 119-130.

15 | Cf. Nils Muižnieks, *Manufacturing Enemy Images? Russian Media Portrayal of Latvia*, University of Latvia Press, Rīga, 2008.

16 | See Eva-Clarita Onken, "The Baltic States and Moscow's 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2007, 59:1, 23-46.



legitimacy. Russian media skilfully manipulate nostalgic sentiments after the Soviet era, mixed with the willingness to restore the geopolitical grandeur of contemporary Russia. Most Russian-speakers in Latvia are sympathetic to this approach, whereby the identification with Russia and its glorious Soviet past provides a symbolic remedy to all real or imagined injustices suffered by the Russian-speakers in independent Latvia. For this reason the celebration of 9 May attracts more Russian-speaking people every year, and Russian-speaking political parties take an active part in it as well. Most Latvians, who, according to their pro-Western political orientation, celebrate the end of World War II on the previous day, 8 May, are increasingly suspicious of this gathering of vast numbers of Russian-speaking people. This especially concerns Riga, where the gathering takes place at the large Soviet-era monument not far from the city centre. This event, where red flags are waved and the Soviet “liberators” are celebrated, helps radical Latvian organisations demonise the Russian-speaking community masked Soviet revanchists, disloyal to the Latvian state. So, on both sides, political parties use the celebration in order to increase the support among their corresponding ethnic group, and to reinforce the ethnic divide.



Victory Day on 9 May: many Russian-speaking Latvians gather at the large Soviet-era memorial close to the centre of Riga to celebrate and commemorate. | Source: Pablo Andrés Rivero, flickr (CC BY-NC-ND).

The celebration of 9 May clearly demonstrates the complex nature of interethnic relations in Latvia. On the one hand, many Russian-speakers feel themselves alienated from the Latvian state. The symbolic influence of the Rus-

**Political parties, instead of bridging the gap and providing common ground for a dialogue between both ethnic communities, mainly talk to the members of their own ethnic groups, thus helping to consolidate them along ethnic lines.**

sian Federation, by emphasising the "great" Soviet legacy, provides them with an attractive alternative for self-identification. Most Latvians, who are cautious about Russia and emphatically negative about the Soviet experience, see these activities of their Russian-speaking neighbours as inherently subversive and threatening to the Latvian state and their own cultural identity. Political parties, instead of bridging the gap and providing common ground for a dialogue between both ethnic communities, mainly talk to the members of their own ethnic groups, thus helping to consolidate them along ethnic lines.

#### **OUTSIDE POLITICS: WORKPLACE AND POPULAR ATTITUDES**

Taking into account the ethnic factor in the public life and politics, one might inquire as to possible spill-overs into everyday relations between Latvians and Russian-speakers, and whether interethnic relations in Latvia overlap with the socioeconomic divisions. The process of social integration always takes place in a complex social context, and other, non-cultural factors have an impact on the relations between the ethnic majority and minorities.

When talking about the socioeconomic integration of Russian-speakers in Latvia, despite some serious difficulties, the situation can be described as relatively good. Ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers share relatively similar educational achievements; also relatively similar levels of employment and average incomes. The main factor which negatively influences the participation and chances of Russian-speakers in the Latvian labor market is still the language. Although the knowledge of Latvian among Russian-speakers has improved significantly over the past 15 years, in some cases the lack of linguistic skills still have an effect on chances to get a well-paying job in Latvia.

According to the research of Mihails Hazans, an employment gap exists between of being Latvians and Russian-speakers. The data show that the ethnic ratio of unemployment on average has been around 1.5 during the last ten years. I.e., for a non-Latvian person the probability of being unemployed is one and a half times higher than for an ethnic Latvian. The presence of this difference is a bad thing in itself. However, the level of inequality in Latvia is rather low, say, compared to Estonia, where the ethnic ratio of unemployment has fluctuated between two and 2.4. A similar situation can be observed also in earnings. Russian-speaking workers are paid lower salaries (around nine to ten per cent on average); this especially concerns women and people with poor language skills. However, both lower employment levels and wages must be treated in the context of other factors. Firstly, there is the regional distribution of the Russian-speakers in Latvia. Many of them live in Latgale, which is one of the most economically underdeveloped regions in Latvia. Secondly, there is the occupational and sectorial segregation, whereby Russian-speakers and Latvians often tend to have different occupations and work in different sectors of the economy. Ethnic Latvians tend to work more in highly skilled non-manual occupations, Russian-speakers in elementary and skilled manual occupations. Latvians tend to dominate in non-market services, agriculture, forestry, and fishing; in industry and construction, as well as in market services there is a higher proportion of Russian-speakers. However, the differences are not great enough to speak of clear economic niches in Latvian society. Nevertheless, a certain ethnic division of labour can undoubtedly be observed.<sup>17</sup>

There are also other problems with the socioeconomic integration of minorities in Latvia. There is a clear ethnic imbalance in the participation of the minorities in public administration (less than 20 per cent, less than one half of their proportion in the overall population). State Language Proficiency requirements are often perceived as needlessly restrictive for certain professions; the idea that Russian speakers can actually improve their knowledge of Latvian, when working in a Latvian-speaking work environment,

17 | Mihails Hazans, "Ethnic Minorities in the Latvian Labor Market, 1997-2009: Outcomes, Integration Drivers and Barriers", in: Muižnieks (ed.), n. 1, 125-158.

has not been accepted by the authorities. There is some evidence also attesting to ethnic discrimination in hiring employees, but the levels of discrimination do not seem to be high. About 4.7 per cent of ethnic Latvian employees admitted that at their businesses Russian-speakers have low chances of being hired. There are considerably more problems with discrimination against Roma (24.6 per cent of ethnic Latvian respondents and 29.9 per cent of non-Latvians) and Jews (correspondingly 9.9 per cent and 6.3 per cent).

Table 2

**Attitudes and values of ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers in Latvia, yes answers/agreement in per cent**

	Latvians	Russians
Are you proud of being a resident of Latvia?	70.5	44.4
All residents of Latvia have to know the Latvian language.	93.1	73.2
Do you feel a sense of belonging to Latvia?	82.8	71.9
Do you feel a sense of belonging to Russia?	3.6	32.9
People of other ethnicities cannot belong to Latvia.	36.4	20.3
Those who wish to preserve their traditions and culture should not be allowed to become citizens of Latvia.	18.5	7.0
The existence of Latvian language, culture is endangered.	55.9	16.6
It was only thanks to help from other Soviet nations that Latvia achieved a high level of economics and culture.	21.7	58.3

Source: Zepa and Kļave, n. 9, 23-38.

When addressing the attitudes and values of ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers in Latvia, no important differences can be observed in the attitudes to work, family, and religion. In most of these areas, Latvians and Russian-speakers seem to be pretty similar. However, there are important differences in civic values and evaluation of 20<sup>th</sup> century history. Significant proportions of Russian-speakers feel themselves less attached to Latvia, more alienated from the state and its democratic institutions, and have considerably different views on the role of ethnic Latvian identity and culture in the integration of society. On the other hand, Russian-speakers seem to be slightly more

tolerant towards immigrants and people of other ethnic groups; they are more open to the processes of globalisation and integration.

## CONCLUSION

Social integration is a multi-directional process, where multiple factors are at work. In the case of Latvia, the process of integration of the large Russian-speaking community has been determined by several specific factors. It is the large size of the Russian-speaking community; the linguistic situation after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, as well as Latvian integration in the EU and other Western structures, that demanded a constant harmonisation of local integration policies with internationally acknowledged rules and standards. At the moment, the process of integration can be described only as partly successful, at best. Although Latvia has not had massive outbreaks of violence, like Estonia had in the case of the “Bronze soldier” protests of 2007, interethnic relations are far from excellent. This especially concerns political life, where the ethnic divide still plays a prominent role and blocks democratic development in many ways. It is inappropriate to place the blame for this at the feet of Russian-speakers alone. Also the excessively ethnocentric approach of the ethnic Latvian elite has contributed to the alienation of the Russian-speaking community from the Latvian state. However, this process cannot be fully understood without taking into account the partly intended, partly unintended influence of the Russian Federation, especially through its media assets. Willingness on the part of the Russian side to present Latvia as an ethnocratic regime with dubious democratic credentials has contributed to the ethnic confrontation on the political level. The political confrontation, both on the national and international levels, has contributed negatively to the process of social integration, which in many spheres of social life, such as language proficiency and labour market, has achieved considerable success.

**The political confrontation has contributed negatively to the process of social integration, which in many spheres of social life, such as language proficiency and labour market, has achieved considerable success.**

So, what lessons are there to be learned? First, like in many post-imperial contexts, the previous experiences have a deep impact on integration processes. The attitude

of the Latvian elite has been distinctly ethnocentric. It was characterised by real or imagined fears about the preservation of Latvian language and culture, without caring much about the interests and values of minorities. The Russian-speakers, who during the Soviet era represented the imperial “normalcy” of Russian language and culture, found it difficult to adapt to the new situation of a minority in a small, democratic state. Second, in ethnopolitical decision-making, there is a great need for dialogue between the majority and minorities, which cannot be compensated by purely administrative measures. The legitimate interest in preserving the cultural and linguistic identity of the state should not be regarded as an obstacle for involvement of minorities in formulation of corresponding policies. Third, with further economic development and European integration, it would be desirable to plan in advance the integration policy as regards future immigrants, while considering how the existing integration policies will be attuned to new situations. Until now, Latvia, like many other Central Eastern European countries, has been subjected to rather low immigration flows. Hence the excessive concentration on already existing problems of Russian-speakers might prevent policy-makers from developing a sustainable integration policy that is suited to meet future challenges.