



Utrecht University

FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Russian Latvians on Russo-Latvian Relations

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**Summary** Taking international press coverage of Latvia's 2018 parliamentary election as its starting point, this thesis delves into the geopolitical context and significance of the existence of a sizeable Russian minority in Latvia. Given the nature of the long-standing frozen conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, diasporic Russians are widely perceived to be a threat to territorial integrity, particularly in European-minded post-Soviet states like Latvia. Presenting the results of ten interviews with Russian-Latvian politicians and journalists, this thesis provides an insight into Russian Latvians' political thinking, ultimately concluding that reports framing their stances as being outright pro-Russia are wide of the mark. The interviews follow a literature review that serves to stake out a continuum of ideal-typical opinions held by Latvian state and Russian Federation officials about the position of Russian Latvians in Latvian society. Special attention is devoted to the role of the Harmony political party, which figures prominently in both Western and Russian assessments of the pro-Russianness of Latvian election results. Among the findings are the discovery of a new, post-nationalist identity in the making and the suggestion that ardent ethnic nationalism can be a self-defeating force in the larger geopolitical arena.

**Keywords** Russian Latvians; Russian diaspora; compatriot policy; minority rights; minority language.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The cover image, which shows both Latvia's seventeenth century Livonian (Liefant) claim to history and the 570 mile distance from Riga (left of centre) to Moscow (lower right corner), is a detail of "Tabula Russiæ," [Map of Russia] in *Toonneel des Aerdriicx, ofte Nieuwe Atlas, dat is Beschryving van alle Landen* [Theatre of the earth, or new atlas, that is, a description of all the countries] (Amsterdam: Wilhelm en Iohannem Blaeu, 1648), 17-18.

FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Yes, we can fight when fight we must;  
but we don't wish to breathe the dust  
of soldiers brave from ev'ry clime  
who give up life before their time.  
Ask of the women in our life –  
ask of our mothers, ask my wife,  
and you will never wonder more  
whether the Russians long for war.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fragment of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's 1961 poem and lyrics to the eponymous song, "Хотят ли Русские войны?" [Do the Russians long for war?], as translated by Leonard Lehrman in the *Hilltop Beacon* (Roslyn Heights, NY), 3 March 1966, 3.

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. The Silent Minority – Knowledge Gap	6
1.2. People and Their States – Academic Relevance	10
1.3. Hearing Russian Voices – Research Design	13
<b>2. Two Sides to the Story</b>	<b>18</b>
2.1. What Russians? – A Pragmatic Approach to Ethnicity	18
2.2. Constructing the Ideal-Typical Extremes	21
2.2.1. <i>Identity: Homo (Post-)Sovieticus?</i>	21
2.2.1.1. Confluent Histories, Colliding Identities	21
2.2.1.2. Multinationalism and Empire	25
2.2.1.3. The Nation-State Nuisance	29
2.2.2. <i>Accommodation: Same Culture, New Home</i>	32
2.2.2.1. From <i>Lingua Franca</i> to Foreign Language	32
2.2.2.2. Education between Integration and Segregation	33
2.2.2.3. Economic (Dis)parity	36
2.2.3. <i>Politics: “Red Lines”</i>	39
2.2.3.1. Russians in or of Latvia?	39
2.2.3.2. The Innocents Abroad	43
2.2.3.3. Ethnocratic Latvia?	50
2.3. Nine Topics of Contestation	56
<b>3. The Other Latvians</b>	<b>58</b>
3.1. Methodology	58
3.2. Results	59
3.2.1. <i>Identity: Transfiguration</i>	59
3.2.1.1. Holistic Views of History	59
3.2.1.2. The Post-Nationalist Identity Crisis	61
3.2.1.3. The Nation-State Enablers	62
3.2.2. <i>Accommodation: Participation</i>	64
3.2.2.1. Latvian-Speaking Russians	64
3.2.2.2. Education Degradation	66
3.2.2.3. The Non-Ethnic Economy	68
3.2.3. <i>Politics: Aspiration</i>	69
3.2.3.1. The Silent Protest	69
3.2.3.2. The People, Not the State	71
3.2.3.3. The Party of Compromise	73
3.3. Discussion	77
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>88</b>
A. List of Interview Topics	88
B. Informed Consent Form	89
C. Study Information Sheet	90

## 1. Introduction

“The Baltic state of Latvia . . . became the latest country whiplashed by rising populism with the announcement of election results that showed strong support for pro-Russia and anti-establishment parties.”<sup>3</sup> Thus reported the *New York Times* on Latvia’s 6 October 2018 parliamentary election. The article went on to suggest that “the results . . . could lead to a government that includes Harmony Center, a Moscow-friendly party that until this year had a cooperation agreement with Russia’s governing party, United Russia.”<sup>4</sup>

Populism, friendliness to Russia, even ties to the party of Vladimir Putin – all of these are serious allegations coming from a Western newspaper – and the *New York Times*’ angle proved to be anything but a one-of-a-kind affair. Various widely circulated European sources struck an equally distressful tone. Germany’s *Die Welt* wrote, “Pro-Russia party wins in parliamentary election in Latvia,”<sup>5</sup> French newspaper *Le Monde* presented an analysis titled “Pro-Russia party heads legislature, uncertainty surrounds future coalition,”<sup>6</sup> and British readers were treated to the following headline in the *Times*: “Pro-Russia party in driving seat after Latvian elections.”<sup>7</sup> Like the *New York Times*, both *Le Monde* and the *Times* of London highlighted the past existence of a cooperation agreement between Harmony and United

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Higgins, “Populist Wave Hits Latvia, Lifting Pro-Russia Party in Election,” *New York (NY) Times*, 7 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/world/europe/latvia-election-russia.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “Prorussische Partei gewinnt Parlamentswahl in Lettland,” *Die Welt* (Berlin), 7 October 2018, <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article181793134/Lettland-Prorussische-Partei-Harmonie-ist-staerkste-Kraft.html>.

<sup>6</sup> “Lettonie: le parti prorusse en tête des législatives, incertitudes sur la future coalition,” *Le Monde* (Paris), 8 October 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/10/08/lettonie-le-parti-prorusse-en-tete-des-legislatives-incertitudes-sur-la-future-coalition\\_5366084\\_3214.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/10/08/lettonie-le-parti-prorusse-en-tete-des-legislatives-incertitudes-sur-la-future-coalition_5366084_3214.html).

<sup>7</sup> Marc Bennetts, “Pro-Russia Party in Driving Seat after Latvian Elections,” *Times* (London), 8 October 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/pro-russia-party-in-driving-seat-after-latvian-elections-98mcxb9pv>.

Russia. None of the articles, however, explained that the direct reason for the agreement's November 2017 discontinuation had been Harmony's admittance to the Party of European Socialists – an event termed “a major policy shift” by Latvia's public broadcaster.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, the justification for the continued attribution of the pro-Russia label to the Harmony party runs deeper than the level of lapsed cooperation agreements. One *Bloomberg* analyst downplayed the significance of terminating the agreement in favour of teaming up with the Party of European Socialists, by reducing both events to an attempt by Harmony “to improve its image,”<sup>9</sup> going on to state that “fear of Kremlin meddling remains acute. About a quarter of the population identifies as ethnic Russian.”<sup>10</sup> This sequence of statements makes clear two assumptions that resonate throughout most of the post-election coverage of Latvia in international media. First of all, it appears that to these European and United States news outlets, being pro Russians equates to being pro Russia; the distinction between a people and a country deemed to be either too nuanced, or quite simply irrelevant. Second, if not by extension, the mere existence of a Russian minority is presented as an “acute” risk of opening the door to interference from the Russian Federation.

That risk assessment is not exclusive to journalists. At the occasion of a 2017 visit to Estonia intended to reassure the world of continued transatlantic solidarity, Vice President of the United States Mike Pence said that “no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the spectre of aggression from your unpredictable neighbour to the east.”<sup>11</sup> And President of the European Council Donald Tusk, speaking on the eve of Latvia's 2018 election at a conference

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<sup>8</sup> “Saskaņa joins Party of European Socialists,” *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 27 November 2017, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/saskana-joins-party-of-european-socialists.a258851>.

<sup>9</sup> Aaron Eglitis, “Populist Surge Eclipsed by New Faces in Latvia,” *Bloomberg* (New York, NY), 8 October 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-08/populist-surge-outshined-by-other-new-faces-in-latvian-election>. To his credit, Eglitis reported that the election's real shocker had been the number of novel, non-establishment parties that had managed to get elected to the Latvian parliament.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> “Mike Pence Reassures Baltic States Over Russia ‘Threat’,” *BBC News* (London), 31 July 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40779184>.

in his native Poland, expressed his concerns at Russian meddling even more explicitly. “Our problem is Russia, which is undermining whatever it can undermine in Europe,” a journalist quoted from the speech.<sup>12</sup> The item continued, “stating he is ‘anxious’ about the result of Latvia’s national election, Tusk said it could ‘be a turning point for that region – a moment which was planned in the Kremlin and not in Europe.’”<sup>13</sup>

Most concretely, such fears can be traced back to 2014, the year that saw Russia annex the Ukrainian Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Back then, a commentary in the *Washington Post* asserted that the dynamics underpinning the dispute between Ukraine and Russia could potentially spill over to the Baltic republics, with special reference to Latvia.

In Ukraine, Russian speakers in the east have said they feared attacks on the right to speak their language. In Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, ethnic Russians have complained of laws that require knowledge of the national language to obtain citizenship and of other rules that downplay Russian language and history in classrooms. The societal divisions have been especially sharp in Latvia, where national leaders have long clashed with the Kremlin. About one-third of the population uses Russian as its primary language, and 13 percent of the population holds non-citizen status and cannot vote.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly, the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (a document outlining that government’s medium- to long-term foreign policy goals, updated once every few years), seems to validate these concerns. The concept’s 2013 version asserted that “ensuring comprehensive protection of rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots residing abroad”<sup>15</sup> was one of Russia’s central aims, as does the 2016

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<sup>12</sup> Michał Broniatowski, “Tusk Makes Scathing Attack on Russian Influence,” *POLITICO* (Brussels), 10 September 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-tusk-poland-russia-latvia-makes-scathing-attack-on-russian-influence>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Michael Birnbaum, “In Latvia, Fresh Fears of Aggression As Kremlin Warns About Russian Minorities,” *Washington (DC) Post*, 26 September 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-latvia-fresh-fears-of-aggression-as-kremlin-warns-about-russian-minorities/2014/09/26/b723b1af-2aed-44d1-a791-38cebbbadbd0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-latvia-fresh-fears-of-aggression-as-kremlin-warns-about-russian-minorities/2014/09/26/b723b1af-2aed-44d1-a791-38cebbbadbd0_story.html).

<sup>15</sup> Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2013, No. 303, art. 4(g), [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186).

revision currently in force.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Russian state-leaning news outlets emphasised issues of citizenship and language policy in reports on Latvia's 2018 election, framing Harmony as a political party "expressing the interests"<sup>17</sup> and "standing up for the rights"<sup>18</sup> of Latvia's *russophonie*. Such language marked a slight but telling contrast to the tone employed by more liberal Russian media, which preferred to cast Harmony as a party "supported by"<sup>19</sup> or "operating on a base of"<sup>20</sup> Russian-language voters. Thus, if state sources insist that Harmony actively promotes the interests of Russian Latvians, other media highlight the party's ethnic base in more passive wording.

At the same time, Russian sources generally sympathetic to their government can be distinctly dismissive of Harmony's political programme. In this vein, TASS Russian News Agency interviewed a European Studies professor on the Russian International Affairs Council, quoting him as saying, "Harmony – they are not on our side . . . they are people who support wholly the course of European Union and NATO membership for Latvia; they come out in favour of most of the anti-social reforms, even though they position themselves as

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<sup>16</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2016, No. 640, art. 3(h), [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>17</sup> "Выражающая интересы." TASS Russian News Agency, "Партия 'Согласие' заняла первое место на выборах в парламент Латвии" [The Harmony party has taken the first place in Latvia's parliamentary elections], 7 October 2018, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/5646939>.

<sup>18</sup> "Отстаивающая права." In "В Латвии победило 'Согласие'" [In Latvia, Harmony won], *Vesti.Ru* (Moscow), 7 October 2018, <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=3068844>.

<sup>19</sup> "Пользуется поддержкой." Dar'ya Korzhova, "На парламентских выборах в Латвии победила партия Нила Ушакова" [In parliamentary elections in Latvia, the party of Nils Ušakovs won], *Vedomosti* (Moscow), 7 October 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2018/10/07/782989-pobedila-prorossiiskaya-partiya>.

<sup>20</sup> "Опирающаяся на." Mariya Epifanova, "На парламентских выборах в Латвии победила партия, опирающаяся на русскоязычных избирателей" [In parliamentary elections in Latvia, a party operating on a base of Russian-language voters won], *Novaya Gazeta* (Moscow), 7 October 2018, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2018/10/07/145719-na-parlamentskih-vyborah-v-latvii-pobedila-partiya-opirayuschayasya-na-russkojazychnyh-izbirateley>. A few hours later, the same expression was used in "Парламентские выборы в Латвии добавили разобщенности" [Parliamentary elections in Latvia have increased discordance], *Kommersant* (Moscow), 7 October 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3764364>.



social democrats.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, while the characteristic Russian state narrative capitalizes on Harmony’s popularity to suggest that Russian Latvians are indeed repressed, it discredits the party’s political significance, thereby implying that the chances of a democratic solution to Latvia’s demographic issues are bleak at best – legitimizing, perhaps, an intervention.

Five years onward from the annexation of Crimea, however, Russia has yet to show concrete signs that there is truth to whatever fears exist of an ethnicity-centred attempt to impinge on Latvian territorial sovereignty. Concurrently, it seems that in proclaiming electoral victory for a so-called pro-Russia contingent, Western media have uncovered little but their own presumptions with regard to the peculiarities of Latvia’s socio-political landscape. If anything, therefore, in the wake of Latvia’s 2018 election and the subsequent formation in early 2019 of a diverse, three-months-in-the-making government coalition, all of this seems to signify only that both the Western press and the Russian Federation have grossly overstated the Russianness of the election outcome.

Caught between this politicized East-West labelling conflict, is Latvia itself. In an article aimed at explaining the election results to its international readership, Latvia’s public broadcaster specifically addressed the *New York Times*’ wording of a pro-Russia “win.”

There is no automatic right for the party winning the most seats in the Saeima to be called upon, and that is a reason why many found fault with, for example, a *New York Times* report about the most recent parliamentary election in Latvia. To rephrase, winning the most seats, in Latvia’s parliamentary democracy, does not mean “winning” the election.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, just like in the 2011 and 2014 campaigns, most parties had explicitly ruled out the possibility of their entering into a coalition with Harmony, leaving President of Latvia

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<sup>21</sup> “‘Согласие’ – это не наши сторонники . . . это люди, которые всецело поддерживают курс на членство в ЕС и НАТО для Латвии, они выступают за большинство антисоциальных реформ, хотя позиционируют себя как социал-демократы.” TASS Russian News Agency, “Эксперт: итоги выборов в Латвии никак не скажутся на отношениях между Москвой и Ригой” [Expert: election results in Latvia will not at all affect the relations between Moscow and Riga], 7 October 2018, <https://tass.ru/politika/5646979>.

<sup>22</sup> “Explainer: Government Formation in Latvia,” *Latvijas Sabiedriskā mediju* (Riga), 7 January 2019, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/saeima/explainer-government-formation-in-latvia.a305297>. Italics added for consistency.

Raimonds Vējonis with no choice but to skip over that party's prime ministerial candidate for consideration as his official nominee.<sup>23</sup>

The Russian diaspora as a security threat; Russian Latvians as an oppressed minority; the Harmony electorate as a negligible staple of Latvia's political landscape – at face value, the emerging continuum of opinions already seems hard to reconcile. So far, however, one voice has been altogether absent from the above discussion: the voice of the very people most affected by it and around whom the discussion revolves.<sup>24</sup> That is why this thesis aims to answer the question how Russian Latvians themselves perceive the geopolitical contextualization of their integration into Latvian society.

### 1.1. The Silent Minority – Knowledge Gap

This is not to suggest that interviews, surveys, and ethnographies of Russian Latvians are completely non-existent. From time to time, for instance, journalists and academics make an effort to talk to those Soviet-era migrants to Latvia who effectively became stateless as a result of their not qualifying or opting for either Latvian or Russian citizenship when the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991.<sup>25</sup> One example is a six-minute segment aired recently by Germany's national public radio broadcaster, wherein a Riga family of mixed Latvian and non-citizen makeup was portrayed in the everyday confines of their apartment.<sup>26</sup> Another is

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<sup>23</sup> "Latvian Election Results Pose Problem for President," *Latvijas Sabiedriskā mediju* (Riga), 7 October 2018, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/commentary/latvian-election-results-pose-problem-for-president.a295064>.

<sup>24</sup> Granted, it is likely that Russian Latvians figure more prominently in Latvian-language media than they do in international press. Still, such sources are largely inaccessible to audiences unfamiliar with the local language, including the author of this thesis. Therefore, the setup of this work is based on what is available to the wider world.

<sup>25</sup> The non-citizen issue is contentious and will be discussed more elaborately in chapter 2. Hence, whether it actually entails "qualifying" or "opting" is left ambivalent for now.

<sup>26</sup> Gesine Dornblüth, "Ein 'Nichtbürger' in Riga" [A non-citizen in Riga], *Deutschlandfunk* (Cologne), 4 February 2019, [https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/lettischeeinwanderungspolitik-ein-nichtbuerger-in-riga.795.de.html?dram:article\\_id=439921](https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/lettischeeinwanderungspolitik-ein-nichtbuerger-in-riga.795.de.html?dram:article_id=439921).

a 2017 *VICE* piece which includes an interview with an elderly non-citizen activist from Daugavpils, Latvia's second-largest and a predominantly Russian-speaking city.<sup>27</sup>

Such efforts, however, run the risk of providing little more than an anecdotal account of the life and opinions of a handful of Russians in Latvia, thereby making it all the more unfortunate that in-depth explorations of Russian Latvians' political views are so uncommon. Coming close is one meta-analysis of Latvian-language sources by Artjoms Ivļevs and Roswitha M. King, which attempts to uncover the reasons why Soviet-era migrants permanently residing in Latvia would refrain from taking on Latvian citizenship, even if that implies having to settle for the country's less-than-favourable non-citizen's status.<sup>28</sup> In a separate paper, Ivļevs asked Russian Latvians about their motives to migrate out of Latvia to other European Union member states, finding that Latvia's unwelcoming language, citizenship, and education policies figured prominently in the potential *émigrés*' answers.<sup>29</sup> Both studies, however, regardless of their seemingly recent publication dates, use data that is well over a decade old. In more current work, only Aija Lulle and Iveta Jurkane-Hobein's adaptation of Ivļevs' design to Russian Latvians relocating specifically to London qualifies as being of some relevance to the topic.<sup>30</sup>

Exceptional in terms of its research question is a large-scale survey conducted by Ieva Bērziņa for the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, which tried to map the extent of the Russian Federation's influence on the Nordic-Baltic information environment

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Brown, "Living in Limbo," *VICE News* (New York, NY), 15 February 2017, [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/gyd7z7/latvias-non-citizen-policy-leaves-thousands-feeling-stateless](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/gyd7z7/latvias-non-citizen-policy-leaves-thousands-feeling-stateless).

<sup>28</sup> Artjoms Ivļevs and Roswitha M. King, "From Immigrants to (Non-)Citizens: Political Economy of Naturalisations in Latvia," *IZA Journal of Migration* 1, no. 14 (2012): 1-23.

<sup>29</sup> Artjoms Ivļevs, "Minorities on the Move? Assessing Post-Enlargement Emigration Intentions of Latvia's Russian Speaking Minority," *The Annals of Regional Science* 51 (2013): 33-52.

<sup>30</sup> Aija Lulle and Iveta Jurkane-Hobein, "Strangers within? Russian-Speakers' Migration from Latvia to London: A Study in Power Geometry and Intersectionality," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43, no. 4 (2017): 596-612.

in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Sweden.<sup>31</sup> Other politically-inclined comparative approaches have resulted in books likening the socio-economic integration processes of Russian minorities in such uniquely dissimilar post-Soviet contexts as Latvia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan,<sup>32</sup> or, more outdatedly, Kazakhstan, Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, some researchers prefer to opt for a more outspokenly cultural or anthropological approach. For instance, Ammon Cheskin has made significant and nuanced contributions to the understanding of Russian-Latvian identity formation and acculturation strategies,<sup>34</sup> in addition to assessing the role played in these processes by Russian Latvians' alleged ascription to specific "Russian" collective-memory myths.<sup>35</sup> These articles later formed the basis of a book wherein Cheskin combined his earlier data with a media discourse analysis and a number of interviews with Latvian parliamentarians, three of which with Harmony representatives.<sup>36</sup> Another scholar to take a cultural approach is Indra Ekmanis, who recently described how Russian-speaking youngsters in and around the city of Daugavpils take part in cultural symbolism and events generally considered to be of a

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<sup>31</sup> Of the 1,008 Latvian respondents, 66 percent reported Russian as their native language; see Ieva Bērziņa, "Russia's Narratives and Public Opinion in the Baltic States, Finland, and Sweden," in *Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment*, Report 2016/2017, by Ieva Bērziņa, Māris Cepurītis, Diana Kaljula, and Ivo Juurvee (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2018), 79-103.

<sup>32</sup> Michele E. Commercio, *Russian Minority Politics in Post-Soviet Latvia and Kyrgyzstan: The Transformative Power of Informal Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>34</sup> Using a focus group approach, Cheskin has attempted to construct a bottom-up account of various topics relevant to the integration of Russians in Latvia, in his "Exploring Russian-Speaking Identity from Below: The Case of Latvia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2013): 287-312.

<sup>35</sup> Ammon Cheskin, "History, Conflicting Collective Memories, and National Identities: How Latvia's Russian-Speakers Are Learning to Remember," *Nationalities Papers* 40, no. 4 (2012): 561-84. Here, Cheskin surveyed Russian-speakers in Riga's Victory Park on the date of 2011's Second World War Victory Day celebrations in Russia.

<sup>36</sup> Ammon Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia: Discursive Identity Strategies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

typically Latvian nature.<sup>37</sup> Here, Ekmanis made use of a subset of data culled from her dissertation on the same topic, which included the Daugavpils case as part of a comparison of urban and regional areas of various degrees of diversity.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Olga Cara has provided an account of ethnic Russian women in the Eastern Latvian borderland village of Baltinava, suggesting counterintuitively that identity caught between two distinct cultures can sometimes take to neither spheres of influence rather than both.<sup>39</sup>

Only the topic of Latvia's protracted education reform agenda stands out as being able to consistently attract academic attention. While that subject will be covered more extensively in the following chapter, suffice it to say for now that in the Latvian case, the word "reform" denotes a legislative agenda geared towards propagating and protecting the use of the Latvian language in schools – or, as opponents of these policies may prefer to describe it, to reduce access to Russian-language primary and secondary education. From this thematic angle, scholars mostly coming from the behavioural sciences have engaged with Russian Latvians to extract information on topics as diverse as the attribution of minority-majority stereotypes in Latvian schools,<sup>40</sup> the acculturation of the Latvian language in young Russian students,<sup>41</sup> and the involvement of Russian speakers in the

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<sup>37</sup> Indra Ekmanis engaged with adolescent Russians in nine regional schools and cultural community centres through participant observation, interviews, and focus groups, in her "Diversity in Daugavpils: Unpacking Identity and Cultural Engagement among Minority School Youth in Eastern Latvia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 1 (2019): 71–96.

<sup>38</sup> Indra Ekmanis, "Host Land or Homeland? Civic-Cultural Identity and Banal Integration in Latvia" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2017), <http://hdl.handle.net/1773/39884>.

<sup>39</sup> Olga Cara, "Lives on the Border: Language and Culture in the Lives of Ethnic Russian Women in Baltinava, Latvia," *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 1 (2010): 123–42.

<sup>40</sup> To this end, Ivars Austers interviewed 329 Latvian secondary-school students, 179 of which he identified as Russians, in his "Attribution of Value Stereotypes As a Consequence of Group Membership: Latvian and Russian Students Living in Latvia Compared," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 26 (2002): 273–285.

<sup>41</sup> Olga Cara (née Pisarenko) in 2002 spoke to 459 seventh-graders in Russian-language schools in Riga, in Olga Pisarenko, "The Acculturation Modes of Russian Speaking Adolescents in Latvia: Perceived Discrimination and Knowledge of the Latvian Language," *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 5 (2006): 751–773, to study the link between perceived discrimination and knowledge of the Latvian language. In 2007, she

decision-making process preceding the implementation of the above-mentioned language adjustments in education.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, despite these endeavours, a systematic inquiry into Russian Latvians' self-perception of the geopolitical conundrum surrounding their integration process has, so far, not been undertaken. Given its instrumental value in assessing the pro-Russianness of Latvia's 2018 election outcome, in gauging the alleged security risks to Latvian sovereignty, in evaluating the state of minority rights in Latvia, and, quite frankly, in helping to emancipate a group of Latvians currently underrepresented in international journalism, academia, and politics alike, this thesis aims to do just that.

## 1.2. People and Their States – Academic Relevance

The knowledge gap surrounding Russian Latvians' political views is surprising for two reasons. First, foreign policy analysts have noted that in the wake of the Baltic states' attempt to move away from the Russian sphere of geopolitical influence, "the three republics, especially Latvia and Estonia, had to manage a number of sensitive policy areas vis-à-vis Russia. Practically all of them ended up in one way or another tied with the Russian-speaking minority issues."<sup>43</sup> Prima facie, one would expect that the people caught up in the main arena of contestation would frequently be asked to answer any of the following questions. Do Russian Latvians identify with Russia, Latvia, or both? Do they conceive of themselves as an

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revisited her earlier sample to measure the effect of a 2004 reform, the findings of which are presented in Olga Cara, "The Acculturation of Russian-Speaking Adolescents in Latvia: Language Issues Three Years After the 2004 Education Reform," *European Education* 42, no. 1 (2010): 8–36.

<sup>42</sup> Licia Cianetti's "Representing Minorities in the City: Education Policies and Minority Incorporation in the Capital Cities of Estonia and Latvia," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 6 (2014): 981–1001 is based in part on a series of conversations Cianetti had with anti-reform activists and policy-makers.

<sup>43</sup> Ainius Lašas and David J. Galbreath, "Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania," in *National Perspectives on Russia: European Foreign Policy in the Making?*, eds. Maxine David, Jackie Gower, and Hiski Haukkala (London: Routledge, 2013), 150.

oppressed minority? If so, by whom are they oppressed and how? Do they feel sufficiently involved in Latvia's political process? Would they prefer that Latvia steered a different course in international affairs? And do they appreciate Russia's foreign policy efforts?

Such reasoning follows Daniel Philpott, who philosophizes that even fundamental changes in the geopolitical fabric are primarily the result of ideas. In turn, he writes that "the ideas convert hearers; these converts amass their ranks; they then demand new international orders; they protest and lobby and rebel to bring about these orders; there emerges a social dissonance between the iconoclasm and the existing order; a new order results."<sup>44</sup> In other words; in international relations, as in other political contexts, people matter.

A similar view is held by James J. Coyle, whose most recent book opens with the assertion that "on the fringes of the Russian Federation, several conflicts continuously smolder."<sup>45</sup> In studying these border wars and frozen conflicts, Coyle holds that

in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan/Armenia – there are two sets of actors. At the systemic level, the primary actors are nation-states. At the sub-systemic level, the actors are groups of people united by nationalisms. These nationalisms, in turn, are based on either ideology or ethnicity. It is the interaction of these actors at the different levels of analyses that have kept the conflicts alive in a relatively "frozen" state.<sup>46</sup>

Conceivably, the volatile prospect of Russian Latvians expressing their discomfort may be part of the explanation why media in the United States and in Europe have been reluctant to provide too much of a platform for this particular group of Russians abroad. After all, other foreign actors might explain even the ostensibly innocent act of giving these people a potentially emancipatory voice, as tacit recognition of their status as an oppressed minority. Hence, doing so may be thought to immediately jeopardize the territorial sovereignty of the host state – in this case, Latvia.

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<sup>44</sup> Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>45</sup> James J. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Coyle asserts that issues of ethnicity may both spark and perpetuate these frozen conflicts – a dynamic which any state that strives for sustainable security will deem suboptimal, at the very least so long as these frozen conflicts do not serve some other goal. In Coyle's assessment, however, the Russian Federation apparently has such ulterior motives, and it does not eschew conflict as a means to fulfil them. "Rather than concentrating on how to increase its own power, Russia appears to have stumbled into adopting a policy of decreasing the power of the countries surrounding it. They achieve the desired increase in relative power by decreasing the relative power of its rivals."<sup>47</sup> On this view, if in foreign affairs, people matter, it follows that they do so partly because they can be exploited for political ends – and vice versa.<sup>48</sup>

This second point is more in line with an argument developed by Stephen D. Krasner, whose central claim is that "outcomes in the international system are determined by rulers whose violation of, or adherence to, international principles or rules is based on calculations of material and ideational interests, not taken-for-granted practices derived from some overarching institutional structures or deeply embedded generative grammars"<sup>49</sup> – and Krasner identifies minority rights as a key arena where sovereign states have historically tried to challenge one another's autonomy.<sup>50</sup>

For this reason, fears of the Russian Federation abusing its post-Soviet diaspora to the detriment of Latvia's national security emphasize the need for knowing more rather than less about Russian Latvians' foreign policy preferences. At the perceived risk of exposing that these people do indeed conceive of themselves as an oppressed minority, given that so little is known about their political standing, it may just as well be that they do feel largely included

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>48</sup> Establishing the appropriate relation of causation in this interplay of people and power could be the subject of an entirely different book. Coyle seems to have circumvented or solved the problem by emphasizing the interaction between states and nationalisms.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 104.



in Latvian society and political discourse – a scenario that has not always sounded as outlandish as consumers of European and United States international news might think it is today.<sup>51</sup> If that potential still exists, then rediscovering it in the scope of this project could be an important step in putting a decisive end to a framing battle that does more harm than good to the idea of international security.

### 1.3. Hearing Russian Voices – Research Design

By engaging with the people that play such a pivotal role in the topic at hand, this thesis hopes to act upon Norman Davies' general criticism, that "any number of surveys of 'Western civilization' confine themselves to topics which relate only to their chosen fragments of the Peninsula."<sup>52</sup> After all, the previous section shows that in the Latvian case, Davies' reference to "surveys" can be substituted, without reservation, by "media reports" or "government accounts." Thus, in Western news coverage, the experience of Soviet citizens waking up one day in the early 1990s to the sudden reality of living in another country, tends to be consistently overlooked. Ironically, in similar fashion, Russian sources often disregard the hard-lived struggle for the restoration of Latvia's interbellum independence. And Latvia itself, eager to join such international alliances as the European Union and NATO as part of a determination to secure the sustained recognition of its sovereignty, seems mostly

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<sup>51</sup> For one, Nils Muižnieks, who would from 2012 to 2018 serve as Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe, in 1993 believed that although conflicts "both among Latvians and between Latvians and Russians are bound to surface during the process of 'deoccupation'," anticipated that "the prospects for peaceful resolution of these conflicts appear positive, given the past lack of bloodshed in the region [and] the emergence of political pluralism and a vibrant independent press." See his chapter, "Latvia: Origins, Evolution, and Triumph," in *Nations & Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, eds. Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 200–201.

<sup>52</sup> Davies, in the introduction to his *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 19, tellingly continues that "in many such works there is no Portugal, no Ireland, Scotland or Wales, and no Scandinavia, just as there is no Poland, no Hungary, no Bohemia, no Byzantium, no Balkans, no Baltic States, no Byelorussia or Ukraine, no Crimea or Caucasus. There is sometimes a Russia, and sometimes not."

impervious to Russia's often-repeated discomfort at the eager eastbound encroachment of these explicitly Russia-excluding coalitions.

To allow for a meaningful positioning of Russian Latvians' views in the geopolitical context of their integration into Latvia, chapter 2 will be devoted to identifying and constructing two ideal-typical extremes – one Russian, one Latvian. To facilitate a measured comparison of these oftentimes conflicting narratives, both ends of the spectrum will be developed side by side, along the lines of Deborah Stone's distinction between identity, accommodation, and politics.

The issue of culture as a need provokes three kinds of policy fights. First, how should government balance minority group needs for particular cultures with a nation's need for a citizenry with a shared identity? . . . Second, what kinds of resources and accommodations do governments owe minorities to help them maintain their cultures? . . . The third, and by far the most contentious and philosophically difficult, issue concerns how to reconcile conflicting political cultures.<sup>53</sup>

Applying this framework to a geopolitical context requires some legitimation. For starters, one might call into question the applicability of Stone's political category to the Latvian case. Indeed, Stone writes mostly with an eye to non-Western migrants to the United States.<sup>54</sup> Still, both the media examples above and the wider criticism articulated by Davies show that many observers do perceive Russia (thus, Russians) as an inherently alien power, not in the least in the political domain.

Explaining how domestic integration policies can be linked to perspectives on foreign policy is the second challenge – but, as noted with reference to Ainius Lašas and David J. Galbreath in the preceding section, the situation in the Baltic states is intricately tied to the superficially domestic issue of their dealing with Russian minority populations. Specifically, Lašas and Galbreath note that early post-Soviet Russo-Latvian bilateral relations were tarnished by Russia's playing up the presence of its diasporic minorities in Latvia to delay

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<sup>53</sup> Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 89–90.

<sup>54</sup> Her example question being, after all, “should a liberal nation devoted to individual autonomy and equality allow minority groups to practice cultural traditions that violate these liberal values?” Ibid., 90.

withdrawal of once Soviet military personnel, to promote the opportune settlement of protracted post-collapse border disputes, and to stall the Baltic bids for joining NATO.<sup>55</sup>

The most fundamental criticism to be levelled at taking a Stonesian approach can be expressed in terms of the rhetorical question why symbolic, not material needs should be central to understanding the problems surrounding Russian Latvians' integration process. After all, Russian Latvians generally have access to the same social benefits as other Latvians have, they are encouraged to participate in the Latvian education system just like anyone else, and by far most of them, being proper citizens of Latvia, are allowed to vote without restrictions. In this sense, it may be argued that the problem, as presented by various international media, virtually does not exist. The fault in that view, however, is its categorical precluding of a satisfactory explanation of why the issue of purported minority oppression has been on the agenda for three consecutive decades.

By highlighting the importance of culture and history, Stone presents an argument that should widely resonate with the most vehement anti-Russian Latvian nationalists.<sup>56</sup> As will become evident in chapter 2, their treasured Latvian statehood is much more than a manifestation of material needs. To restore the independence gained in 1919 is to explicitly premise the nation on a proactive quest for meaning through cultural symbolism, instead of, reactively, on the concrete wants that arose under and after Soviet occupation.<sup>57</sup> This is why

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<sup>55</sup> Lašas and Galbreath, "Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania," 150. Writing in 2013, one year before the outbreak of armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the authors end their assessment on the ominous note that "unless Russian foreign-policy-making becomes more forthcoming and transparent on the one hand, and Baltic political elites start to feel securely rooted in Europe on the other, there remains strong temptation for both sides to stick with the familiar." *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>56</sup> More specifically, Stone holds that "the minimum survival concept of need . . . renders us all equal. The symbolic concept of need, by contrast, recognizes human differences – different cultures, histories, social groups, classes, and even tastes. If we accept the symbolic dimension of need as important, then welfare means protecting people's identities as well as their existence." See *Policy Paradox*, 89.

<sup>57</sup> Consider, for instance, S. Frederick Starr's assertion that history is "the dowry borne by leaders and citizens of these new states as they leave the Soviet family and set up housekeeping of their own;" see the introduction to *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. by S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 4.

the following chapter will focus first on conflicting identities, then on the accommodation of the preservation of those identities, and lastly on the matter of political participation.

Surely, though, both the Russian Federation and the Republic of Latvia are internationally-recognized actors in their own right, capable of fending for themselves – if not militarily, then at least through statements and declarations. Contrariwise, being the subnational, loosely-defined group that they are, Russian Latvians so far have not enjoyed anything remotely akin to that privilege of international voice held by sovereign states. Their interests have been either represented by minority advocates and political parties kept at bay by Latvia's inhospitable political context, misrepresented by a Russian Federation speaking on their behalf, or quite simply not represented at all.

By means of a series of individual semi-structured interviews, arranged along the lines of the ideal types explored in chapter 2, the focus of chapter 3 will be to gain a better understanding of these ill-represented Russian-Latvian political views. In terms of sequence, chapter 3 aims first to further justify the methods supporting the interview setup, then to present the results of these interviews, and finally to draw comparisons to the topics as outlined in section 2.3. The obvious challenge in taking qualitative approach is to select a sample which is both sufficiently illustrative of a Russian-Latvian *communis opinio* – if there is one – and which is composed of participants knowledgeable enough to allow for a fruitful discussion of the practicalities of integration and the connection to international relations.<sup>58</sup>

This is why, to maximize the credibility of the results, two main groups of Russian-Latvian interviewees were selected.<sup>59</sup> Considering that the Harmony party figures

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<sup>58</sup> After all, the topic of foreign affairs is not for the uninformed, as the Latvian constitution affirms by stating that “laws concerning . . . declaration and commencement of war, peace treaties . . . as well as agreements with other nations may not be submitted to national referendum.” Satversme (Sat.) art. 73, <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/57980>.

<sup>59</sup> As such, the chosen sample is based on what Alan Bryman has termed “generic purposive sampling” in *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 412–15, although in one particular case, one of the interviewees suggested another participant. As that person's profile provided an excellent fit to the pre-determined selection criteria, some limited “snowball sampling” took place; see *ibid.*, 415–16. For a broader discussion of evaluation criteria for qualitative research, see *ibid.*, 383–86.

prominently in international coverage of Latvian politics, the first group of respondents consisted of a diverse selection of five of its members. By way of a Fourth Estate contrast, five journalists made up an equally diverse control group, to make it possible to check whether the politicians' opinions are representative of something larger than Harmony's electoral base. Moreover, all participants agreed to have their answers presented anonymously, a measure intended to encourage Harmony affiliates to transcend their direct political agendas, while giving journalists the opportunity to reflect on their personal political views without reservation.<sup>60</sup>

The discussion of the results serves to capture Russian Latvians' self-image and political position in terms of Stone's systematization of symbolic and cultural needs.<sup>61</sup> This will allow for a clean comparison of Russian-Latvian views vis-à-vis the two ideal-typical narrativizations of this group's historical integration process into Latvian society. In the end, the hope is to formulate an explorative approximation of Russian Latvians' perceptions of the geopolitical quagmire that envelopes the historical process of their integration into Latvian society.

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<sup>60</sup> By withholding the respondents' personal identity, political representatives were encouraged to transcend their direct political agendas, while journalists were given the opportunity to comment without reservation on their personal political views. As an added benefit, the anonymous treatment invites readers to value the data on the basis of what is said, not on who said it. See *ibid.*, 479-83.

<sup>61</sup> Having identified beforehand the possible topics of contestation and the potential range of contrasting views, the interviews were structured in accordance with a list of topics closely resembling the structure of chapter 2. *Ibid.*, 468-69.

## 2. Two Sides to the Story

### 2.1. What Russians? – A Pragmatic Approach to Ethnicity

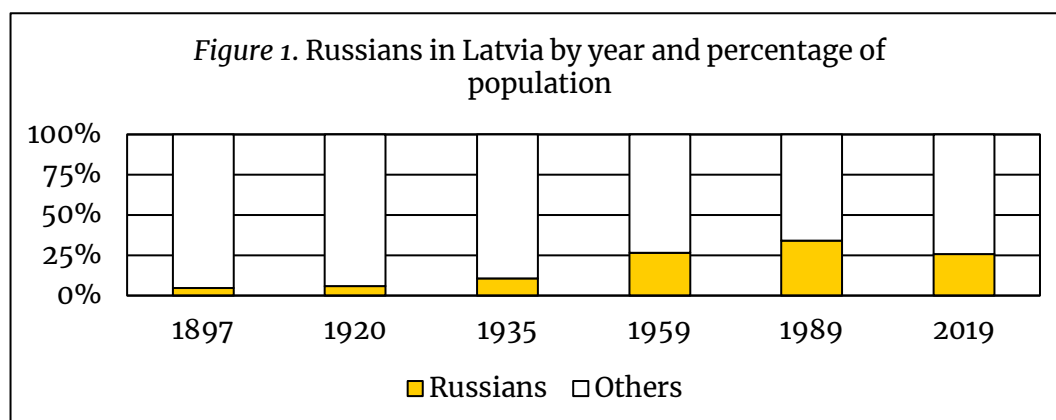
On 1 January 2019, 538.4 thousand – or 25.7 percent – of Latvia’s 2.1 million inhabitants were Russian.<sup>62</sup> How did this small nation become so multinational? Understood simply as the question of *when* Latvia attracted such a large population of Russians, demographic data unequivocally points to the time Latvia spent as an unwilling Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1897, two decades prior to the final collapse of the Russian Empire, the Courland, Livonian and Estonian governorates were home to a combined 114.2 thousand people reporting their native language as being Russian – just 4.8 percent of a total population of 2.4 million.<sup>63</sup> Two years after Latvia gained independence from a revolution-torn Russia in the wake of the First

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<sup>62</sup> The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) presents various static sets of statistic data on population, ethnicity, and nationality twice a year on its website, at OCMA, *Iedzīvotāju reģistra statistika uz 01.01.2019* [Population register statistics on 1 January 2019], 17 January 2019, <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/sakums/statistika/iedzivotaju-registrs>. The total population (“Visa Latvija | Kopā”) is given in the set “Latvijas iedzīvotāju skaits pašvaldībās” [Population of Latvia in numbers by municipality], [https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISPV\\_Pasvaldibas\\_iedzivotaju\\_skaits.pdf](https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISPV_Pasvaldibas_iedzivotaju_skaits.pdf). The total number of Russians (“Krievs | Kopā”) can be obtained from “Latvijas iedzīvotāju sadalījums pēc nacionālā sastāva un valstiskās piederības” [Population of Latvia by national composition and citizenship status], [https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISVN\\_Latvija\\_pec\\_TTB\\_VPD.pdf](https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISVN_Latvija_pec_TTB_VPD.pdf).

<sup>63</sup> Henning Bauer, Andreas Kappeler, and Brigitte Roth, “Tabellen: Tabellen für Großregionen; Muttersprachen nach Stadt-/Landbevölkerung” [Tables: Tables for greater regions; Native language by urban/rural population], in *Die Nationalitäten des Russischen Reiches in der Volkszählung von 1897* [The nationalities of the Russian Empire in the population census of 1897] (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991), 2:215. In this German study of the 1897 census, data for the greater “Baltikum” region consisted of the Courland, Livonian and Estonian governorates, the former two of which comprised a territory closely resembling present-day Latvia. To be fair, not included in this figure is much of the present-day Eastern Latvian region of Latgale, which was administered as part of the Vitebsk governorate – part of the greater Belarus-Lithuania region in this study. There, the percentage of Russians was almost a full percentage point higher, at 5.6 percent (ibid.). Roth’s accompanying chapter, “Quellenkritische Dokumentation der erfaßten Berichtskategorien: Sprachen” [Source-critical record of registered reporting categories: Languages], in *Die Nationalitäten des Russischen Reiches*, 1:144–46, explains that native language was in some periods seen as the most fitting determinant for nationality.

World War, in 1920, the proportion had risen to 5.7 percent, reflecting 91.5 thousand Russians-by-nationality in a country of 1.6 million inhabitants.<sup>64</sup> By 1935, the percentage had crept up to 10.6, with 206.5 thousand Russians of a total of 2.0 million.<sup>65</sup> But the biggest leap occurred sometime during the Second World War and late Stalinism. When the first post-war census was conducted in 1959, the number of Russians in Latvia had reached 556.4 thousand, or 26.6 percent of a total of 2.1 million.<sup>66</sup> By 1989, the Russian share came to a 34.0 percent peak, reflecting 905.5 thousand people on a total population of 2.6 million.<sup>67</sup>



<sup>64</sup> State Statistical Bureau, “Répartition de la population d’après la nationalité (au mois de juin 1920)” [Distribution of the population by nationality (in the month of June 1920)], in *Latvijas statistiskā gada grāmata 1921*, or *Annuaire statistique de la Lettonie pour l’année 1921* [Latvian Statistical Yearbook, 1921] (Riga: State Statistical Bureau, 1922), 4. In table 4, see “Dans toute la Lettonie | Grands Russes” for the number of Russians and “Dans toute la Lettonie | Ensemble” for Latvia’s total population.

<sup>65</sup> State Statistical Bureau, “Certaines données sur l’effectif de la population et sa structure (d’après le recensement en 1935)” [Some data on the size of the population and on its structure (from the 1935 census)], *Latvijas statistikas gada grāmata 1939*, or *Annuaire statistique de la Lettonie 1939* [Latvian Statistics Yearbook, 1939] (Riga: State Statistical Bureau, 1939), 8–9. In table 10, see “Population totale | Gr. Russes” for the number of Russians proper and “Population totale | Total” for the total population.

<sup>66</sup> Central Statistical Board of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, “Распределение населения по национальности и родному языку” [Distribution of the population by nationality and native language], in *Итоги всесоюзной переписи населения 1959 года: Латвийская ССР* [Results of the all-union population census of the year 1959] (Moscow: State Publishing House for Statistics, 1960), 92–93. In table 53, see “русские | всего” for the number of Russians and “Все население | всего” for the Soviet republic’s total population.

<sup>67</sup> Latvian SSR State Statistical Committee, “Iedzīvotāju nacionālais sastāvs 1979. g. un 1989. g.” [Composition of the national population in 1979 and 1989] in *1989. gada vissavienības tautas skaitīšanas rezultāti* [1989 all-union census results] (Riga: Latvian SSR State Statistical Committee, 1990), 16. See “Visi iedzīvotāji ini skaitā” at “pilsētu un lauku iedzīvotāji, pavisam” for the total count and “krievi” for the Russian figure.

Aside from this factual approach, another way to understand the question is to ask who these Russian Latvians are. The above data is culled from censuses mandated by four (or, by some accounts, five)<sup>68</sup> historically very different governments: the late-nineteenth century Russian Empire, the newly-independent Republic of Latvia of the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century, and the present-day Republic of Latvia of restored independence. Over the course of 122 years of population counting in the region, nationality has been measured explicitly as a person's first preferred language, his ethnicity, his place of birth, or as a combination of such variables.

Lumping these diverse categories together, is risking to be confronted with Edward Hallett Carr's rhetorical question, that "if the historian necessarily looks at his period of history through the eyes of his own time, . . . will he not fall into a purely pragmatic view of the facts, and maintain that the criterion of a right interpretation is its suitability to some present purpose?"<sup>69</sup> Yet, in articulating a pragmatist's view of history, Carr lays out a fundamental presupposition of the present thesis, namely that (historical) facts mean something only when someone says they do.

After all, any of the five governments could well have decided against keeping track of the nationality of its citizens. The point is that they did not. Apparently, at crucial moments in Latvian history, up until the present day, differentiating the various terrestrial, ethnic, or language-related backgrounds has seemed the sensible thing to do – and in each census discussed above, "Russian" has been a label of at least some basic significance. How that linguistic category has historically corresponded to the abstract entity of a people, is of no

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<sup>68</sup> At least three leading historians of the Baltic region have classified Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis' 1934 ascent to Latvia's presidency a *coup d'état*, and his subsequent rule authoritarian, a dictatorship, or, in the case of the Arnolds Spekke, a parliamentary system that is worthy of either of those labels, both by today's and by past standards. See Spekke, *History of Latvia: An Outline* (Stockholm: M. Goppers, 1951), 376; Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Path to Independence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 69–70; and Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 100.

<sup>69</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge, January–March 1961* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 27.



importance here. What is important, is how Latvians labelled “Russian” figure in present-day debates about their role in foreign policy.<sup>70</sup> By trying to construct the two ideal-typical extremes of that debate – that is, by looking at the way in which history and data are used by Latvians to explain their minority policies to the world, or by hard-line Russians to criticize Latvia for it – a basis for interpreting the interviews in chapter 3 will begin to take shape.

## 2.2. Constructing the Ideal-Typical Extremes

### 2.2.1. Identity: Homo (Post-)Sovieticus?

#### 2.2.1.1. Confluent Histories, Colliding Identities

In *Secondhand Time*, Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich tried her hand at “piecing together the history of ‘domestic,’ ‘interior’ socialism. As it existed in a person’s soul.”<sup>71</sup> She recounts,

Communism had an insane plan: to remake “the old breed of man” . . . Seventy-plus years in the Marxist-Leninist laboratory gave rise to a new man: *Homo sovieticus*. . . . *Homo sovieticus* isn’t just Russian, he’s Belarusian, Turkmen, Ukrainian, Kazakh. . . . People who’ve come out of socialism are both like and unlike the rest of humanity – we have our own lexicon, our own conceptions of good and evil, our heroes, our martyrs. We have a special relationship with death. . . . How much can we value human life when we know that not long ago people had died by the millions? We’re full of hatred and superstitions. All of us come from the land of the gulag and harrowing war. Collectivization, dekulakization, mass deportations of various nationalities . . . This was socialism, but was also just everyday life.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For one convincing pragmatist critique, see Rudolf Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4 (1950): 21–22. Here, Carnap argues that abstract entities exist in so far as they exist within the framework of a language. To ask whether they exist as entities in the real world (now or in the past), is to try and use language for the purpose of forcing a statement about something outside of the scope of that language’s own linguistic framework, thus rendering the language useless. In other words, there is no escaping language as it is presently in use. When speaking of the involuntary connotations of words in history, Carr essentially makes the same point, albeit without offering a credible means to circumvent it.

<sup>71</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets; An Oral History*, trans. Bela Shayevich (New York, NY: Random House, 2016), 3.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

The suggestion here, is that the communist reconstruction of its constituent republics forced a common identity onto all the individual members of that body politic, thus imposing a special kind of kinship onto the nations joined together in that Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Hence, besides offering a rather bleak characterization of Soviet common identity, Alexievich effectively articulates the view that Latvian history is Soviet history, with the opposite being equally true.

On the Russian Federation's side, such a view figured prominently in the speech held by President Putin two days after the Referendum on the Status of Crimea of 16 March 2014.

Crimea is a unique blend of different peoples' cultures and traditions. This makes it similar to Russia as a whole, where not a single ethnic group has been lost over the centuries. Russians and Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars and people of other ethnic groups have lived side by side in Crimea, retaining their own identity, traditions, languages and faith.<sup>73</sup>

In one sweeping, history-charged statement, Putin thus extrapolated the *Homo post-sovieticus* hypothesis to argue the case of an even wider historical convergence, one that reaches back a thousand years – and while he constructs his argument upon a series of events that are very much particular to the Crimean context, there is every reason to assume that these Ukraine-specific dynamics can be just as well applied to the Latvian case.<sup>74</sup>

After all, Latvia is home to a unique and historical blend of cultures and ethnicities too, and Russian involvement began as early as the start of the Livonian War in 1558, when Tsar Ivan IV attempted to secure an ice-free port on the Baltic Sea.<sup>75</sup> The first try ended in defeat in 1582, after which the Latvian lands fell to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but

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<sup>73</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," *Kremlin.ru*, 18 March 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* Intriguingly, Putin actually cuts from Volodymyr's adoption of Christianity in 988, straight to the Russian acquisition of the peninsula in 1783 and the subsequent founding of the Black Sea Fleet. Though not a subject relevant to this thesis, there are fair grounds on which that version of history can be disputed. For an excellent overview of Ukrainian history, with special attention to present-day Ukraine-Russia relations, see Marc Jansen, *Grensland: Een geschiedenis van Oekraïne* [Borderland: a history of Ukraine], 6th ed. (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij G.A. van Oorschot, 2017).

<sup>75</sup> J.W. Bezemer and Marc Jansen, *Een geschiedenis van Rusland: Van Rurik tot Poetin* [A history of Russia: from Rurik to Putin], 10th ed. (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij G.A. van Oorschot, 2015), 41-42.

Russia's Baltic ambitions never went away.<sup>76</sup> After a long seventeenth century of fighting other wars, the Russians made a Baltic comeback in the Great Northern War of 1700, with Peter I reclaiming Riga in 1710, subjecting the Latvian provinces to an imperial rulership that would remain in place continuously for over 200 years.<sup>77</sup>

Still, that Alexievich mentions Russians, Belarusians, Turkmens, Ukrainians, and Kazakhs, but not Latvians, Estonians, or Lithuanians, is crucial. Unlike their Slavic and Central-Asian counterparts, the Baltic peoples did not in fact spend seventy years in the Marxist-Leninist laboratory of the USSR. For them, the Soviet era lasted only about two thirds of that period. Therein lies one crucial difference between Latvians and Russians in the present age: at vital times, Latvian and Soviet history diverged.<sup>78</sup>

This point, too, has been expanded upon to make sense of the centuries-long formation of Latvian identity. Already in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* – one of the earliest historic sources on the wider Eastern European region, dated 1116 – the Balts are described as being thoroughly different from the Slavic tribes. The Slavs, along with the Krivichians, are described in detail to have populated parts of present-day Western Russia, Northern Belarus, and Western Ukraine, while the “Litva, Zimegola, Kors’, Narva, and Liv’” are mentioned only in passing, in their capacity as “other tribes which pay tribute to Rus’.”<sup>79</sup> As such, they “have their own languages and belong to the race . . . which inhabits the lands of the north.”<sup>80</sup>

Yet, even if the *Russian Primary Chronicle* highlights a discontinuity between the Balts and the Slavs, Arnolds Spekke, one of the first modern-era authors to have published a

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 41-42 and 56. To add to the diversity, rulership over Riga was eventually transferred to the Swedes, in 1621. See also Spekke, *History of Latvia*, 222.

<sup>77</sup> Bezemer and Jansen, *Een geschiedenis van Rusland*, 76-79.

<sup>78</sup> Starr, in his introduction to *The Legacy of History*, 4, makes a similar point, stating that for the new states of Eurasia, “history is not a unitary thing.”

<sup>79</sup> Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans. and eds. *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 55. From the peoples mentioned here as “other,” the modern-era Lithuanians, Semigallians, Couronians, Narvans, and Livonians can be discerned.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

dedicated *History of Latvia*, is quick to call out what he perceives to be the chronicler's blatant pan-Slavism. To him, what stands out is not so much the off-hand acknowledgement of his people's distinctive non-Slavic roots; what bugs the historian most is the submissive contention that the Baltic peoples' were somehow brought to pay tribute to the Slavs.<sup>81</sup> Clearly, Spekke's national historic pride runs deep – and he is not the only one. Another staunch defender of the existence of a proto-Latvian identity, was Alfrēds Bilmanis, a Latvian professor and later diplomat. He writes,

Latvia's independence, achieved in 1918, was not unexpected, artificial or casual, as its antagonists tried to insinuate. Its independence was not a creation of Versailles, but the result of a long historical process in which the Latvians always played the most active role and never forgot their national aspirations. They were a nation like other nations: they had their own territory, old civilization, culture, religion and useful occupations.<sup>82</sup>

Even if Latvians were late to the table of communism's "insane plan," however, their eventual overture to it was to be swift and overwhelming. In less than a year after President Ulmanis' carefully staged resignation in July 1940, the Soviet government ordered a mass deportation scheme to commence in the night of 13 to 14 June 1941. In just a few days' time, an estimated 15 to 17 thousand Latvians were taken to Siberia and to the Russian Arctic.<sup>83</sup> By this measure of near-immediate subjection to Soviet terror, the Latvians certainly qualify to be part of Alexievich's *Homo post-sovieticus* definition. But resistance to reading the past in this way is unrelenting. At the annual commemoration in honour of the victims of the 1941 deportations, however, President Vējonis on 14 June 2019 reiterated that "the Soviet

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<sup>81</sup> Spekke, *History of Latvia*, 109–12. In fact, the first three chapters of Spekke's book are devoted solely to the compilation of an interdisciplinary account of Baltic life, tracing its earliest signs of continuous existence as far back as the fourteenth century BCE.

<sup>82</sup> Arnolds Bilmanis, *Latvia as an Independent State* (Washington, DC: Latvian Legation, 1947), 33.

<sup>83</sup> Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence, 1940–1980* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1983), 38–42. Misiunas and Taagepera assume a figure of 15 thousand, while Timothy Snyder's calculations, in *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), 143, come down to 17 thousand. The overall losses in Latvia between 1940 to 1941 are thought to have amounted to some 21 (Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 193) or 35 (Misiunas and Taagepera, *Years of Dependence*, 41) thousand people. For a detailed retelling of the Soviet *coup d'état* in Latvia and in the other Baltic republics, see Misiunas and Taagepera, *Years of Dependence*, 15–28.

occupation regime used deportations to physically destroy our country and break our nation” and that “the crimes of the Soviet regime are crimes against humanity.”<sup>84</sup> By stating that the central government in Moscow was nothing less than an occupant regime, Latvia’s official narrative distances itself explicitly from any conception of Soviet identity, which it perceives and proclaims to be totally alien. In doing so, however, it is premised on the exact same ideas that lead Alexievich to believe in a coalescence of identity.

#### 2.2.1.2. Multinationalism and Empire

Two interpretations of Russian imperial and Soviet history exist, that try to accommodate the incongruity of Latvia’s heritage being at once post- and non-Soviet – and, by extension, post- and non-Russian. One version made its way into the preamble of the Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993, which opens with the sentence “we, the multinational people of the Russian Federation.”<sup>85</sup> On this view, the Russian state, throughout its various shapes and forms, is seen as an inherently multinational or multi-ethnic entity. By extension, the same could be said of many of its prior imperial or Bolshevik appendages. Representing this view is Andreas Kappeler, who worked from the hypothesis that, aside from a few exceptional bouts of repression, the central political attitude towards this quintessentially Russian multinationalism was, in most historic periods, one of “pragmatic flexibility.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Raimonds Vējonis, “Address by the President of the Republic of Latvia H.E. Mr. Raimonds Vējonis at the Event to Commemorate the Deportations of 14 June 1941 at the Freedom Monument, Riga, 14 June 2019” (unofficial translation handed out to foreign dignitaries). A scan of this booklet is available upon request.

<sup>85</sup> “Мы, многонациональный народ Российской Федерации.” Конституция Российской Федерации [Constitution of the Russian Federation] (Const. RF), preamble, <http://constitution.kremlin.ru>.

<sup>86</sup> “Pragmatischen Flexibilität.” Andreas Kappeler, “Historische Voraussetzungen des Nationalitätenproblems im russischen Vielvölkerreich” [Historical preconditions of the nationalities problem in the Russian multi-ethnic empire], *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 8, no. 2 (1982): 164. Throughout this section, the adjectives “multinational” and “multi-ethnic” are used interchangeably where a translation of Kappeler’s term *Vielvölkerreich* (literally: “empire of many peoples”) is required.

On this view, the Russian government typically upheld the social, political, and cultural status quo in those newly acquired territories in the European parts of the state, which were seen as beacons of enlightenment by many of Russia's eighteenth and nineteenth century rulers. As such, the central government in many periods favoured collaborating with local elites, winning their trust by respecting their local privileges, whilst showing a remarkable tolerance of local values, languages, and cultures.<sup>87</sup> Notwithstanding some regional and historical reservations, Kappeler thus concludes that from the seventeenth century onwards, the imperial approach had been to grant local societies considerable autonomy throughout the west and north, including in the Baltics.<sup>88</sup>

To be fair, already in the mid-nineteenth century, the pragmatic flexibility that typified the multinational Russian Empire was gradually beginning to be phased out.<sup>89</sup> Back then, however, the north-western parts of the realm had managed to keep abreast of industrial, social, and cultural advances in Europe. Thus, these parts played a pivotal role in helping to keep up the imperial image, which, in turn, largely protected them from cultural and political repressions.<sup>90</sup> In this sense, the Latvians appeared to have exited the empire at an opportune moment in history. While they enjoyed their first bout of independence from 1919 to 1940, they missed two crucial moments in the development of the Soviet nationalities policy.

Initially, Lenin initially envisioned an approach not unlike the pragmatic flexibility of earlier times. Every person deemed equal, the right to self-determination of all peoples soon

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 165-69. For instance, Kappeler specifically mentions the Baltic German elites that traditionally dominated that region's political life before the 1700s, who were allowed to continue to do so throughout the two centuries of Russian imperial rule. Moreover, Russian rulers mostly facilitated the coexistence of Lutheranism and Orthodoxy and they allowed non-Russian universities such as those in present-day Estonia and Finland to operate without much hindrance until late in the nineteenth century.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 175-77. This ran contrary to the policy in the south and east, where large influxes of Russian migrants were ordered and where local elites were forcefully replaced.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 181-82.

<sup>90</sup> Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall* [Russia as a multi-ethnic empire: creation, history, collapse] (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1992), 265-66.

became a cornerstone of Soviet society. Through its policy of “indigenization,”<sup>91</sup> the Soviet government actively supported the political and cultural emancipation of between 48 and 53 distinct ethnicities, reinstating the early modern tsarist practice of sharing local government responsibilities with local elites.<sup>92</sup> The Soviets developed notational systems for local tongues that lacked them and founded regional schools for education in these various native languages to combat illiteracy rates in the more remote areas of the young Soviet Union.<sup>93</sup>

The turnaround moment came in the 1930s, when the success of indigenization backfired. The newly-introduced planned economy, with its focus on the collectivization of agriculture and the development of manufacturing and industry, increasingly depended on the forced migration of a mostly ethnic Russian labour force into the union’s periphery. This perceived (if unintended) Russification began to irk local elites, leading to what Moscow in some places noted as the emergence of a national consciousness that was judged counterproductive to communism. In turn, non-Russian politicians quickly began to raise suspicion throughout the party ranks and the promotion of national culture was slowly abolished. National political and cultural leaders and ethnic minorities were prosecuted, deported, and dispersed, as the ideology slowly shifted from the Leninist axiom of “socialism in all countries” to Stalin’s hard-line “socialism in one country.”<sup>94</sup>

A more ideologically inflected dynamic driving this unexpected change of heart, was Lenin’s and Stalin’s initial belief that “non-Russian nationalism was a defensive response to

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<sup>91</sup> “Indigenization” is the translation of “коренизация” suggested by Terry Martin, in his “An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism,” in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, eds. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 73.

<sup>92</sup> Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich*, 302-4. The figure 48 for the number of recognized ethnicities comes from Kappeler, as cited. Ian Bremmer counted 53, in “Reassessing Soviet Nationalities Theory,” the introductory chapter to Bremmer and Taras, eds., *Nations & Politics*, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich*, 303-4.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 306-7.

the experience of Russian Great Power or imperial chauvinism.”<sup>95</sup> By trying to recast the central state as explicitly anti-imperialist and not Russocentric, Russians in the Soviet Union effectively became the one nationality without a titular government to their name. Nevertheless, Russians soon permeated *all* the levels and localities of government, instead of being concentrated in only one of the republics, as was customary for the other nationalities. In effect, the anti-imperialist policy launched the Russians into becoming the union’s prime ethnic grouping.<sup>96</sup>

After 21 years of coming of age as an Interbellum nation state, this thoroughly Russified Soviet Union was the entity that Latvia was incorporated into in 1940. Consequently, the budding republic had some socialist catching-up to do. Leading local figures were prosecuted and replaced by ethnic Russians, with Latvians only beginning to climb the party ranks from the 1950s and the 1960s onward, and the processes of forced collectivization and inbound ethnic Russian labour migration of the 1930s were rolled out at great speed, to aid a planned economy wherein the thoroughly European Baltic republics were seen, just like in earlier times, as an innovation-driven “window to Europe.”<sup>97</sup>

Given this Janus-faced history of imperial repression in a multinational state, it is perhaps not surprising that the Latvian constitution forms stark contrast to its Russian equivalent. Whereas the people of Russia in their 1993 foundational text declared themselves

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<sup>95</sup> Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire,” 80.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–80.

<sup>97</sup> Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich*, 310–13. The “window to Europe” phrase is often attributed to Alexander Pushkin (for instance in Bezemer and Jansen, *Een geschiedenis van Rusland*, 82), who used it to describe Peter I’s ambitions in the founding of Saint Petersburg, in the second stanza of the poem “Медный всадник: Петербургская повесть” [The bronze horseman: a tale of Saint Petersburg]. In reality, Pushkin, in turn, borrowed the term from Italian *uomo universale* Francesco Algarotti, who wrote of Russia’s new capital, “I am at length going to give you some account of this new city, of this great window lately opened in the north, thro’ which Russia looks into Europe” – see Algarotti to Hervey, Saint Petersburg, 30 June 1739, in *Letters from Count Algarotti to Lord Hervey and the Marquis Scipio Maffei, Containing the State of the Trade, Marine, Revenues, and Forces of the Russian Empire with the History of the Late War between the Russians and the Turks, and Observations on the Baltic and Caspian Seas* [. . .] (London: Johnson and Payne, 1769), 1:70.



fundamentally “multinational,” a 2014 amendment to the Latvian constitution added a preamble of a markedly different, monocultural complexion, asserting that

the State of Latvia, proclaimed on 18 November 1918, has been established by uniting historical Latvian lands and on the basis of the unwavering will of the Latvian nation to have its own State and its inalienable right of self-determination in order to *guarantee the existence and development of the Latvian nation, its language and culture throughout the centuries*, to ensure freedom and promote welfare of the people of Latvia and each individual.<sup>98</sup>

### 2.2.1.3. The Nation-State Nuisance

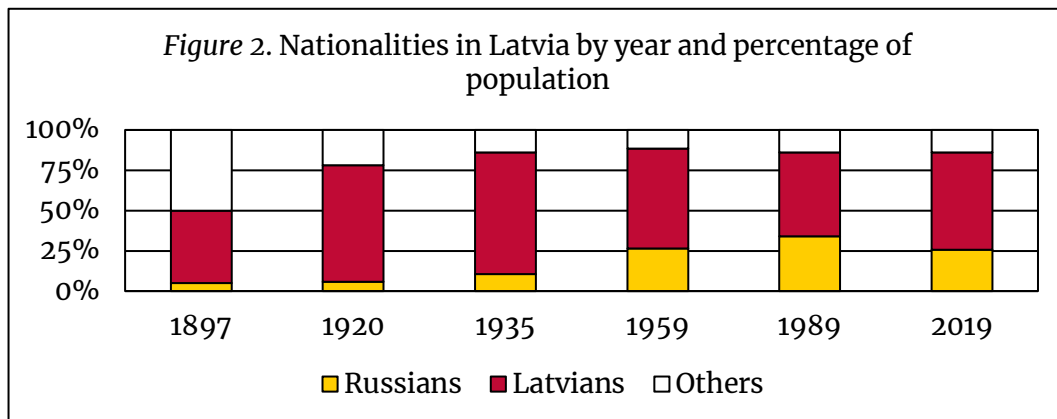
Considering that ethnic Latvians presently only make up about 60.2 percent of the country’s total population, the claim that the Latvian state was established to guarantee the existence of the Latvian nation is both understandable and inconsiderate.<sup>99</sup> It is understandable, because the steep increase of Latvia’s Russian population between 1935 and 1989 clearly effectuated a relative decline of the percentage of those considered to be ethnically Latvian, as evidenced by the census data cited in section 2.1.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Sat. preamble. Emphasis added.

<sup>99</sup> Official OCMA statistics indicate that on 1 January 2019, 1.3 million inhabitants were ethnic Latvians (“Latvietis | Kopā”); see “Latvijas iedzīvotāju sadalījums pēc nacionālā sastāva un valstiskās piederības.” While this thesis does not aspire to offer a deconstruction of the practical definitions underpinning specific labels of nationality, Latvianness is held by some historians to be a rather arbitrary invention, premised on the rallying of diverse tribes – see, for instance, Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 34–35.

<sup>100</sup> Expanding on the sources used to compile figure 1, Bauer, Kappeler, and Roth show in *Die Nationalitäten des Russischen Reiches*, 2:215 that in 1897, 1.1 million inhabitants of the greater Baltic region were Latvian (“Lettisch”), or 44.9 percent of a slightly skewed base figure that, as indicated earlier, includes Estonia but leaves out most of Latgale. By 1920, according to the State Statistical Bureau’s *Latvijas statistiskā gada grāmata 1921*, 4, there were 1.2 million Latvians (“Lettons”) in the newly-formed Latvian state, or 72.6 percent of the total – a figure that in 1935 would rise to 1.5 million, or 75.5 percent, as stated in State Statistical Bureau, *Latvijas statistikas gada grāmata 1939*, 8–9. In the Soviet census of 1959, the number of Latvians (“латыши”) fell to 1.3 million, then equivalent to 62.0 percent of the population, and in 1989, 1.4 million Latvians amounted to only 52.0 percent of the total; see Central Statistical Board of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, *Итоги всесоюзной переписи населения 1959 года: Латвийская ССР*, 92–93 and Latvian SSR State Statistical Committee, *1989. gada vissavienības tautas skaitīšanas rezultāti*, 16, respectively.



Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, President of Latvia from 1999 to 2007, articulated the Latvian chagrin at this dynamic in a 2005 Europe Day speech, one year after Latvia's accession to the European Union.

Unlike the case in Western Europe, the fall of the hated Nazi German empire did not result in my country's liberation. Instead, the three Baltic countries of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were subject to another brutal occupation by another foreign, totalitarian empire, that of the Soviet Union. For five long decades, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were erased from the map of Europe. Under the Soviet rule, the three Baltic countries experienced mass deportations and killings, the loss of their freedom, and the influx of millions of Russian-speaking settlers. . . . For Latvia, the beginning of the end of the Second World War arrived many decades later, on May the 4th, 1990. This was the date when my country's parliament passed a declaration of independence from the Soviet Union.<sup>101</sup>

By mentioning Soviet occupation and Russian migration in the same breath and invoking the colonial language of the "settler," Vīķe-Freiberga effectively voiced the opinion that these Russian-speaking people were occupants by implication. Proponents of this view will perhaps justify it with reference to the comparatively small number of ethnic Latvians, seeing in these Soviet-era migrants some sort of threat to the Latvian nation. But the constitution's existential guarantee is also inconsiderate. Here, it is worth investigating the

<sup>101</sup> Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, "Declaration by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia regarding 9 May 2005," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia*, 12 January 2005, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/information-on-the-history-of-latvia/5505-declaration-by-h-e-dr-vaira-vike-freiberga-president-of-the-republic-of-latvia-regarding-9-may-2005-riga-12-january-2005>. The viewpoint expressed here by Vīķe-Freiberga has since been enshrined in the aforementioned preamble to the Latvian constitution, which holds that "the people of Latvia did not recognise the occupation regimes, resisted them and regained their freedom by restoring national independence on 4 May 1990 on the basis of continuity of the State. They honour their freedom fighters, commemorate victims of foreign powers, condemn the Communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes and their crimes."

immediate cause of this “influx of settlers.” In general, besides the increased demand for skilled labour, the Soviet planned economy’s focus on innovation also meant the import of above-average numbers of highly-educated Russians, all of which is part of the steep rise in Latvia’s population figures between 1935 and 1989.<sup>102</sup>

More specifically, three considerations apply. First, that these Soviet citizens may well be considered an inherently cosmopolitan group of people. Given their innate multinational outlook (a fact acknowledged by Viķe-Freiberga’s usage of the “Russian-language,” not merely “Russian” label), their personal backgrounds did not by logical necessity pit them against any kind of local culture or people. Second, that from the histories cited so far, it follows that many of these migrations were, in fact, forced, not voluntary.<sup>103</sup> And lastly, that “a very large minority”<sup>104</sup> of these so-called settlers in the 1991 referendum voted in favour of Latvian independence from the Soviet Union.<sup>105</sup> These facts attest to the inconsiderate nature of Latvia’s post-occupation nationalism, articulated as follows by one Russian-born two-term member of the Latvian parliament, “we are here; we are not guests.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 187. On the subject of population shares, note also that figure 2 reflects how by 1935, independent Latvia already counted 206.5 thousand Russians, well over one third of the 556.4 thousand Russians registered in 1959.

<sup>103</sup> Following Alexievich’s assessment in *Secondhand Time*, it may even be said that Russian-language migrants were victims of Soviet repression just like any other group.

<sup>104</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 199–200.

<sup>105</sup> According to Kasekamp, a convincing 74 percent of residents of the Latvian SSR voted to restore the independence that was lost in 1940; see *Baltic States*, 155.

<sup>106</sup> “Мы здесь – не гости.” Vladimir Buzayev, “Нарушение прав национальных меньшинств в Латвии” [The violation of the rights of national minorities in Latvia], in *Современная европейская этнократия: Нарушение прав национальных меньшинств в Эстонии и Латвии* [Contemporary European ethnocracy: the violation of the rights of national minorities in Estonia and Latvia], eds. Mikhail Demurin and Vladimir Simindey (Moscow: Historical Memory Foundation, 2009), 188. In 2012, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, Edgars Rinkēvičs, placed one of the editors of this book and the director of the Historical Memory Foundation on his country’s persona non grata list; see “Российских историков Дюкова и Симиндея внесли в ‘черный список’” [Russian historians Dyukov and Simindey placed on blacklist] *DELFI* (Riga), 2 March 2012, <https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/rossijskih-istorikov-dyukova-i-simindeya-vnesli-v-chnyj-spisok.d?id=42178632>.

### 2.2.2. Accommodation: Same Culture, New Home

#### 2.2.2.1. From *Lingua Franca* to Foreign Language

Despite diversity having once been the epitome of empire and the pride of Leninist planners, the failure to elevate many of the Soviet Union's local languages to full official status in the various union republics led to the gradual reinstatement of Russian as the primary language of government from 1932 onwards.<sup>107</sup> And while the Latvian language did retain a limited standing after the 1940 annexation, with members of the Latvian intelligentsia using it more or less without repercussion, the All-Soviet primacy of the Russian language meant that the republic's new inhabitants could easily get by without learning the local tongue.<sup>108</sup>

So much so, that in 1989, only 23 percent of Latvia's non-Latvian population was able to speak the national language; a figure troubling Latvians anxious to conserve it.<sup>109</sup> In 1998, these concerns led to a constitutional amendment that added an article stating that "the Latvian language is the official language in the Republic of Latvia."<sup>110</sup> *One Essential Grammar* of the Latvian language captures the spirit of preservation like so.

Ethnic Latvians constituted only 52% of the population [in 1991] . . . so language and citizenship laws were introduced to protect the status of Latvian as the official language. These call for Latvian to be taught as a second language in the many ethnic minority schools, and recently more subjects have to be taught in Latvian in these schools to ensure that students are not disadvantaged when applying for university places as higher education is available only in Latvian. . . . Latvian has to be used as the official language in public life, and fines can be imposed if this is not done – for example, if menus in a restaurant are not displayed in Latvian. While some of these measures may seem harsh, Latvians feel that their language has always been under threat.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Martin, "An Affirmative Action Empire," 81.

<sup>108</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 95 and 186.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>110</sup> Sat. art. 4.

<sup>111</sup> Dace Prauliņš, *Latvian: An Essential Grammar* (London: Routledge, 2012), 3-4.

Even in this work of linguistics, then, the Latvian language is presented as being under a constant socio-political threat to its proliferation – and, granted, there may be some credibility in that assessment. After all, provided that Cheskin’s 2012 focus group research is still representative,<sup>112</sup> his study suggested that Russian speakers “still feel that Latvian culture is not their culture,”<sup>113</sup> a point that may well be indicative of Russian Latvians’ uncharitable attitude towards the Latvian language.

Cheskin, however, casts his findings in a slightly different light, maintaining that this is therefore something that state legislators should bear in mind when, for example, debating whether to move from having 60% of school teaching in Latvian to 100%, or of the need to reduce the amount of Russian-language media in Latvia. To attempt to remove the influence of Russian culture and various aspects of Russian identity would surely only lead to a return of discourses of marginalization and discrimination.<sup>114</sup>

This way, a zero-sum game dynamic has developed where any measure taken to protect the Latvian language by securing its legal and practical status is likely to be seen by others as concurrently diminishing the role of Russian in the public area – and the other way round.<sup>115</sup>

#### 2.2.2.2. Education between Integration and Segregation

Indeed, the language issue spilled over to the field of education when a reform was enacted in 2004, demanding 60 percent of subjects in Russian-language schools to be offered in Latvian. As late as 2018, however, Estonian historian Andres Kasekamp noted persistent “passive resistance and inability on the part of some teachers” as one reason why that target

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<sup>112</sup> Cheskin, “Russian-Speaking Identity,” 291. Cheskin spoke to three groups of native speakers of Russian, all of them Riga-based, including ten undergraduate students aged 19 to 20, eight post-graduates of between 22 and 25 years old, and ten persons between 40 and 60 years of age.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> In this sense, in the Latvian case as well, Stone is right to suspect that language forms the basis for most disputes concerning minority accommodation; see *Policy Paradox*, 90.

has yet to be fully met.<sup>116</sup> Regardless, in the same year, parliament passed a law phasing out minority-language instruction almost entirely between 2019 and 2021. While “children of ethnic minorities will continue learning their native language, literature and subjects related to culture and history in the respective minority language,” the law prescribes that “all general education subjects in high school . . . will be taught only in the Latvian language.”<sup>117</sup>

This legislation sparked controversy, as twenty Harmony-affiliated members of the 2014–2018 parliament challenged it at Latvia’s Constitutional Court.<sup>118</sup> They claimed that the reform violated the constitutional rights to non-discrimination and to the preservation and development of minority languages and ethno-cultural identities. In April 2019, the court ruled that the legislation was in compliance to the constitution. It reasoned that

the State . . . [has] the obligation to create the preconditions for the participation of ethnic minorities in a discourse typical of a democratic society. However, . . . ethnic minorities should show the initiative to participate in this discourse in the official language. . . . Every person, who [resides] permanently in Latvia, [has] to know the official language of this State, moreover, on a level to allow full participation in the life of a democratic society.<sup>119</sup>

By proposing that the main subjects in schools should be taught solely in Latvian, the 2018 reform achieves much of what the national conservative party For Fatherland and

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<sup>116</sup> Kasekamp, *Baltic States*, 168. In late 2018, a collective of Latvian journalists corroborated Kasekamp’s assertions independently by uncovering that in 2016 and in 2017, nine out of ten of Riga’s worst schools were of the Russian minority format; see Inga Sprīņģe, “Из 10 самых неуспевающих школ Риги только одна – латышская. Почему?” [Out of ten of the most unsuccessful schools in Riga, only one is Latvian. How come?], *The Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism Re:Baltica* (Riga), 10 December 2018, <https://ru.rebaltica.lv/2018/12/928>.

<sup>117</sup> “Government Okays Transition to Latvian as Sole Language at Schools in 2019,” *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 23 January 2018, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/education/government-okays-transition-to-latvian-as-sole-language-at-schools-in-2019.a265290>. Although this article reported that the law was still in its drafting phase, a later article mentioned the bill being signed into law. “President promulgates law leading to Latvian language switch in schools,” *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 2 April 2018, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/education/president-promulgates-law-leading-to-latvian-language-switch-in-schools.a273409>.

<sup>118</sup> “Court Rules Transition to Latvian-Only Education Constitutional,” *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 23 April 2019, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/court-rules-transition-to-latvian-only-education-constitutional.a316783>.

<sup>119</sup> Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia, 2018-12-01, [http://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/2018-12-01\\_PR\\_par-spriedumu\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/2018-12-01_PR_par-spriedumu_ENG.pdf).

Freedom/LNNK proposed in a 2012 referendum bid. Eventually, although FF/LNNK failed to obtain the required number of signatures, its attempt did provoke a counter-referendum calling for the recognition of Russian as a second official language, launched from within Harmony's political base, albeit with reluctant support from the party's decidedly moderate politicians.<sup>120</sup> In late 2012, 75 percent of eligible Latvians voted against the suggested change, neatly mirroring, in Cheskin's estimation, the country's ethnic makeup of the time.<sup>121</sup>

Egils Levits, who became President of Latvia on 8 July 2019, shared his views on language use in an interview published one year before the Russian language referendum.

In identifying as a Latvian, the Latvian language is the central, though not the only element. That other people also speak other languages at home or in the family does not in any way diminish or interfere with this fact. . . . If no one says that he is Latvian, then I must say that the Latvian state as a state for Latvians does not make sense. In that case, it will naturally disappear.<sup>122</sup>

If his views throughout the past decade have been consistent, Latvia's new president thus clearly ascribes to the zero-sum game understanding of the language equilibrium described above. And this assessment shines through in his 2011 stance on education as well.

That we are reproducing a segregated school system from the Soviet Union; that Russians are studying in their own schools – this is a very important element that does not promote cohesion. . . . Latvianness in Latvia must be normal, so that Latvians feel comfortable and good in their country.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> "Court Rules Transition to Latvian-Only Education Constitutional," *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 23 April 2019, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/court-rules-transition-to-latvian-only-education-constitutional.a316783>.

<sup>121</sup> Cheskin, *Russian Speakers*, 163–64.

<sup>122</sup> "Identifikācija kā latvietim, kur centrālais, lai arī ne vienīgais elements ir latviešu valoda. Tas, ka citi cilvēki runā arī citās valodās – mājās vai ģimenē, tas to nekādā ziņā nemazina un netraucē. . . . Ja neviens vairs neteiks, ka viņš ir latvietis, tad man ir jāsaprot, ka Latvijas valstij kā latviskai valstij nav jēgas. Tad viņa arī izzudīs, dabiskā ceļā." Ieva Lešinska and Arnis Rītups, "Defektīvas demokrātijas miglā" [Defective democracy in the fog], *Rīgas Laiks* (Riga), September 2011, <https://www.rigaslaiks.lv/zurnals/defektivas-demokratijas-migla-1139>. Levits was interviewed in his capacity as a judge on the European Court of Justice, which he served from 2004 to 2019.

<sup>123</sup> "Tas, ka mums tiek atrāžota segregētā skolu sistēma no Padomju Savienības, ka krievi mācās savās skolās, ir ļoti būtisks elements, kas neveicina saliedētību. . . . Latviskumam Latvijā jābūt normalitātei, lai latvieši savā valstī justos ērti un labi." *Ibid.*

In other words, it appears that Latvia's new president, too, is a long-time proponent of linguistic assimilation<sup>124</sup> – a concept contrary to a person's being entitled to “retaining a minority identity if desired,” besides the “common overarching citizenship identity.”<sup>125</sup>

### 2.2.2.3. Economic (Dis)parity

Turning to a different mode of accommodation, the primacy of Latvian language and culture seems to have had little bearing on Russian Latvians' economic position. Ekmanis, for instance, observed that the language question has “been arguably overblown in top down discussions, while causing few problems in day to day interpersonal integration.”<sup>126</sup> In similar vein, perhaps, Michelle E. Commercio in 2008 typified Latvia's contemporary Russian population as being, on the whole, adaptive to their situation. As those with insufficient mastery of the Latvian language were deemed unfit to work in the public sector (if not because their language deficiency complicated their citizenship status in the first place) most of them ended up in commercial enterprise.<sup>127</sup> Particularly in the industrial and service sectors, Commercio found that Russian Latvians often “play a prominent role in local business communities.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> If that seems like a harsh verdict, consider Stone's opinion that “issues such as . . . bilingual education . . . are about defending communities against death by assimilation;” see *Policy Paradox*, 21.

<sup>125</sup> Nils Muiznieks, Juris Rozenvalds, and Ieva Birka, “Ethnicity and Social Cohesion in the Post-Soviet Baltic States,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 47, no. 3 (2013): 306. See also Sat. art. 114, which guarantees unspecified minorities the right to languages preservation and development – though, apparently, in anything but public life and the school system. Incidentally, this article played a key role in the twenty Harmony parliamentarians' 2018 Constitutional Court appeal.

<sup>126</sup> Ekmanis, “Host Land or Homeland?,” 97–98. In the country's second-largest city of Daugavpils, for instance, Ekmanis observed that “it is often easier to speak Russian here than Latvian;” see “Diversity in Daugavpils,” 72

<sup>127</sup> Commercio, *Russian Minority Politics*, 132.

<sup>128</sup> Commercio, “Systems of Partial Control: Ethnic Dynamics in Post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43 (2008): 94.



Indeed, for many migrants, the initial decision to stay in post-restoration Latvia had been notably influenced by the fact that living standards in the Baltic republics were perceived as being higher than elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.<sup>129</sup> Still, on a more systemic level, Stephen Bloom argued in the previous decade that in Latvia's larger cities, Russian populations lacked "the political clout to prevent their tax revenue from being distributed to the countryside,"<sup>130</sup> while the lack of political representation on the national level prevented the general redistribution of financial means to the poorer, predominantly Russian-populated regions of Latvia.<sup>131</sup>

Both Commercio's and Bloom's studies are, however, distinctively outdated. Even if Bloom's conclusions are as much political as they are economic, they are still based primarily on economic data from the period spanning 1990 to 1999. Likewise, Commercio grounds her work on survey data from the Baltic Barometer, an annual publication that last came out in 2004. In lieu of more up-to-date research on the economic outlook of Russian Latvians, for the purpose of this thesis, a brief look at the data readily available will have to suffice. In 2010, Latvia's Central Statistical Bureau began differentiating the country's unemployment rate along binary ethnic lines. Irrespective of an impressive overall decline of 12.1 percentage points between 2010 (when the total unemployment rate was as high as 19.5 percent) and 2018 (when it was 7.4 percent), the rate of unemployment among Latvians has been anywhere between 25.0 (in 2017) and 40.3 percent (in 2012) lower when compared to the unemployment rate among non-Latvians in all years measured.<sup>132</sup>

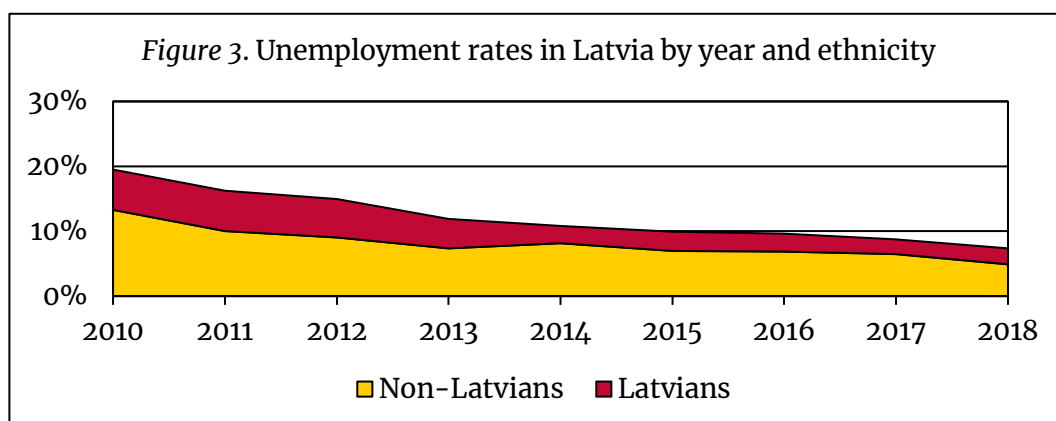
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<sup>129</sup> Kasekamp, *Baltic States*, 167-68.

<sup>130</sup> Stephen Bloom, "Which Minority Is Appeased? Coalition Potential and Redistribution in Latvia and Ukraine," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 9 (2008): 1591. On the national level, Bloom admits that this effect was apparently alleviated somewhat in periods when the governing coalition depended more on Russian-Latvian parliamentary support.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, "NBGO20: Unemployment Rate by Ethnicity and Sex (%)," [https://data1.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/sociala/sociala\\_\\_\\_nodarb\\_\\_\\_bezdarbs\\_\\_\\_ikgad/NBGO22.px](https://data1.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/sociala/sociala___nodarb___bezdarbs___ikgad/NBGO22.px).



Obviously, the comparative percentage means less and less as overall employment figures are on the rise, and Russian Latvians benefit from the same trend in equal measure, as the 9-year average and the median difference between the two ethnic groupings come out at 32.1 and 31.8 percent, respectively.<sup>133</sup> This improvement of conditions could be one reason why the topic does not in recent times appear to have sparked any substantial political controversy, suggesting that non-ethnic causes may in fact better account for the persistent difference between Latvian and non-Latvian employment figures.<sup>134</sup> In the context of this thesis, therefore, the current bandwidth of Russian Latvians' perceived chances on the job market remains an open question.

<sup>133</sup> Additionally, when interpreting non-Latvian unemployment rates, it must be taken into account that not all non-Latvians are Russians. Still, that contingent makes up almost two thirds (64.7 percent) of the country's non-Latvian population, with the next-largest groups of Belarusians (8.0 percent of non-Latvians), Ukrainians (6.1 percent), Poles (5.2 percent), and Lithuanians (3.1 percent) trailing far behind. According to the OCMA, in "Latvijas iedzīvotāju sadalījums pēc nacionālā sastāva un valstiskās piederības," Latvia is home to 66.5 thousand Belarusians ("Baltikrievs"), 50.7 thousand Ukrainians ("Ukrainis"), 34.6 thousand Poles ("Polis"), and 25.7 thousand Lithuanians ("Lietuvietis"), with Belarusians and Ukrainians being well represented in the non-citizen count, at 30.9 thousand and 22.2 thousand, respectively.

<sup>134</sup> Indeed, in a chapter aptly titled "Numbers," Stone specifically problematizes the reliability of what is represented by official unemployment rates, stating that "there are many possible measures of any phenomenon. . . . The unemployment rate, for example, is designed as a measure of people wanting work, or the need for jobs. People are counted as unemployed if they are older than sixteen, have previously held a job, are available for work, and have looked for work within the previous four weeks. The official method of counting unemployment (which, make no mistake, is the official definition of the problem), leaves out a host of people who fit somebody's notion of unemployment but not the official definition." Stone then proceeds to list a number of reasons why people who do not the official criteria may or may not be conceived of as being unemployed. See Stone, *Policy Paradox*, 183-84.

### 2.2.3. Politics: “Red Lines”

#### 2.2.3.1. Russians in or of Latvia?

Throughout the 1990s, the issuance of citizenship to Soviet-era migrants constituted the single-most pressing concern in Latvian minority policy. Initially, only those who were Latvian before the end of independence in 1940, or those who could prove their lineal kinship to such persons, were recognized as citizens of post-restoration Latvia – a principle codified eventually in the citizenship law of 1994. The others, unless they took up citizenship of another state, became non-citizens. They received a special, grey-coloured passport that granted them a home country, protection against extradition to another state, and full diplomatic assistance. At the same time, it barred them from taking on a considerable number of public sector jobs and from participating in national elections.<sup>135</sup>

Given the fact that the vast majority of post-war migrants did not qualify for Latvian citizenship proper, the law was amended in 1995 to include a naturalization procedure requiring that candidates for citizenship take a language exam and a history test.<sup>136</sup> Yet, understandable as these criteria may be from a Latvian viewpoint of cultural preservation, the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (since renamed the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or OSCE) repeatedly criticized the Latvian government’s approach.

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<sup>135</sup> Kristīne Krūma, “Checks and Balances in Latvian Nationality Policies,” in *Citizenship Policies in the New Europe*, eds. Rainer Bauböck, Bernhard Perching, and Wiebke Sievers, expanded and updated ed. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 73. With regards to voting rights, consider also Sat. art. 8, which holds that “All citizens of Latvia *who enjoy full rights of citizenship* and, who on election day have attained eighteen years of age shall be entitled to vote.” Emphasis added.

<sup>136</sup> Kasekamp, *Baltic States*, 168. The 2013 version of the law simply states the demand that those requesting naturalization are “fluent in the Latvian language,” as per Citizenship Law 2013 sect. 12 (1), <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/id/57512-citizenship-law>.

Reflecting on the language test, for instance, the High Commissioner found that “only 10% of the young people in a survey of the Naturalisation Board could speak Latvian fluently. For very many of those interested in applying for citizenship the language test must therefore constitute a formidable barrier.”<sup>137</sup> In more normative language, the High Commissioner expressed his concern that it would be “undesirable that Latvia would insist on such high requirements for citizenship that a great number of applicants would not be able to meet them,” insisting that “there are other instruments than the citizenship law to promote and strengthen the Latvian identity, especially in the cultural, educational and linguistic fields.”<sup>138</sup>

In 2007, one study found that the language exam remained the most significant obstacle on the road to naturalization. Another barrier involved travel restrictions and opportunities that came with obtaining Latvian citizenship. Although younger Russian Latvians were keen to reap the benefits of becoming a European citizen, the older ones tended to favour non-citizens’ possibilities of visa-free travel to visit friends and family residing elsewhere in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Finally, the study established that, particularly by Soviet-era Russian migrants, refusing to become Latvian was in some cases intended as a kind of protest – an “ideological stubbornness” resulting from the loss of

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<sup>137</sup> Max van der Stoel, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe High Commissioner on National Minorities, to Valdis Birkavs, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, The Hague, 23 May 1997, 376/97/L. Already in 1993, when the naturalization legislation was still under debate, the High Commissioner had already suggested that persons over 60 years of age and disabled persons should be exempted from the language requirement, in Van der Stoel, Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe High Commissioner on National Minorities, to Georgs Andrejevs, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, The Hague, 6 April 1993, 238/93/L/Rev, under “Conclusions and recommendations” (8). See also Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 187.

<sup>138</sup> Van der Stoel, Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe High Commissioner on National Minorities, to Georgs Andrejevs, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, The Hague, 6 April 1993, 238/93/L/Rev. By 1997, the High Commissioner concluded that Latvia had gone overboard on one of these “other instruments,” writing, “I wonder whether it is really necessary for candidates for citizenship to know what Swedish educational policy was like in Vidzeme in the seventeenth century, or which religion was supported in Latgale during the period of Polish region, or which state officials hold the most merits for achieving diplomatic recognition of Latvia in the beginning of the twentieth century;” see Van der Stoel to Birkavs.

privilege that came with the transition from being the Soviet Union's titular nationality to becoming a small country's ethnic minority.<sup>139</sup>

“Stubbornness,” however, is a negative frame – and in this respect, the current Russian perspective often highlights other feelings associated with non-citizenship. Last year, for instance, Russian state-owned news agency RIA Novosti published an article on these “non-citizens by principle,”<sup>140</sup> suggesting that what had been identified in 2007 as a privilege-based reason for not naturalizing, has morphed today into a more concrete and biting argument for keeping the non-citizen status. Focussing on three of these non-citizens all of them grey-haired men, RIA Novosti noted a general disenchantment with the movement for an independent Latvia, which “many representatives of the Russian-language intelligentsia supported. They hoped that independence would bring freedom of beliefs, creativity, and change. Besides, to many Russian-language Latvians, it seemed that a small country could be made prosperous more easily than a huge country.”<sup>141</sup>

Thus, non-citizens are presented as a group of people who feel cheated out of a country that they supported, even helped to build,<sup>142</sup> and the article's last paragraph paints a picture that is even more bleak. “Today, many ‘non-citizens’ are not in a hurry to naturalize. . . .

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<sup>139</sup> Ivļevs and King, “Naturalisations in Latvia,” 7–8 and 13. See also Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich* and Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire” for a discussion of the social position of the Russian nationality in the Soviet Union.

<sup>140</sup> RIA Novosti, “Русские ‘неграждане’ ими и останутся. Из принципа” [Russian non-citizens will stay non-citizens. As a matter of principal], 19 August 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180819/1526739414.html>.

<sup>141</sup> “Движение за выход из СССР . . . поддержали многие представители русскоязычной интеллигенции. Они надеялись, что независимость даст свободу убеждений, творчества и перемещений. Кроме того, многим русскоязычным латвийцам тогда казалось, что небольшую страну привести к процветанию легче, чем огромную державу.” RIA Novosti, “Русские ‘неграждане’ ими и останутся.”

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. For a fascinating close-up of the transition towards restoration of Latvian and Baltic independence and the role and composition of the Latvian Popular Front movement for post-Soviet independence, see chapter 8 of Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 214–315.

Presently, the number of ‘passportless’ inhabitants of Latvia is decreasing as a matter of course, rather than out of a desire to obtain citizenship: these people are simply dying out.”<sup>143</sup>

For the time being, however, the non-citizen phenomenon remains a rather common feature of Russian existence in Latvia, as on 1 January 2019, only 345.9 thousand of the nation’s 538.4 thousand Russians were citizens of Latvia, whereas 147.2 thousand have retained non-citizen status.<sup>144</sup> Meanwhile, some 53.9 thousand inhabitants were citizens of the Russian Federation.<sup>145</sup> In both the non- and the foreign citizen categories, then, Russians make up the majority grouping.<sup>146</sup> Counting all ethnicities, Latvia is home to a combined 224.7 thousand non-citizens (10.7 percent of total), as well as 95.0 thousand foreigners (4.5 percent). Ironically, then, the sheer size of these groups makes non-citizenship a problematic fact of political life even by Latvia’s very own political standards.<sup>147</sup>

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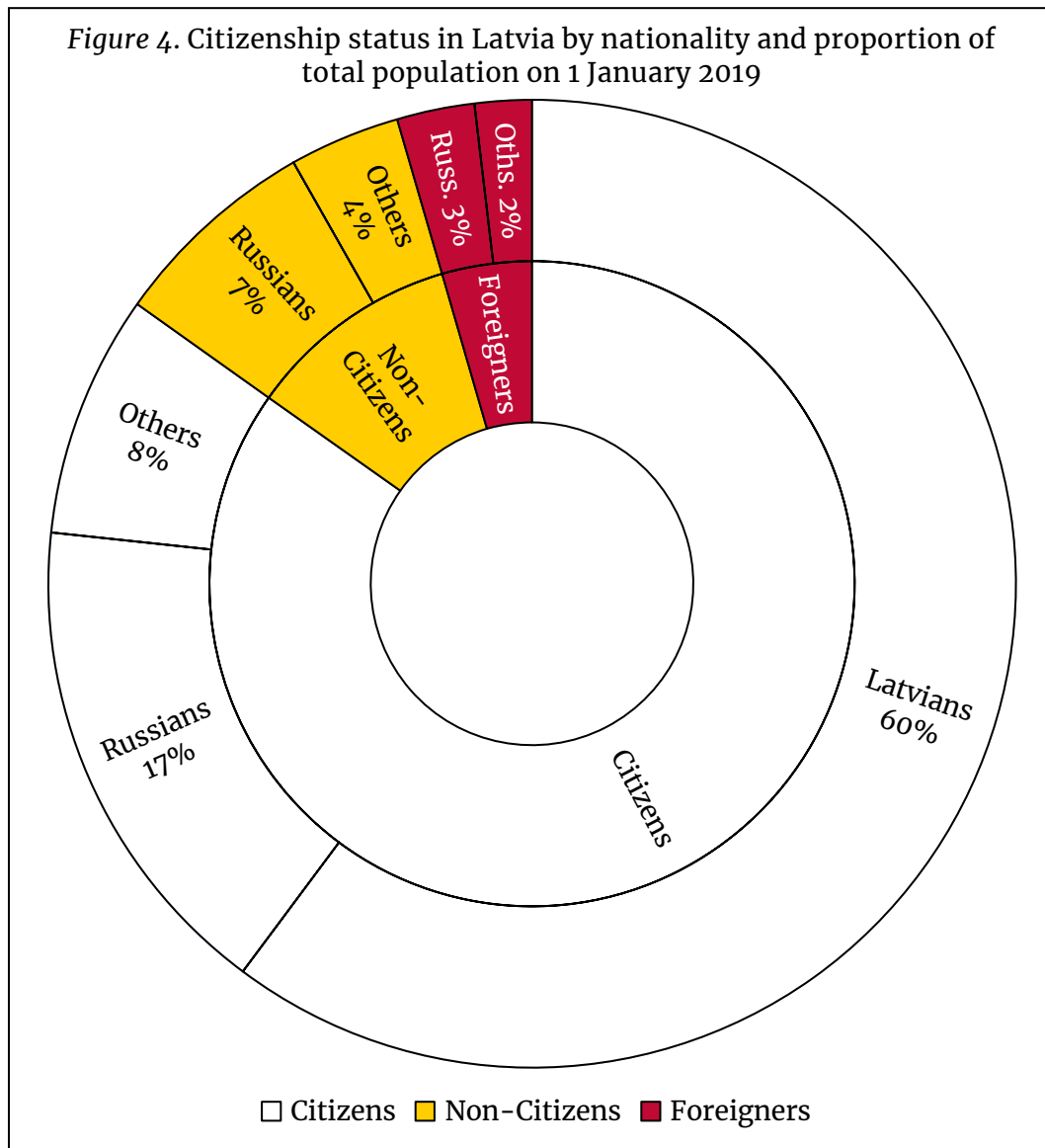
<sup>143</sup> “Сегодня многие ‘неграждане’ не торопятся с натурализацией. . . . Сейчас число ‘беспаспортных’ жителей Латвии уменьшается скорее в силу естественных причин, чем из-за желаний получить гражданство — люди просто умирают.” RIA Novosti, “Русские ‘неграждане’ ими и останутся.”

<sup>144</sup> OCMA, “Latvijas iedzīvotāju sadalījums pēc nacionālā sastāva un valstiskās piederības.” Citizens (“pilsonis”) with a Russian background account for 16.5 percent of the country’s total population. Russian non-citizens (“nepilsonis”) make up 7.0 percent.

<sup>145</sup> Another 2.6 percent of the population enjoys citizenship of the Russian Federation (“Krievijas pilsonis”). This figure is culled from OCMA, “Latvijas iedzīvotāju sadalījums pēc valstiskās piederības” [Population of Latvia by citizenship status], [https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISVP\\_Latvija\\_pec\\_VPD.pdf](https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISVP_Latvija_pec_VPD.pdf). Pursuant to Citizenship Law 2013 sect. 8 (3), sect. 12 (2), sect. 12 (3), and sect. 23 (3), and given that no agreement on dual citizenship between Latvia and Russia presently exists, Latvian law in most cases effectively prohibits dual citizenship of these states.

<sup>146</sup> OCMA, “Latvijas iedzīvotāju sadalījums pēc nacionālā sastāva un valstiskās piederības.”

<sup>147</sup> After all, Latvian election laws prescribe an electoral threshold of 5 percent, meaning that any political grouping that receives a larger share is entitled to a proportionate number of seats in the Latvian parliament. Saeima Election Law 2018, art. 38 (1), [https://www.cvk.lv/upload\\_file/Saeima\\_Election\\_Law\\_2018\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.cvk.lv/upload_file/Saeima_Election_Law_2018_ENG.pdf).



### 2.2.3.2. The Innocents Abroad

If the Latvian government faced continuous international pressure on the topic of minority rights throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, first from the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, then on the basis of European Union accession criteria, it appears that the country has since managed to satisfy the multilateral demands. Ever since Latvia joined the European Union in 2004, consolidating the long-awaited geopolitical “return to its

native Europe,”<sup>148</sup> and especially after its subsequent signing of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007, it formally accepted the responsibility to uphold the value of “respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.”<sup>149</sup> In this vein, a visit to Latvia by the OSCE High Commissioner in March 2019 was mostly uneventful,<sup>150</sup> while recent developments in Poland and Hungary have only highlighted the rarity of European Union institutions berating member states’ performances on respecting and promoting shared basic values.<sup>151</sup>

One foreign actor, however, has consistently called out Latvia for its minority record, all the while denouncing the international community for its perceived lack of criticism to the same effect. In the 1990s, that condemnation took on a rather aggressive form, as the Russian Federation “did little to take away the fear on the part of the Balts that its ultimate

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<sup>148</sup> To borrow an often-cited phrase presumably coined by Polish activist-turned-politician Adam Michnik, in his “Notes from the Revolution,” trans. Klara Glowczewska, *New York (NY) Times Magazine*, 11 March 1990, national edition, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/11/magazine/notes-from-the-revolution.html>. The full quote runs “For now two roads lay open before my country, and to our newly freed neighbors: . . . one road leads to nationalism and isolation, the other to a return to our ‘native Europe.’”

<sup>149</sup> Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union art. 2, 2012 O.J. C 326/01, at 17. In fact, that European enlargement is concerned as much with “native” identity as it is with geopolitical interests and security, is argued convincingly by Karen E. Smith in her chapter “Enlargement, the Neighbourhood, and European Order,” in *International Relations and the European Union*, eds. Christopher Hill, Michael Smith, and Sophie Vanhoonacker, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 338–39.

<sup>150</sup> The High Commissioner concluded his four-day stay (which, of itself, attested to the subject’s continued salience) with a catch-all recommendation that authorities “keep integration high on the agenda,” while he “offered the support of his institution with respect to several facets of this process.” OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, “High Commissioner on National Minorities Zannier Discusses Inter-Ethnic Relations and Integration on His First Visit to Latvia,” 8 March 2019, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/413690>. Save for a critical piece in a local Daugavpils gazette, to the effect that true representatives of the Russian minority were not heard, the visit did not cause widespread reaction. “А комиссару ничего не скажем!” [But we will not tell the Commissioner anything!], *Миллион* (Daugavpils), 14 March 2019, <https://www.grani.lv/daugavpils/105505-a-komissaru-nichego-ne-skazhem.html>.

<sup>151</sup> In 2017, the European Commission made headlines by asking the Polish government to explain a controversial reform of its judiciary system. For the latest developments, including an overview of prior actions, see European Commission, “Rule of Law: European Commission Launches Infringement Procedure to Protect Judges in Poland from Political Control,” 3 April 2019, Press release IP/19/1957, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-19-1957\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-1957_en.htm).



goal was reintegration of the Baltic states into a reborn Soviet Union.”<sup>152</sup> For this reason, the High Commissioner made sure to visit Moscow numerous times “to explain his activities, to learn the Russian view on specific minority issues, and, when a situation was tense, to urge the Government to exercise restraint.”<sup>153</sup>

That approach, in combination with the later quieting down of criticism on Latvia, may be one of the reasons why Russian officials have gotten into a habit of speaking lowly of the OSCE.<sup>154</sup> In 2009, Sergei Lavrov, then and now Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, wrote that he was “not against the OSCE becoming an ‘umbrella’ pan-European organization. However, nothing was done towards this goal 20 years ago, and nobody seems to be ready for it now. . . . We are only suggested to . . . get by with the existing ‘flabby’ OSCE within a ‘patchwork’ European architecture.”<sup>155</sup> And shortly after Latvia’s 2018 education reform, Konstantin Kosachev, speaking in his capacity as chairman of Russia’s senatorial Committee on Foreign Relations, commented that the OSCE only works in the interests of European Union member states, opining that “whenever such issues go against the interests of Russia or of Russian-language countries, the OSCE’s attention to the problem turns out to be minimal.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Rob Zaagman, *Conflict Prevention in the Baltic States: The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania* (Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues, 1999), 24. Concretely, Zaagman, who was Van der Stoel’s principal adviser between 1993 and 1995, mentions that Russia postponed withdrawal of its troops from Latvian territory after 1991, raised an energy embargo in 1993, and imposed sanctions in the financial and railroad transport domains in 1998.

<sup>153</sup> Walter A. Kemp, *Quiet Diplomacy in Action: The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2001), 60.

<sup>154</sup> Frans Timmermans, who succeeded Zaagman to work in the High Commissioner’s office from 1995 to 1998, praised Van der Stoel’s inclination to be distinctively tough on his collocutors. Timmermans was interviewed by Van der Stoel’s biographer, Anet Bleich, for her book *De stille diplomaat: Max van der Stoel, 1924-2011* [The silent diplomat: Max van der Stoel, 1924-2011] (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 2018), 361.

<sup>155</sup> Sergey Lavrov, “How to End Finally the Cold War?,” *International Affairs*, 9 June 2009, <http://en.interaffairs.ru/exclusive/17-how-to-end-finally-the-cold-war.html>.

<sup>156</sup> “Однако когда эти проблемы затрагивают Россию или русскоязычные страны, внимание ОБСЕ к проблеме оказывается наиболее низким.” Quoted in Yelena Studneva, “Россия и ОБСЕ – за ‘реанимацию’ принципов Парижской хартии” [Russia and the OSCE – in favour of a reanimation of the principles of the Paris Charter], *International Affairs*, 4 April 2018, <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/19646>.

As is customary for many countries across the world, citizens of the Russian Federation enjoy their government's constitutional guarantee of protection and patronage abroad.<sup>157</sup> But in 1999, Russia began to widen and specify the scope of that particular clause by introducing a legislative framework for "realizing free choice of place of residence or the right to return to the Russian Federation" for a broadly-defined group of so-called "compatriots."<sup>158</sup> Four grounds for being considered a compatriot were defined, which included being a "citizen of the Russian Federation residing abroad," a "person with USSR citizenship," a so-called "exiter" . . . or one who has become stateless," or being the "offspring of compatriots."<sup>159</sup> Evidently, most of Latvia's non-citizens are likely to fall into any one, if not multiple of these categories of people.

The compatriot framework received a new impetus in 2006, when a presidential decree launched a full-fledged resettlement programme.<sup>160</sup> Foreign analysts offered two thinly-veiled motivations for the design. For one, the focus on resettlement caused some to suspect that Russia hoped to compensate its waning population figures, with *Radio Free Europe* reporting that "according to official figures, Russia's population, now 143 million, shrinks by some 700,000 people each year due to high mortality and a low birthrate. The authorities have long been trying to bring back ethnic Russians from outside Russia to help reverse the

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<sup>157</sup> Const. RF art. 61 (2).

<sup>158</sup> "Осуществлять свободный выбор места жительства или права на возвращение в Российскую Федерацию." Федеральный закон о государственной политике Российской Федерации в отношении соотечественников за рубежом [Federal law on the state policy of the Russian Federation concerning the relations with compatriots abroad] 1999, No. 99-ФЗ art. 5, sect. 2, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102059861>.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. art. 1, sect. 2. "граждане Российской Федерации, проживающие за рубежом," "лица, состоявшие в гражданстве СССР," "выходцы . . . или ставшие лицами без гражданства," and "потомки соотечественников."

<sup>160</sup> See the Государственная программа по оказанию содействия добровольному переселению в Российскую Федерацию соотечественников, проживающих за рубежом [Government programme to allow facilitation of the voluntary resettlement into the Russian Federation of compatriots residing abroad] 2006, No. 637, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102107419>.

trend.”<sup>161</sup> Others noted that geopolitical considerations were likely to be at play, as the compatriot framework provided Russia with a means of exerting pressure on NATO and on the European Union after many former Soviet and Warsaw Pact states joined both alliances.<sup>162</sup>

Concerning the latter point, Putin’s provocative, widely picked-up televised 2016 quip that “Russia’s border does not end anywhere,”<sup>163</sup> did not do much for countering the idea that the compatriot policy is but one instrument that can be used to boast the scope of Russia’s importance as a global power. And, speaking at a compatriot-centred conference in 2018, Putin backed up his earlier jest by reiterating his government’s promise to defend the rights of Russians abroad.<sup>164</sup> In the Baltic case, one way of supposedly protecting these rights has been the lifting of Russian visa requirements for non-citizens, a measure that was met with Latvian and Estonian criticism, as the measure was expected to “remove any incentive

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<sup>161</sup> Claire Bigg, “Russia: Moscow Attempts to Entice Russians Back Home,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (Prague), 28 June 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1069533.html>. A 2012 interview with Russia’s Special Envoy on Compatriot Matters, offered some support for the population argument. Speaking with the envoy at the triannual World Congress of Compatriots (“the supreme body of delegates that facilitates engagement between compatriots and the state authorities of the Russian Federation”), the state-owned blog *Russia Beyond* quoted him saying, “since the program was launched, more than 98,000 citizens have moved back to Russia – of these, about 36,000 this year;” see Olesya Aldushenko, “Russia Interested in the Russian Diaspora Living Abroad,” *Russia Beyond* (Moscow), 2 October 2012, [https://www.rbth.com/articles/2012/10/01/russia\\_interested\\_in\\_the\\_russian\\_diaspora\\_living\\_abroad\\_18739.html](https://www.rbth.com/articles/2012/10/01/russia_interested_in_the_russian_diaspora_living_abroad_18739.html). To another question, the envoy answered that a programme revision aimed to “involve not only compatriots working under employment contracts but also students at Russian universities, as well as people engaged in business, investment and farming.”

<sup>162</sup> Bezemer and Jansen, *Een geschiedenis van Rusland*, 364. Russian discomfort at former kinstates joining the European and transatlantic alliances remains a hotly debated issue in international politics, at the core of which lies an interpretation dispute concerning the assurance offered by United States Secretary of State James Baker to Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev, that “if we maintain a presence in a Germany that is a part of NATO, there would be no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east.” See United States Department of State, *Memcon of Baker, Gorbachev, and Shevardnadze, 9 February 1990*, ed. Frank H. Perez (Washington, DC: National Security Archive, 2002), 6.

<sup>163</sup> “Russia’s Border Doesn’t End Anywhere, Vladimir Putin Says.” *BBC News* (London), 24 November 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38093468>.

<sup>164</sup> Stepan Kravchenko, “Putin Promises ‘Decisive’ Protection for Ethnic Russians Abroad,” *Bloomberg* (New York, NY), 31 October 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-31/putin-promises-decisive-protection-for-ethnic-russians-abroad>.

. . . to take up local citizenship.”<sup>165</sup> Still, given the Russian diaspora’s size, it is perhaps only reasonable for Moscow to want to maintain some kind of relation to its kinfolk abroad.<sup>166</sup> As one Russian Israeli put it, “actually, it’s a beautiful step. For the first time, they’ve thought about their citizens, even former citizens, because Russia has never cared for people.”<sup>167</sup>

That care, however, combined with concerns over the situation in Crimea, has in recent years raised Latvian vigilance. One notable figure to have undergone a repositioning, is current Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Artis Pabriks.<sup>168</sup> In 2006, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, he wrote that “importantly, it is in the Latvian interest that opportunities for cooperation with Russia are deepened, to the benefit of a positive development of bilateral relations between Latvia and Russia.”<sup>169</sup> By 2014, he was urging his European colleagues to

acknowledge that European countries might face a military threat from revisionist Russia. The EU must also acknowledge that a military threat could not be countered by the declining European soft power or by diplomatic talks alone. Soft power, without convincing hard power, is hot air. . . . Along with allocating more money to defence in national budgets, a common budget for multinational security cooperation in the EU should be considered.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Reuters, “Estonia, Latvia See Russian Hypocrisy in Visa Rules,” 18 June 2008, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-russia-visa-baltic/estonia-latvia-see-russian-hypocrisy-in-visa-rules-idUKL1827483320080618>.

<sup>166</sup> After all, by 1989, some 64.5 million Soviet citizens, among them 21.7 million Russians, had been born outside of their titular republics, elsewhere in the union; see Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States, *Демографический ежегодник 1991* [Demographic yearbook, 1991] (Moscow: CIS-Stat, 1991), 324–25.

<sup>167</sup> Bigg, “Moscow Attempts to Entice Russians Back Home.”

<sup>168</sup> According to one journalist, Pabriks “wrote his doctorate on minorities in Europe;” see Alison Smale, “Latvia’s Tensions with Russians at Home Persist in Shadow of Ukraine Conflict,” *New York (NY) Times*, 23 August 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/24/world/europe/latvias-tensions-with-russians-at-home-persist-in-shadow-of-ukraine.html>. After his academic career, Pabriks went to on to serve his country as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2004 to 2007, Minister of Defence from 2010 to 2014, and Member of the European Parliament from 2014 to 2018.

<sup>169</sup> “Pour les intérêts lettons, il est important que les opportunités de coopération avec la Russie soient approfondies pour favoriser un développement positif des relations bilatérales entre la Lettonie et la Russie.” Artis Pabriks, “Valeurs, intérêts et influence de la politique étrangère lettonne” [Values, interests and influence of Latvian foreign policy], *Revue internationale et stratégique* 61, no. 1 (2006): 193.

<sup>170</sup> Artis Pabriks, “European Security: Stop Sleeping and Wake Up,” *European View* 13, no. 2 (2014): 266.

Tellingly, Pabriks left no doubt as to what he felt would be at stake for Eastern Europe.

We must be clear on what our goal is with regard to the Russo-Ukrainian war. It is clearly not just a ceasefire. It is ensuring a sovereign and free Ukraine and respect for its internationally recognised borders, and it is letting Ukraine choose its way of development freely. . . . If Ukraine falls, the next goal for the Kremlin may be other former members of the USSR, . . . but it could also be Baltic EU and NATO members or the wider Baltic Sea area.<sup>171</sup>

Pabriks's tougher stance on Russia is not unique. On 25 June 2019, Latvian delegates to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe voted against that body's controversial decision to unconditionally reinstate the Russian parliamentarians whose access to the assembly had been revoked since the escalation of the conflict in Crimea. In their opposition to Russia's foreign policy track record, Latvian parliamentarians from contrasting parties shared a rare moment of agreement with one another.<sup>172</sup> Still, in terms of individual Latvians hoping to establish ties with Russia, official compatriot monitoring data often lumps Latvia into a generic Baltic category, reporting for the first quartal of 2019 that just 0.02 percent of all compatriot programme participation requests are filed in the Baltic region as a whole.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>172</sup> "Latvia Might Quit Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly as Russia Returns" *EURACTIV* (Brussels), 28 June 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/latvia-might-quit-council-of-europes-parliamentary-assembly-as-russia-returns>. Even the Harmony delegate to the assembly, Boriss Cilevičs, said in an interview that while his party "always thought it right that the Russian delegation would return, this should not happen unconditionally. . . . If the opposition is not represented in the delegation, the delegation should not be accepted" ("Мы всегда считали правильным, чтобы российская делегация вернулась, но не на любых условиях. . . . Если оппозиция в делегации не представлена, делегация не будет утверждена."), as quoted in "Цилевич о возвращении России в ПАСЕ: не стоит мыслить категориями 'кто кому надавал'" [Cilevičs on the return of Russia in the PACE: it is not worth thinking about it in terms of a 'whodunit'], *DELFI* (Riga), 27 June 2019, <https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/cilevich-o-vozvraschenii-rossii-v-pase-ne-stoit-myslit-kategoriyami-kto-komu-nadaval.d?id=51225407>.

<sup>173</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Мониторинг реализации Государственной программы по оказанию содействия добровольному переселению в Российскую Федерацию соотечественников, проживающих за рубежом, на территориях вселения субъектов Российской Федерации в I квартале 2019 года" [Monitoring of the implementation of the State program to aid the voluntary resettlement in the Russian Federation of compatriots residing abroad, by territory of the Russian Federation in the first quarter of 2019], 8 May 2019, [https://мвд.рф/мвд/structure1/Glavnie\\_upravlenija/guvm/compatriots/monitoring/2019](https://мвд.рф/мвд/structure1/Glavnie_upravlenija/guvm/compatriots/monitoring/2019).

### 2.2.3.3. Ethnocratic Latvia?

Some ten days before the European Parliament election was held in Latvia on 25 May 2019, a radio advertisement began airing in almost every peak-hour commercial break on Latvia's sole public Russian-language channel *Latvijas radio 4*.

There is a war going on against the ones who work and conduct their business against Harmony. Whose side are you on? The ones that have always been against you? The ones that have offended you? Or the ones that have always stood with you? The ones that never differentiated between Latvian and Russian inhabitants of Latvia. . . . Support your own!<sup>174</sup>

The advertisement, which was accompanied by an objectively gloomy fragment of background music, appears to be an implicit response to the mounting of pressure against Harmony's party leader, Nils Ušakovs – a journalist-turned-politician who was a Latvian parliamentarian from 2006 to 2009 and a three-term mayor of Riga from 2009 to 2019.

Although Ušakovs was recently installed as member of the European Parliament, his transition from Riga to Brussels was not a smooth one. In a social media post quoted by RIA Novosti, Ušakovs told supporters of his decision to stand in the European election, writing,

They only let me fight for my seat, so that I have not the strength nor the time to work. . . . The more they fight me, the more the public good suffers, the harder it is for all of us to work. . . . I had to make the hardest decision of my political life. How to protect the most important thing despite this war, which is harmony in Riga – literally and figuratively.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> “Идет война против единственных, кто работает и делает против Согласия. На чей стороне ты? Тех, кто всегда был против тебя? Тех, кто оскорблял тебя? Или тех, кто всегда был с тобой? Тех, кто никогда не делил жителей Латвии, на Латышей, и Русских. . . . Поддержи своих!” A recording of the advertisement is available upon request.

<sup>175</sup> “Меня заставляют только бороться за свое кресло. Чтобы на работу не было ни сил, ни времени. . . . Чем больше сейчас борются со мной, тем больше страдает общее дело, тем сложнее нам всем работать. . . . Мне нужно было принять самое тяжелое решение в своей политической жизни. Как в этой войне сохранить главное – согласие в Риге, в прямом и переносном смысле.” Quoted in RIA Novosti, “Политическая жертва или преступник: почему отстранили Нила Ушакова” [Political sacrifice or criminal: why Nils Ušakovs was removed], 5 April 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190405/1552426663.html>. The full post can be found at Nils Ušakovs, “Я готов пожертвовать своим постом, чтобы сохранить согласие в риге” [I am ready to sacrifice my post, to keep harmony in Riga], Facebook, 3 March 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/NilsUsakovs/posts/2313173432046895>.

But before Ušakovs got a chance to leave the mayor's office as an elected European Union parliamentarian, the Latvian Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development sacked him, citing misconduct in a number of accounting and investment issues.<sup>176</sup> Indeed, already in January, allegations of corruption in the Riga City Council had reached the Riga mayor, and the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau searched his office and residence to investigate a grafting case involving the Riga transport authority.<sup>177</sup>

A roundup piece by *Radio Free Europe*-affiliated television channel *Current Time* showed that while most Latvian media focussed on the minister's allegations of corruption, Russian counterparts highlighted Ušakovs' long-lasting career as mayor, suggesting that the enemies he made along the way had finally found a reason to dispose of him.<sup>178</sup> The latter sentiment mimicked the tone of a 9 February demonstration following the initial January searches, where Latvia's public broadcaster estimated that between three and six thousand people came out to support the Riga mayor on the capital's town hall square.<sup>179</sup> Ušakovs himself appeared as well, and various sources quoted from his speech,

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<sup>176</sup> "Rīga Mayor Ušakovs Removed from Office by Minister," *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 5 March 2019, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/riga-mayor-usakovs-removed-from-office-by-minister.a315043>.

<sup>177</sup> "Anti-Graft Squad Searches Rīga Mayor's Home and Office," *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 30 January 2019, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/anti-graft-squad-searches-riga-mayors-home-and-office.a307800>. In fairness, corruption has long been a staple of Latvian politics, considering for example that even the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau itself has been subject to corruption allegations in the past, as has been explained adequately by Una Bergmane in "The Three Little Oligarchs: Latvia's Corruption Scandal," *Foreign Policy Research Institute Baltic Bulletin*, 22 November 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/11/three-little-oligarchs-latvias-corruption-scandal>.

<sup>178</sup> Vladislav Andreyev, "'Неудобный' Ушаков или борьба с коррупцией? Версии увольнения мэра Риги в Латвии и России" ["Inconvenient" Ušakovs or fight with corruption? Versions of the firing of the mayor of Riga in Latvia and Russia], *Current Time* (Prague), 13 April 2019, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/latvia-ushakov-riga-media/29877088.html>. Note that TASS Russian News Agency did publish a nuanced English-language piece under the heading of "Riga Mayor Dismissed from Office After Corruption Scandal," 5 April 2019, <https://tass.com/world/1052234>.

<sup>179</sup> "Show of Support for Rīga Mayor Ušakovs," *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 9 February 2019, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/show-of-support-for-riga-mayor-usakovs.a309009>.

My heart hurts when I see that politicians push away Russians and Latvians for the sake of their dirty interests, as a result of which, these people come into conflict. . . . Harmony is the party that was, is, and will be for Latvians and Russians living together in happiness and prosperity. Only those who can but draw “red lines” loathe us.<sup>180</sup>

The reference to red lines denotes the other political parties consistently precluding entering into a coalition with Harmony, a dynamic described by the public broadcaster as follows. “Harmony. . . has topped the poll in the past but has never been in government as ‘Latvian’ parties have tended to band together to form a large enough bloc to prevent Harmony having any chance of a workable parliamentary majority.”<sup>181</sup> Russian Federation lawmakers have argued that “artificial division of people in two groups only aggravates their already complicated situation and plays into the hands of local nationalists and politicians spreading anti-Russia sentiment in the Baltic states.”<sup>182</sup> And Cheskin asserted that highlighting ethnic tension played into the hands of fringe radicals on both sides of the Russian-Latvian divide in Latvia’s domestic politics.<sup>183</sup>

On the Russian-leaning side, one such radical voice could be Vladimirs Buzajevs’s, the politician whose contribution to an edited volume titled *Europe’s Contemporary Ethnocracies* was cited above, even though there is a certain irony in a two-terms Russian-Latvian parliamentarian presenting his country as an ethnocracy. The Latvian Russian Union is another party on this side of the spectrum. It has not held a seat in Latvia’s parliament since

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<sup>180</sup> “У меня болит сердце, когда я вижу, что политики из-за своих грязных интересов сталкивают русских и латышей, и в результате этого они конфликтуют. ‘Согласие’ – это партия, которая была, есть и будет за то, чтобы латыши и русские жили счастливо и в одинаковом достатке.” Quoted in Vadim Radionov, “Извиниться за ошибки. Зачем партия Нила Ушакова вывела людей на улицы” [Apologizing for a mistake: why the party of Nils Ušakovs took people to the streets], *Спектр.Пресс*, 11 February 2019, <https://spektr.press/izvinitnya-za-oshibki-zachem-partiya-nila-ushakova-vyvela-lyudej-na-ulicy>.

<sup>181</sup> See, again, “Latvian Election Results Pose Problem for President,” *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 7 October 2018, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/commentary/latvian-election-results-pose-problem-for-president.a295064>.

<sup>182</sup> “Russia to Repeal Visa Requirement for Non-Citizens,” *Latvijas Sabiedrisko mediju* (Riga), 17 November 2016, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/russia-to-repeal-visa-requirement-for-non-citizens.a210641>.

<sup>183</sup> Cheskin, *Russian Speakers*, 163–64.



2006, but it does compete with Harmony for seats in the European Parliament, where it has consistently supplied one of Latvia's representatives since 2004. The Latvian Russian Union can be distinctively critical of Harmony politicians, as last year, one member of its leadership recorded a video message that assessed Harmony politicians' voting record in the parliament and criticized the fact that they sometimes supported proposals launched by the Latvian nationalist party National Alliance, whilst reminding viewers that "Harmony members support Latvia's accession to NATO in the same way as Latvian nationalists do."<sup>184</sup>

At the other side of the spectrum, other parties' reluctance to work together seems to be caused chiefly by speculation on the extent of Harmony's links to the Russian Federation. Such speculation is apparently based on two particular episodes, the most significant of which concerns Harmony's much-publicized but little-studied ties to Putin's United Russia.<sup>185</sup> On 21 November 2009, Harmony delegates attended a United Russia party congress in Saint Petersburg, where they signed an agreement to cooperate.<sup>186</sup> At the time, Russian media reported that "a total of twenty agreements and five treaties between United Russia and foreign parties exist. These agreements stipulate that international interactions are held on a regular basis. Moreover, these frameworks call for the organization of forum discussions

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<sup>184</sup> "Члены 'Согласия' поддержали вхождение Латвии в НАТО, равно как и латышские националисты." Quoted in "Депутат от РСЛ: 'Согласие' поддерживает латышских националистов" [LRU representative: Harmony supports Latvian nationalists], *Baltnews.lv* (Riga), 2 October 2018, [https://baltnews.lv/riga\\_news/20181002/1022320425/Deputat-LKS-Soglasie-podderzhivaet-latischskih-natcionalistov.html](https://baltnews.lv/riga_news/20181002/1022320425/Deputat-LKS-Soglasie-podderzhivaet-latischskih-natcionalistov.html).

<sup>185</sup> It having lapsed in 2017, the agreement is not publicly accessible and limited but multiple attempts by the author of this thesis at obtaining a copy were not successful. Andis Kudors mentions it in "The Eastern Direction in Latvia's Foreign Policy," in *The Centenary of Latvia's Foreign Affairs: Ideas and Personalities*, eds. Diāna Potjomkina, Andris Sprūds, and Valters Ščerbinskis (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2016), but the only text he is able to reproduce stems from United Russia's 2003 manifesto – not the actual agreement. Still, since the agreement was brought up in the interviews below, see section 3.2.3 for a second-handed discussion of its contents.

<sup>186</sup> "ЦС будет сотрудничать с 'Единой Россией'" [Harmony Centre will cooperate with United Russia], *DELFI* (Riga), 23 November 2009, <https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/cc-budet-sotrudnicat-s-edinoj-rossiej.d?id=28216445>.

of a varied thematic nature.”<sup>187</sup> A few years later, Russian newspaper *Kommersant* took another look at United Russia’s various agreements, compiling a chronology of collaboration that yields a list of at least twelve other regional political parties, half of which in countries with no significant Russian-speaking populations.<sup>188</sup>

Adding to the self-proclaimed unimportance of the agreement, Andrejs Mamikins, at the time a Member of the European Parliament for Harmony publicly denounced the decision to terminate it, indicating first that the “question . . . was not discussed widely in Harmony . . . I can only conclude that it was done in order to become more acceptable to the ones ruling Latvia, so that they could enter into a coalition with Harmony after the parliamentary election next year.”<sup>189</sup> Elaborating on the agreement’s merits, he said,

When the remaining mechanisms of diplomacy do not work, it is easier for people to meet according to the model: “we know you, we have secured an agreement, therefore we may have a talk outside of the parliamentary or the foreign ministerial formats; we may discuss a few things, we can agree on something or other, and we may help each other out.” This is a very good format. What is more,

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<sup>187</sup> “У ‘Единой России’ в общей сложности существуют 20 договоров и 5 соглашений с зарубежными партиями. Эти договоры предусматривают, что межпартийные контакты переводятся на регулярную основу. Кроме того, в их рамках прописана организация разного рода форумов тематического характера.” “‘Единая Россия’ налаживает сотрудничество с партиями других стран” [United Russia commences cooperation with parties of other countries], *Vesti.Ru* (Moscow), 21 November 2009, <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=327064>.

<sup>188</sup> Elena Fedotova, “С кем ‘Единая Россия’ договаривалась о сотрудничестве” [With whom United Russia agreed on cooperation], *Kommersant* (Moscow), 10 May 2016, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2982553>. Fedotova listed parties in China, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Vietnam, Mongolia, Japan, and South Ossetia as partners since 2004. In 2005, an agreement was reached with Viktor Yanukovych’s Party of the Regions in Ukraine, which was ceased after his being ousted in 2014. Latvia is mentioned alongside Serbia and Georgia in the 2009 to 2010 additions (*Vesti.Ru*, in “‘Единая Россия’ налаживает сотрудничество,” also names Peru and Turkey for this period), and the European People’s Party is referred to as a one-time potential partner, with United Russia delegates attending an EPP congress in Bonn in 2009.

<sup>189</sup> “Вопрос . . . широко в ‘Согласии’ не обсуждался. . . прихожу только к одному выводу: это было сделано для того, чтобы стать ‘приемлемыми’ для правящих в Латвии, чтобы те взяли ‘Согласие’ в правящую коалицию после выборов в Сейм в следующем году.” Vera Aleksandrova, “Мамыкин: разрыв договора с ‘Единой Россией’ был очень большой глупостью” [Mamikins: the termination of the agreement with United Russia was a big stupidity], *RuBaltic.Ru*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/12102017-andrey-mamykin-razryv-dogovora-s-edinoj-rossiey-byl-ochen-bolshoy-glupostyu>. This dispute was one of the reasons for Mamikins’s 2018 switch from Harmony to the Latvian Russian Union.

I know that the agreement between Harmony and United Russia was not used very often. Whenever members of the parliament travelled to Russia, they went there as members of the delegation for cooperation with Russia. There were no interparty consultations or meetings. But such an agreement is always a fire extinguisher. When something burns, people always quickly resort to this tool.<sup>190</sup>

Another issue fuelling reluctance to work with Harmony stems from 2011, when an online platform for independent journalism published a series of emails sent in 2008 by Ušakovs to Aleksandr Khapilov, a diplomat at the Russian embassy in Riga.<sup>191</sup> Ušakovs, then still in the parliament, requested the embassy's financial support for an event on behalf of a Harmony-affiliated organization which later reported to have received significantly less external donations for the fiscal year in question.<sup>192</sup> The journalist behind the revelation was physically attacked<sup>193</sup> and later sued for email theft, with charges against him dropped only in 2016.<sup>194</sup> As no link between Ušakovs and the attack was ever established, the politician retained his position as mayor. Still, the matter clearly did not help his reputation.

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<sup>190</sup> “Когда не работают остальные механизмы дипломатии, людям проще встретиться по модели: ‘Мы с Вами знакомы, заключили договор, поэтому можем поговорить вне парламентских, вне мидовских форматов, обсудить какие-то вещи, договориться о чём-либо и помочь друг другу’. Это очень хороший формат. Тем более я знаю, что договор между ‘Согласием’ и ‘Единой Россией’ задействовался не так часто. Если ехали какие-то члены Сейма в Россию, то они ехали как члены делегации по сотрудничеству с Россией. Не было каких-то межпартийных консультаций или встреч. Но такой договор — это всегда пожарный стоп-кран. Когда что-то горит, люди всегда прибегают к этому инструменту.” Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> “Ушаков передавал сведения российскому разведчику Хапилову” [Ušakovs sent messages to Russian intelligence officer Khalipov], *KOMPROMAT.LV*, 16 November 2011, <https://www.kompromat.lv/item.php?docid=readn&id=7114>.

<sup>192</sup> “Ушакова подозревают в связях с российским дипломатом” [Ušakovs suspected of ties with Russian diplomat], *DELFI* (Riga), 17 November 2011, <https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/ushakova-podozrevayut-v-svyazyah-s-rossijskim-diplomatom.d?id=41784435>.

<sup>193</sup> “Покушение на журналиста Якобсона: стреляли при маленьком сыне” [Attack on the journalist Jakobson: shot in front of his young son], *TV NET* (Riga), 29 March 2012, <https://rus.tvnet.lv/5486420/pokushenie-na-zhurnalista-yakobsona-strelyali-pri-malenkom-syne>. Apparently, Jakobson was working on at least one other difficult story at the time, and his attack may well have been related to that parallel case. See “Ушаков о покушении на журналиста: у меня есть алиби!” [Ušakovs on the attack on a journalist: I have an alibi!], *TV NET* (Riga), 29 March 2012, <https://rus.tvnet.lv/5486401/ushakov-o-pokushenii-na-zhurnalista-u-menya-est-alibi>.

<sup>194</sup> Kudors, “The Eastern Direction,” 181.

### 2.3. Nine Topics of Contestation

In the previous section, a careful selection of opinions by Russian and Latvian officials and other influential members of the public served to reconstruct two ideal-typical ways of viewing the international ramifications of the Russian Latvians integration process. This section analyses the juxtaposition of these narratives, using the structure of topics derived from Stone's model of symbolic and cultural needs. On the broader topic of identity, a distinction can be made between a convergent understanding of history where both modern-day Latvia and Russia are regions of an Eastern Europe, unmistakably shaped by centuries-long rulership of the Russian Empire and of the Soviet Union, as opposed to a divergent history where pre-imperial and interbellum Latvian nation-building has made the people of this small region into something wholly different from the people of that other nation to the east. With that, the fundamentals of long-term Russian nationalities policy can be identified either as emancipatory multinationalism, or as discriminatory imperialism. As for the Russian inhabitants of modern-day Latvia, they can be viewed, by extension, either as just another group of cosmopolitan people among the Latvians, supportive of independence and generally well-adapted to life in their new home country, or they can be seen as a group that is inherently opposed to Latvia's post-Soviet soul searching and national pride.

In terms of accommodation, whereas part of Latvia's population speaks Russian in the intimacy of its household, another part, like the nation as a whole, is growing increasingly unfamiliar with that language, discouraging its usage as something contrary to Latvianness. The language issue is closely tied to education policy, considering that minority schools are increasingly pushed into underperformance by raising Latvian-language instruction quota, even though these requirements stem from hopes that Russian Latvians will feel encouraged and enabled to integrate more thoroughly into Latvian society. Meanwhile, on the economic level, although unemployment rates are lower for Latvians than for non-Latvians and non-citizens are categorically excluded from taking certain jobs in the public sector, suggesting

systemic disparity, most Russian Latvians are citizens proper, meaning that they are not hampered by job restrictions and that they have equal opportunities in all respects.

Politically speaking, this also means that although most are able to participate fully in the political process, being allowed to vote or stand elected, non-citizenship remains a prescient issue, and Russians are well-represented among non-citizen ranks. Moreover, their reasons for not naturalizing are often ideologically incompatible with the Latvian perspective, provided there is no room for change in this regard. All of this encourages the Russian Federation to act its part as a protector of Russians' rights, even if this is perceived by the Latvian state as a thinly-veiled breach of national security, with a foreign actor aggressively interfering in Latvian affairs. Fear of Russia's protective meddling is also key to understanding perceptions of the Harmony party, where on the one hand, its politicians until recently actively sought to maintain contacts with Latvia's looming eastern neighbour, while on the other hand, some Russian Latvians hold that Harmony is not nearly Russian enough.

A comparison of these views can be presented in terms of the following matrix.

<i>Table 1. Nine topics of symbolic and cultural needs contestation</i>		
	Russian	Latvian
1. Identity	Convergent histories; Russian multinationalism; cosmopolitan contributors.	Divergent histories; Russian imperialism; nation-state nuisance.
2. Accommodation	<i>Lingua franca</i> of nations; segregation by education; economic disparity.	Languishing language; integration by education; equal opportunity.
3. Politics	Minority repression; compatriots abroad; ethnocratic Latvia.	Reluctance to integrate; national security threat; democratic Latvia.

### 3. The Other Latvians

#### 3.1. Methodology

As stated in the introduction, the main goal of this thesis is to find out how Russian Latvians perceive the geopolitical quandary encapsulating the process of their integration into Latvian society. The present chapter presents the results of ten in-depth interviews, conducted solely for the purpose of this research, aiming to position these Russian Latvians' self-identifications, their views on minority accommodation in Latvia, and their participation in the Latvian political system in the Russian-Latvian continuum explored in chapter 2.<sup>195</sup>

Among the five Harmony-affiliated participants were one present and one former member of the Latvian parliament, two city council members, and two active members of Harmony's youth wing, Restart.lv. Two respondents had been candidates in the European Parliament election of 2019, both of whom were interviewed after the publication of the Latvian results. One of the city council members doubled as a mayor, which is common practice in Latvia. The control group consisted of three (chief) editors, a reporter, and a producer, with two persons having formerly been employed as foreign correspondents. Each had current or recent experience with local, national, and international online portals, with national radio and television broadcasting, or with working for a news agency. Across both groups, special care was taken to maintain an even balance in age and regional spread.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> The list of interview topics, the informed consent form, and the information sheet have been attached to this thesis as appendices A, B, and C. Transcripts were compiled by the researcher, and shared with the supervisor on 1 August 2019. Given the adherence to Stone's model, results were analysed thematically, along the lines of the procedure outlined by Bryman in *Social Research Methods*, 587-588. Statements were selected to provide a "thick description," encouraging the reader to think about transferability (see *ibid.*, 384), and some were lightly edited to improve readability. Answers given in Russian were translated by the researcher. Respecting respondents' anonymity, all quotes are attributed only with reference to professional background and age group.

<sup>196</sup> The interviews were conducted between 22 May and 19 June of 2019, at which point in time the sample included four persons between 22 and 29 years of age, three persons

## 3.2. Results

### 3.2.1. *Identity: Transfiguration*

#### 3.2.1.1. Holistic Views of History

In terms of their official citizenship status, eight interviewees had acquired Latvian citizenship either as birthright or through naturalization. One respondent was a non-citizen, and another was a long-time resident of Latvia with Russian citizenship. All but two participants described their ethnic background as something mixed.

My first language is Russian, but if you start to dig into my ethnic groups, it's a mess. It's Polish, Russian, Jewish; not Latvian, but Latgalian; Estonian, and *Ostsee* Germans. You name it, I have it.<sup>197</sup>

Nevertheless, Latvia's resident registration system automatically confronts people with the nationality question.

When my first son was born, we had to register him with the state, and they asked, "Name, age, nationality?" We didn't know what to say; he's Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Latvian! . . . We realized that, "Okay, let it be Latvian, just because he lives in Latvia." At the same time, everyone understands that culturally – ethnically – he's Russian.<sup>198</sup>

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in their early 40s, and three persons between 52 and 63 years old. Even though most participants were Riga-based for work-related purposes, a majority indicated having current or prior ties to a number of smaller cities and towns, including Daugavpils, Jelgava, Jūrmala, Rēzekne, and Ogre, and the researcher visited each of these places between and 7 April and 24 June 2019. Some interviewees also had a personal history in cities outside of Latvia. Vitsyebsk and Polatsk in Belarus, Moscow in Russia, and the Donetsk region in Ukraine were all mentioned in this context. Given the scope of this project, gender balance and education levels were not deemed to be decisive selection criteria. Nevertheless, the sample included a near-equal mix of four female and six male respondents, with only the oldest of three age groups made up solely of male interviewees. Less diverse were the education levels, as all ten participants had obtained at least some degree of higher education, albeit in diverse fields, ranging from humanities to social sciences to polytechnics.

<sup>197</sup> Older journalist.

<sup>198</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

Whatever the eventual choice, a person's ethnic registration is not necessarily fixed.

Each time you change your passport, you can ask to put away this nationality mark, or you can change it . . . but you need documents to show that your parents or grandparents were of that ethnic group.<sup>199</sup>

According to some, this points to the arbitrariness of the Latvian passport's ethnicity line.

Because my grandfather was Latvian, . . . I chose Latvian – but, actually, it doesn't mean anything. A lot of the people just see me as a Russian or a Russian speaker, because I communicate in Russian with my friends and family.<sup>200</sup>

Besides the problem of various identities competing in something akin to a false binary, a number of interviewees' family histories gave rise to other problematizations of ethnicity. In some families, there is a well-represented Latgalian branch, which is not recognized as a separate nationality. Other unrecognized but meaningful categories include Jewish or Old Believer labels. In this vein, the identity question aggravated one respondent, who exclaimed,

I'm a human being!<sup>201</sup>

For many participants, these often intricate family histories indicate an immediate awareness of Latvia's complex history. Speaking of a great-grandfather, who owned a workshop in *fin-de-siècle* Riga, one interviewee explained,

He used to serve customers in four different languages . . . Russian, as the formal imperial language; German, which was extremely important and influential; Yiddish which was the language of the neighbourhood and of a big part of Riga; and Latvian, which was also quite popular.<sup>202</sup>

Across all sampled groupings, respondents shared similar stories, effortlessly naming the various populations that held a presence in their birth regions or cities, now and in the past.

I think it is very important to remember history, to learn it, and to think about it objectively. . . . One tries to understand history as if it was personal; trying to put oneself in his grandmother's or grandfather's shoes – and for this, it's important to know how things were and in what circumstances grandmother and grandfather lived.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>200</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>201</sup> Older journalist.

<sup>202</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>203</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.



Still, familial complexities compelled others to be more sceptical about history's precise role.

If we speak about identity, for me, the cultural dimension is much more important. Why should political history be decisive?<sup>204</sup>

### 3.2.1.2. The Post-Nationalist Identity Crisis

On the whole, all but one participant identified as being at least partly Russian. Asked to define this Russianness in positive terms, interviewees of all sampled characteristics referred to combinations of speaking Russian at home, reading Russian literature, watching Russian movies, listening to Russian music, having access to the Russian internet information space, knowing Russian history, or belonging to the Orthodox faith. Most middle-aged and younger respondents, however, also noted the porousness of the Russian identity itself.

A lot of people from Russia don't think Russians from Latvia are Russians, so there is a new nationality.<sup>205</sup>

Some participants had only just begun uncovering this new, "Baltic Russian" identity.

I'm still struggling because . . . my friends and my colleagues are people with a Latvian or Russian background, while I'm trying to somehow mix it up.<sup>206</sup>

To others, the demarcation was already more distinct.

Living here in Latvia, . . . we were inspired by local culture, and we became more moderate – not like Russian Russians, who go, "Hooray! Russia!" . . . When you meet a Russian from Russia, you can always see it. They're a little bit different. Even the language is a little bit different.<sup>207</sup>

If some observed these deviations primarily in the cultural domain, others, on the contrary, viewed it in a strictly political sense.

I would say that I feel European, or Latvian European, with no connection to Russia as a state, but at the same time with a big connection to Russian culture.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Middle-aged Harmony affiliate.

<sup>205</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>206</sup> Younger journalist.

<sup>207</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>208</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

In the same vein, one interviewee offered an insightful first-hand account of migrating to independent Latvia as a Russian citizen.

From the very beginning you feel fantastic. You feel at home. It's a Russian-speaking country, it has almost the same type of climate – but it's European, Eurozone, with all the possibilities. There are no problems with travelling, it has beautiful shops. It's like a wonderful future Russia! . . . After a couple of years, you start to understand that you are in a foreign country, with foreign legislation, and you see that it has its own politics, its own problems, and its own attitude towards you. . . . If you go to Spain, France, or Germany, you get this feeling right away, at the airport. Here, you only come across it in three or five years – gradually.<sup>209</sup>

### 3.2.1.3. The Nation-State Enablers

Two of the younger respondents mentioned not wanting to mark their nationality as Russian in their first passport, because they felt that being registered as such would stigmatize them. Indeed, multiple participants observed a link between being Russian and being considered something of an unwanted by-product of Latvia's Soviet past.

In Latvia, there's always this connection: if you admit the occupation, then you admit that you are an occupant.<sup>210</sup>

Multiple interviewees problematized this deduction by referring to their family histories.

For me, the occupation says more about the USSR than about the people who were living in it. I can't say that my grandfather is an occupant, . . . because then, I'm also an occupant!<sup>211</sup>

In general, most respondents expressed fatigue at discussing the Latvian occupation.

Of course, in Latvia, there was an occupation. But to say that this occupation continued until 1990; this doesn't hold water, both legally and practically. It's a very useful concept for justifying, for example, citizenship issues or the non-citizenship policy. . . . When you refer to past injustices, it's much easier to justify today's injustices. . . . I try to avoid these discussions, because talking about the occupation can last for years, and we're not discussing substantive topics.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>210</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>211</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>212</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

In the broader historic sense, when pressed for it, most participants showed a thorough understanding of the delicate contrast between one part of the population commemorating the Latvian Waffen SS Legion each year on 16 March, while another part – including some, but not all interviewees – on 9 May celebrates the Soviet Victory Day.

After the Second World War, we went from a Jewish town to – well, there were no Jews left. And that's of course a huge tragedy. After this, if you know the situation, how can you not celebrate 9 May? That would be completely wrong. . . . But I absolutely think we shouldn't be angry with the fact that the Legionnaires have their event each year – it's not so much about fascism, as it is about their family members who died.<sup>213</sup>

Ironically, one respondent critiqued independent Latvia's custom of ethnic registration as an unnecessary continuation of Soviet practice.

In my view, this artificial division to Soviet-type ethnicities, is not only outdated, but extremely counterproductive.<sup>214</sup>

Meanwhile, others took issue with the importance ascribed to ethnicity in other fields as well.

In the official answer to the latest Council of Europe report, which criticized Latvia in undiplomatic terms, . . . the Foreign Ministry brought up statistics: that in Riga and five other large cities, ethnic Latvians are still in the minority, or balancing somewhere around half of the population. Mind the wording. Not those who speak Latvian fluently, not those who are loyal to Latvia, not those who are willing to fight and die for Latvia – *ethnic* Latvians. Blood principle. It's official!<sup>215</sup>

One participant expressly highlighted a more positive influence from Soviet times.

I would say that my identity is more like an international Soviet identity. . . . When I was young, we had the idea of friendship between all the nations. . . . That's why I'm quite liberal, not focussed on nationalities. For me, it's not very important.<sup>216</sup>

Indeed, a number of interviewees identified more strongly with Europeanism than with any ethnic categorization, some speaking warmly of partaking in various exchange programmes.

When I meet people in Erasmus projects, or wherever, I think it's so strange to say that Germans are like this, Latvians are like that, and Norwegians are like so, because, yes, we have some tiny, specific nuances in our characters, but still – we're all the same.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>214</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>215</sup> Older journalist.

<sup>216</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>217</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

Paradoxically, making a comparable point in a dissimilar manner, another respondent said,

I've always enjoyed diversity. I believe it must be very boring if everyone speaks the same language, and I believe that multiculturalism is enriching. Therefore, I'm a great fan of the European Union.<sup>218</sup>

### 3.2.2. *Accommodation: Participation*

#### 3.2.2.1. Latvian-Speaking Russians

All participants were fully convinced that a vast majority of Russian Latvians are sufficiently proficient in the Latvian language, a sole exception being perhaps a limited number of pensioners in the countryside.

I interviewed them myself. . . . They feel ashamed that they didn't master Latvian, but it's terribly difficult for them to do it, because at their age, it's very difficult to learn any language. But when they know a couple of words in Latvian, they will definitely use them, just to express their respect.<sup>219</sup>

Another interviewee was more sceptical.

People who were able to get higher education, to travel, and to work, just having one language – they got used to it. And when you're in your 40s, 50s, or 60s, it's not easy to just change your way of life and your way of thinking, to learn something new. They're used to one way of living and they want to continue it, saying, "Why should I change?"<sup>220</sup>

One respondent speculated on the cause of widespread Latvian language mastery.

The Latvians made it a natural feeling to feel deeply ashamed if you don't speak their language. Living here, enjoying the benefits of the life they've managed to construct, you have to pay respect to those for whom this country is a home country. . . . It's not as if they won't speak with you in Russian; they will. It's not as if they'll give you a cold reception if you don't speak Latvian; they won't. . . . But when you speak a little bit of Latvian, it's like a celebration.<sup>221</sup>

Having picked up the language from university classmates, another also mentioned shame.

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<sup>218</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>219</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>220</sup> Younger journalist.

<sup>221</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

I felt a little bit inferior, because they could speak two languages, and I could speak only one. . . . So, when I mastered Latvian, we became more or less of equal footing.<sup>222</sup>

All participants spoke contentedly about being effectively trilingual, valuing the practical usefulness of being able to communicate, or simply appreciating the aesthetics of other languages. All interviewees now spoke Latvian, Russian, and English to a professional degree, and one explicitly welcomed the post-Soviet opportunity to learn more.

I'm really sorry that when I grew up in the Soviet Union, it wasn't really possible to learn foreign languages.<sup>223</sup>

Yet, while there were no concerns over the Latvian language being endangered, one respondent, notably beholden to having a Russian background, summarized the common feeling towards recent proposals like the reform to minimize minority-language education.

Two million speakers is completely enough for a language to continue to exist . . . Why should we need something more than a law that you need to know Latvian in your childhood, a law that we have one state language, and maybe a law that you can't promote information only in Russian; that you need to do it in both languages, or in Latvian.<sup>224</sup>

In fact, some participants felt it was the Russian, rather than the Latvian language that was under threat.

The Latvian language not only prevails, not only dominates, but actually squeezes out all other languages. . . . Yes, Latvian must be the only state language and it must be used for all official purposes, but the use of other minority languages should be permitted in full accordance with modern conventional standards.<sup>225</sup>

For some, the language issue directly informed political preferences.

I ask, "Is Russian a foreign language?" and all of the parties on the Latvian side of the political spectrum answer – yes. Whatever your economic programme is, I won't vote for you. Russian is not a foreign language. It was always spoken by a sizeable minority. . . . It could be regional, but it's not a foreign language.<sup>226</sup>

In others, this perception of threat inspired modest acts of civil disobedience.

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<sup>222</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>223</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>224</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>225</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>226</sup> Older journalist.

As a minority representative, I want to have some respect for my language. Therefore, I sometimes speak Russian so that Russian is represented in the public space.<sup>227</sup>

In a number of situations, communicating in the Russian language is strictly regulated.

Say, we have a public event, which is attended by the Russian community, for instance, the celebration of *Rozhdestvo*, or a concert, where there are Russian ensembles singing. If I'm attending it as a public official, or if I'm announced as an official, then I absolutely have to speak in the Latvian language. If I'm speaking Russian, then the organizers have to provide a Latvian translation. Even if nobody needs it!<sup>228</sup>

An interviewee tending towards a Latvian self-identification, however, had a different view.

I prefer to use Latvian everywhere I go – I mean in coffee shops or at the kiosk – not Russian. Only if I feel that the person behind the counter struggles with Latvian, maybe I will go with Russian. . . . I think that people who are born here and who finished school here, who are maybe 18 or 20 years old – it's weird for me when they don't know Latvian. Come on! Really, it's not about how you are with languages. In twelve years at school, you could learn Chinese!<sup>229</sup>

### 3.2.2.2. Education Degradation

All five respondents that had been pupils in the Soviet education system, dispraised the quality of the Latvian language instruction that they received, further blaming the limited number of class hours and the lack of a need to speak Latvian outside of classes. Three of the younger participants, having gone to school in independent Latvia, had a vastly different experience, one of them starting instruction at the youngest possible age.

I was in a Latvian kindergarten, in a Latvian group. So, for me, it was a bit easier to speak Latvian from first grade onward.<sup>230</sup>

That interviewee, however, mentioned growing up in a town where the Russian community was smaller than elsewhere. Another respondent had considerable difficulty keeping up.

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<sup>227</sup> Middle-aged Harmony affiliate.

<sup>228</sup> Older Harmony affiliate. “Рождество” is the Russian word for the Nativity of Christ, which is celebrated in the Russian Orthodox Church each year on 7 January.

<sup>229</sup> Younger journalist.

<sup>230</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

So terrible was the educational system where I went to school, that I had to take extra Latvian courses from my parents' own money, so that I could study at university and not speak like a strange person. We spent our money on that, but actually, the school had to do this.<sup>231</sup>

And for parents whose children do not grow up having a lot of Latvian-language neighbours and friends, limited instruction in kindergarten is not always enough.

Our second son is a Russian-speaking small child, set to go to school this year. . . . He knows some Latvian words, but I'm not sure that he can already learn in a Latvian school. So, we decided that because starting school can be quite stressful, he'll go to a Russian school first and we'll move him to a Latvian school later.<sup>232</sup>

To this day, young children grow up struggling with the Latvian language, despite parents' efforts to try and get them to watch, for example, Latvian children's programmes.

This raises another problem, relating to Latvia's 2018 minority-language school reform.

You'll have the same school with the same teacher, but from 1 September, she has to speak Latvian. She doesn't speak it, but she'll have to teach the children anyway. What level of education will those children receive? They'll have a double language barrier: the teacher won't have enough words to explain what she's trying to teach them and the children for whom this language is not their mother tongue will have less possibility to get the information.<sup>233</sup>

For this reason, one of the politicians had anticipated the Constitutional Court appeal to be more successful.

I didn't expect a full win, but I thought that the court should've seen, for instance, that there's a lack of Latvian-language teachers and that there are problems with Latvian-language textbooks. The court should've given some directive to the government that they have to fix this situation first and then speak about prohibiting the Russian language in education.<sup>234</sup>

One respondent, however, felt that faulty government policy was not the only culprit.

These teachers are people over 55, they have a problem with Latvian language, and they can't teach kids in Latvian. And that's *their* problem, not the kids'. . . . Young teachers don't go into the schools, because the pay is not very high, and that's why this older generation is still there.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>232</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>233</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>234</sup> Middle-aged Harmony affiliate.

<sup>235</sup> Younger journalist.

Yet, for all the focussing on the effects of implementing the Latvian language on the curriculum, one mixed-heritage participant reflected on the wider ramifications.

Those who studied in a Latvian school, they had this Latvian national song, and they had these lessons . . . I was learning at a Russian-speaking school, and we didn't have any dances, nor did we study culture. . . . At that time, I didn't know anything about Russian traditions, only what we did in our family – but that was very similar to Latvian culture.<sup>236</sup>

This suggests that in education, too, efforts to encourage Latvian language use can reduce awareness of minority cultures. An older interviewee elaborated on that concern.

These gifted Russian speakers, they master Latvian, they speak it without accent, and they have career opportunities similar to ethnic Latvians'. . . . The price is a substantial loss of part of their identity. Maybe they will read a couple of poems by Pushkin, but certainly not Chekhov. This is replaced by some universal, Hollywood-type memes and cultural symbols. Which is inevitable, but it's very far from our formal obligations with regard to preserving cultural diversity.<sup>237</sup>

### 3.2.2.3. The Non-Ethnic Economy

As a general consensus, respondents did not mention themselves or their relatives having any significant problems on the job market having to do with their Russianness. Still, in deciding on a passport ethnicity, one participant noted having employment-related doubts.

I thought that in some work places, for some people it'll be better if I'm Latvian.<sup>238</sup>

In practical terms, however, interviewees of all ages noted that Russian language proficiency in many cases turned out to be beneficial.

History now, as they say, makes its own faces, as we've started hearing more often that you have to be able to speak Russian, too. Because of tourism, and because a lot of the clients are Russians.<sup>239</sup>

In the political sense, one respondent with a pronounced Eastern Latvian background remarked that the regions had begun to benefit from economic development as well.

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<sup>236</sup> Younger journalist.

<sup>237</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>238</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>239</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.



When we were voting to enter the European Union, it seemed like people in Latgale and Daugavpils didn't want to join. But with time, people understood that within this European Union, they'd have more possibilities, more projects, and more funding. Their lives changed, because they started using it.<sup>240</sup>

Still, two participants pointed out Latvia's decreasing population and ageing labour force, anticipating significant long-term repercussions if anti-Russian sentiments were to persist.

It would look very strange if, on the one hand, we're talking about all this Latvian language stuff, while on the other, we're inviting workers from Ukraine and Belarus, who are speaking Russian. At the same time, we dislike people from the Middle East and Africa – so we don't really want to invite anyone, but we need to invite someone! Because without a workforce, we can't develop our economy, and without developing our economy, those who've left our country won't return.<sup>241</sup>

### 3.2.3. *Politics: Aspiration*

#### 3.2.3.1. The Silent Protest

Although non-citizenship was not a common feature in most interviewees' personal networks, many mentioned having at least one non-citizen parent or grandparent. Here, the most common story involved their having eagerly contributed in pro-independence events.

My father participated in these barricades, standing with independence forces. So, he sees no reason why he should once more prove his loyalty to the country.<sup>242</sup>

Even the respondent whose father had opposed the independence, told a nuanced story.

There were people in the Supreme Soviet that did not vote for independence; who, instead, walked out of the room. My father was one of those. He felt that independence would lead to a disintegration of the Soviet economy, and as a result, Latvia would lose its potential. And, frankly, this is what happened. All the old factories were destroyed and Latvia destroyed its potential. . . . If you want to break away, you have to do it slowly. Later, these individuals were declared enemies of the people, because they did not vote for independence – even though, to them, the vote was about the economy more than anything else!<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Younger journalist.

<sup>241</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate. The reference to people from the Middle East and Africa was meant as an ironic gesture to the Latvian migration and asylum debate, which another interviewee – a middle-aged journalist – deemed to be outright “toxic.”

<sup>242</sup> Middle-aged Harmony affiliate.

<sup>243</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

One participant exposed the procedure's ethnic, rather than political undertones.

On both my mother's and my father's line, my roots are here – but my roots are Estonian, Baltic German, and Jewish, not Latvian. . . . Along my mother's line, on the oldest tombstone I was able to find in Latvia, the dying date is 1804. That's 215 years ago! And still, I must prove that I belong here? I, myself, believe that I do belong. But what the state thinks – well, that's up to the state.<sup>244</sup>

For an interviewee possessing Latvian lineage, the ethnic aspect proved equally problematic.

When applying for registration of citizenship, you had to make a statement that your parents were Latvian citizens – but if state officials doubted you, they could request documentary evidence. . . . I was asked for these papers and it was not an easy task to get them, because very few papers survived the holocaust.<sup>245</sup>

Still, not all respondents deemed Latvia's naturalization requirements entirely unfair, although these participants – both of them younger – did feel that fairness goes both ways.

They have to show that they want to be a part of our society, . . . but I also get it when people say, "I was part of the protests when the Soviet Union fell apart and . . . I didn't get the citizenship," and they have this deep hole in their heart. . . . The government has to be more open to these people, and say to them, "We accept you, and you're part of this country." You have to involve them, and while they have to prove their loyalty, the government has to show it's loyal to them, too.<sup>246</sup>

Interviewees who had undergone naturalization themselves all mentioned practical reasons for doing so. For most, this involved raising their employment status. One respondent postponed the procedure until passing the army's upper conscription age limit, while another turned the matter upside down, proclaiming to have liked having a non-citizen's passport, echoing an argument that kept some participants' older, more apolitical family members from wanting to naturalize.

I think it's a fantastic thing, because it allows you to go to Europe, to Russia, and to Israel without a visa. . . . Yes, there are downsides, but as a journalist, I tend not to vote anyway. . . . It's the unexpected outcome of two competitions, because the very idea of having this passport, in the first place, is to humiliate these people; to put them in an unpleasant situation. But because of the competition between the Russian, the European, and the Latvian influence, it turned out to be more beneficial than anyone expected.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Older journalist.

<sup>245</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>246</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>247</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

### 3.2.3.2. The People, Not the State

On the whole, interviewees were familiar with the Russian Federation's compatriot policy, but in general, none were very much impressed by it, citing a number of inherent flaws. To begin with, some found the policy's target group to be indifferent to the overarching goals.

I think this is one of those projects of the Russian Federation that's aimed at bolstering a positive image of Russia in these territories – but the people who participate in it from the Latvian side are just trying their luck across the border. I don't think these people truly believe in it. It's just a commercial project.<sup>248</sup>

Others framed their criticism in the form of a logical fallacy.

If Russian is your first language, then you're Russian. If you're Russian, then your country is Russia. . . . The narrative produced by Russia is that everyone who speaks Russian is theirs. . . . To that, I have a counter-argument: try calling a Scotsman English! . . . Mexicans are not spoilt Spanish, and Americans are not a bad breed of Englishmen. They're all groups in their own right.<sup>249</sup>

In practical terms, multiple respondents pointed out that the call to unite Russians abroad was problematic, because they felt that no such unified group exists.

The Russian policy of laying a claim on everyone who speaks Russian abroad prevents the emergence of grassroots opinion leaders, because there is a spiritual metropolis somewhere over there. . . . Of course, not everyone considers the Kremlin to be their metropolis, or Putin to be their spiritual leader, but the critical mass necessary for producing real local leaders is taken away.<sup>250</sup>

In fact, most participants believed that the compatriot programme was used primarily to foster internal support for the Russian government, rather than to aid Russian communities.

For Russia, the protection of compatriots is good for internal consumption. The worse it is abroad, the better it is for Russia.<sup>251</sup>

Two interviewees were able to identify concrete benefits related to the compatriot policy, with one having Russian-Latvian friends migrate to Russia.

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<sup>248</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>249</sup> Older journalist.

<sup>250</sup> Older journalist.

<sup>251</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

I know that this compatriot thing is not very popular, . . . although I know some families who moved from Riga to Yaroslavl, who feel absolutely happy. Probably, because they are among Russians and this is, for them, the most important thing. . . . It's hard for me to imagine how they can find a better place to live than Riga, but anyway, . . . they were Russians from Latvia; they were born here.<sup>252</sup>

Another respondent recalled having contemplated enrolment at a Russian university after secondary school, being drawn by the advantages of Russian-language education and the guaranteed tuition-free access to top-ranked universities offered to compatriots. Ultimately deciding against it, this participant spoke of others that did take up the offer.

I know some people who now study at Russian universities. . . . Usually, they don't choose to study in Russia because it's Russia – they do it because they want to study in areas which are not developed in Latvia. For example, in Russia, there are very influential and very popular theatre schools, and if you want to study an Asian language, it's hard to do so in Latvia, because we don't have the professors. . . . I even know one journalism student, but I hope that this girl understands that in Russia, if you want to become a journalist, it's a bit problematic!<sup>253</sup>

In terms of the Russian Federation exerting an influence on its claimed kinfolk in Latvia, the use of media came up in all conversations as being a more salient means to do so.

After the hybrid war started, many Russian commercial channels suddenly became open instead of being coded, and terrestrial broadcasting from Russia and Belarus can now be received free of charge.<sup>254</sup>

Many interviewees spoke of the content presented on Russian television with immediate reference to Latvia's own media landscape, speaking disapprovingly of policies and language demands that journalists and Harmony affiliates of all ages labelled as nationalist.

A lot of channels are just making fun of Latvian decisions, or saying that Latvia has stupid laws, or showing that we are a threat because we have NATO soldiers; and the people are feeling it – they think they're living in some stupid country. So, this is not the way our inhabitants should be getting their information. They have to get it from the inside, not from outside analysts. . . . We have to strengthen our inside media and we shouldn't cut the budget for state channels making their programmes in different languages. . . . Because, for my grandmother, it's not very easy to watch Latvian news. It's much easier to see it and hear it in Russian.<sup>255</sup>

Still, most also noticed a shift of interest on the Russian part in recent years.

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<sup>252</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>253</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>254</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>255</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

Now, when you turn on the Russian television, all you hear is about Ukraine, about Zelenskyy, and very little about the Baltics. But five or ten years ago, you could just tune in and hear about the Baltics being fascists, about the Russian schools, or about 9 May – it was popular theme. But times are changing, and Russia is changing its attention to the United States, to France, and to Ukraine.<sup>256</sup>

One journalist reflected on having a high position in Latvian media.

I should be a target of Russian efforts to influence. . . . They should be here somewhere with bribes or with whatever. But they're not doing it. I've met the Russian ambassador in Latvia only once, and I'm not pressured. I don't see it. Maybe, we're not in the focus. . . . My personal opinion is that sometimes, the influence of the Russian state on Latvian people is overestimated. Their main influence is just media influence.<sup>257</sup>

All but two respondents soundly rejected the prospect of Russia invading the Baltic states, the exceptions noting human error in the military domain, or Russian foreign policy being simply too unpredictable.

### 3.2.3.3. The Party of Compromise

Journalists and politicians alike argued that barring Harmony from coalition talks was a clear sign of polarization efforts that tapped into an electorally significant anti-Russian sentiment in Latvian society at large.

Russians don't have a political presence in Latvian government. We have a system where Latvian parties who are trying to communicate with Russian voters are losing Latvian votes. As a result, they've segregated these communities, and they're not speaking to Russians at all.<sup>258</sup>

One participant highlighted a difference between the local and national levels of politics.

I think we're doing well for our city, the city is flourishing, and it's better there now than it was before my term, because we try to be neutral. But in Latvian politics as a whole, this isn't happening.<sup>259</sup>

Another interviewee noted a similar dynamic.

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<sup>256</sup> Younger journalist. This interview took place two months after Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected President of Ukraine.

<sup>257</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>258</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>259</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

You can find a lot of stuff in social media comments and in political rhetoric about a Russian danger, but in everyday communication, we have a lot of mixed companies, we have mixed families, and we don't have ethnic regions that Latvians or Russians are afraid to visit at night.<sup>260</sup>

Still, multiple respondents mentioned the electoral practice of “minussing,” referring to the custom where Latvian voters, when voting for a particular party list, are presented with the option to place either minuses or plusses after any number of candidates on that list.

The most minussed people in Development/For! were people with Russian surnames. It was a very bad surprise to me, as I was sure that the electorate of that party was completely liberal in these questions. . . . Maybe this was just the electorate of a different party voting for Development/For! in the European Parliament, but it's strange.<sup>261</sup>

Confronted with a question about Harmony's hard-hitting radio advertisement for the European Parliament election, one politician expressed annoyance.

That's the rhetoric they force us into. Look at all the positions we took that I think are wrong! On the language, on our relationship with Russia – we're losing voters for it, and still it's not giving us anything in terms of political relations!<sup>262</sup>

One of the journalists recognized the importance of those concessions on Harmony's part.

The Russian community has made several steps towards compromise, but the Latvian community hasn't recognized those steps, or isn't ready to take steps in the same direction yet. In 2014, Ušakovs admitted the occupation, as a leader of the Russian community, if I may put it like that. . . . When he said that there was an occupation, but that there are no occupants, that was a very strong point, because he lost the very radical part of his electorate. But he wanted to win the hearts of Latvians, so he decided to try and make this leap forward. At the same time, some Latvian opinion leaders were already openly expressing the idea that they had been too hard on the Russians, that they promised them citizenship, and that maybe it was time to go a bit softer on them. . . . I had a strong feeling that a compromise from the Latvian side was also possible – and then Crimea smashed all that by polarizing nationalistic feelings in many post-Soviet countries, with governments starting to look at all those Russians in their midst.<sup>263</sup>

Participants of all backgrounds found that below the superficial level, Russian Latvians are not a singular group.

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<sup>260</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>261</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate. In extreme cases, minussing can change a candidate's final position on their party's approved list. Development/For! is a Latvian political party of the liberal democratic Renew Europe family.

<sup>262</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>263</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

Latvia has never had well-organized Russian communities. It's a myth, used actively on the one hand by some Russian activists, who want to present themselves as the leaders of some big, organized group, and by Latvian nationalists on the other hand, who want to present it as a huge, several-100-thousands-strong community that's well-organized, living among them. But in practical terms, Russians are very different, and absolutely not organized.<sup>264</sup>

Most younger interviewees noted that such differences even run within families.

I have discussions with my father, but I'm not having discussions with my grandfather. . . . I don't want to have a conflict with him, because he's 93 years old and maybe he will be disappointed. I don't know why I would need to do that, what it could change.<sup>265</sup>

In this sense, one journalist explained his appreciation of the compromise-seeking nature of Harmony's fight for recognition of Russians' rights, and in total, two journalists felt that this made Harmony an appealing electoral option for them, at least in their private capacities.

If you include Harmony in the coalition, . . . they will have to comply with that coalition, and they will have to keep their radicals less radical. . . . I think that this would be much more difficult if there were ten different Russian parties instead of one Harmony party. . . . Ušakovs managed to get all those different small groups into one big party, demonstrating to these people that they can do things when they're together, and that compromise works. The next step is for the Latvian politicians to be brave enough to give Harmony something it could cherish while being controlled by a coalition.<sup>266</sup>

But maintaining a coalition is easier said than done, and whereas one older politician cited above felt uneasiness at Harmony's recent concessions, its younger members talked enthusiastically about progressive goals like solving the gender pay gap or improving LGBTI rights – opinions that were shared by two of the interviewed journalists who looked to parties more holistically inclined to support these causes than they felt Harmony would be.

Harmony is a very big party. . . . Its politicians are very different: from people who are completely against NATO to people who are publicly speaking about LGBT rights and about European integration. . . . I don't want to leave the party, but I have a lot of questions that I don't have answers to. Now, the situation is changing, because our leader is in the European Parliament, so there will be changes in leadership and changes in power.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>265</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

<sup>266</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>267</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.

On respondents' preferred relations to Russia, there was more consensus, most ascribing to a view characterized by one respondent as sadly long-gone.

Latvian Russians are sure that Russia is a European country. They believe that economic and cultural cooperation are good for Latvia. Actually, this was a very popular position in Latvian politics for about 20 years, because geographically, we had the vision that we could be a logistical bridge between Russia and the West; that we should somehow live like Hong Kong or Singapore. But after all these issues with Ukraine, these options are closed, and now we are the West, and Russia is evil – which, I believe, is not a very productive way to see the world.<sup>268</sup>

Similar views dominated respondents' opinions of Harmony's previous agreement with United Russia. Some said the agreement included something of a framework to encourage cultural exchange by both parties' participation in city fairs and other events, whereas all participants who recalled to have read it downplayed its concrete political significance.

As far as I remember, it was only this very typical Soviet bureaucratic stuff, that "we want to facilitate good cooperation, and in the case of necessity we will conduct consultation," and that's all. A lot of words about nothing.<sup>269</sup>

Even journalists were not convinced that the agreement was a threat to Latvian security.

Well, it wasn't like the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact! . . . And if you take a look at it from the perspective of Harmony being a European party in a European country, then it's a smart idea to have an agreement with Russia's ruling party, isn't it? They dissolved it after Crimea, and many other European parties didn't.<sup>270</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given these assessments, negative press based on the agreement having existed in the past irked more than a few Harmony affiliates.

I'm very upset when they write that we are Kremlin accomplices, because we don't have any Kremlin points or rhetoric in our programme. It's just a myth; a standard argument for nationalists to say that we're one with the Kremlin. I don't see it at all. Maybe some of our politicians are against severe sanctions, but we are for the European Union's common foreign policy.<sup>271</sup>

Finally, a middle-aged Harmony affiliate stated that membership of the Party of European Socialists was pursued as early as in 2007, with the Estonian social-democrats and another Latvian member party until recently successfully frustrating Harmony's attempts to join.

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<sup>268</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>269</sup> Older Harmony affiliate.

<sup>270</sup> Middle-aged journalist.

<sup>271</sup> Younger Harmony affiliate.



### 3.3. Discussion

For most interviewees, history problematizes the question of ethnicity. Often complex, multinational family histories cause a general inability or reluctance to ascribe to a certain ethnic label. While, admittedly, most respondents do derive meaning from some of these categorizations, the intricacy of their familial backgrounds tends to give them a uniquely depoliticized perspective on long-term history.

Many participants also observe the appearance of a diasporic rift in the Russian identity, suggesting that their Russianness does not pose a caricature Russian threat to Latvian statehood. Rather, many indicate that their Latvian surroundings have slowly but surely transformed their historic Russian identity into a particular brand of Baltic Russianness. In fact, interviewees across all age groups opt to identify primarily as European or international, as opposed to picking any national label.

Some younger respondents once felt reluctant to register their official ethnicity as Russian. As a possible explanation, others experience stigmatization for being considered members of an occupant nationality. Most participants actively distance themselves from the occupation narrative, although many are empathic to the historic complexities on both sides of the dispute. Many are convinced that discussing the occupation is not productive.

All interviewees believe that a vast majority of Russian Latvians is sufficiently proficient in the Latvian language. Perhaps in part because of their innate internationalism, many respondents speak affectionately of knowing multiple languages, including Latvian. In this sense, no threat to the Latvian language is perceived. On the other hand, some middle-aged and older participants are concerned that a lack of protection of the Russian language might at some future point lead to its gradual demise in Latvian society.

Recent reforms in the education domain are perceived by most as being enacted too quickly and for populist reasons, at the expense of the quality of education in minority schools. Nevertheless, most interviewees are not ideologically opposed to abolishing

minority-language education per se, although some respondents feel that eliminating Russian-language schooling altogether might in the long run reduce affinity with Russian minority culture, especially considering earlier-cited fears of Russian language decline.

Astonishingly, if not outright incongruously, the Russian language appears to be thriving in some employment sectors, and Russian language proficiency is thought to raise candidates' chances on the labour market. At the same time, some participants foresee long-term complications resulting from a combination of anti-Russian sentiments and a dwindling workforce that calls for labour migration from Russian-speaking countries.

Non-citizenship occurs in the families of almost all interviewees, modestly suggesting that it is not an isolated phenomenon. In most respondents' circles, naturalization is seen as a practical step to be taken at some point on the path to full participation in society. Often-cited reasons for non-naturalization relate to independence-era disappointments, or, in fewer cases, the persistent lack of travel restrictions. Some experiences with naturalization raise questions about the fairness of Latvia's ethnicity-centred statehood.

The compatriot policy is seen by most as an attempt to bolster Russia's image as a world-class great power. Interviewees do not recognize its stated purpose of helping Russians abroad, nor are they compelled to improve ties with a motherland that they feel no connection to. The Russian influence is felt primarily in its broadcasts domineering over the Russian media landscape, although Latvia has become less of a target in recent times.

Many respondents contest the idea of a consolidated Russian-Latvian community, and Harmony's strength has so far been its ability to hold the various strands together in spite of that diversity. The party's position is therefore solid, but not guaranteed, as uncertainty over the next leadership's ideological course is mounting and active attempts to raise wider acceptability have so far not led to its involvement in coalition talks. Friendly diplomatic relations with Russia as a neighbouring state are favoured, and Harmony soundly represents this view. Most interviewees think the agreement with United Russia served this aim. Membership of the Party of European Socialists is claimed to be long-pursued, and younger members' internationalist progressivism is consistent with that assertion.

Adding the impressions given by the Russian Latvians interviewed to the earlier outline yields the following updated matrix of the various generalized viewpoints.

<i>Table 2. Comparison of Russian-Latvian symbolic and cultural needs to symbolic and cultural needs according to the two overarching narratives</i>			
	Russian	Latvian	Russian Latvian
1. Identity	Convergent histories; Russian multi-nationalism; cosmopolitan contributors.	Divergent histories; Russian imperialism; nation-state nuisance.	Holistic history; post-nationalism; post-Soviet non-occupants.
2. Accommodation	<i>Lingua franca</i> of nations; segregation by education; economic disparity.	Languishing language; integration by education; equal opportunity.	Over-protected Latvian; degradation of education; beneficial bilingualism.
3. Politics	Minority repression; compatriots abroad; ethnocratic Latvia.	Reluctance to integrate; national security threat; democratic Latvia.	Pragmatists and protestors; non-Russian Russians; uncompromising Latvia.

## Conclusion

Across a variety of topics, Russian Latvians do not ascribe to Latvia's official state narrative. Specifically, they disagree with historic Latvian portrayals of the Russian state, they dislike the nationalist conceptions of identity that characterize Latvian self-representation, and they feel generally disengaged with the centre-stage of Latvian politics at the national level. In geopolitical terms, however, none of this signifies substantial alignment with the opinions propagated by the Russian Federation. On the whole, Russian Latvians feel little connection to Russia as a state, viewing their Russianness instead as being of a purely cultural and historic nature. On this account, having developed a distinct Baltic Russian identity, Russian Latvians' social integration as part of Latvian society has been reasonably successful.

In fact, not being inherently opposed to Latvian demands of language knowledge, nor to the request that they reaffirm their loyalty towards the state in cases of pending naturalization, Russian Latvians appear to be fully capable of participating in Latvian society at large. Yet, given that the conceptualization of identity in Latvian nationalist circles seems to be predominantly ethnicity-based, conforming to such high standards of integration will always remain an impossibility. Russian Latvians, after all, will never be full ethnic Latvians, and some take understandable offense at such unattainable expectations.

Thus, while the conclusion is that Russian Latvians are not quite the appendages of the Russian state that nationalist rhetoricians and the international press often make them out to be, the catch is that the ideal-typical Latvian narrative employed in this thesis is, of course, an extreme. This highlights a first limitation of this project, namely that although the ideal-typical narratives that Russian-Latvian opinions are compared to here are useful tools in positioning their thoughts on various topics in the continuum of prevalent Latvian opinions, they are in essence of the same imagined nature as the representations projected onto Russian Latvians in the geopolitical context – and this thesis does little justice to the diversity that is no doubt present in the larger Latvian political society as well.

Another limitation has to do with Russian-Latvian concerns over an expected loss of Russian cultural heritage. Given that many have already begun to observe identity-related differences between their own brand of Russianness and the Russianness observed across the border to the east, this raises an overarching philosophical question with regard to the meaning and the importance of minority culture preservation. Perhaps Baltic Russianness will be able to evolve into a fluid, altogether new kind of identity, possibly even benefitting from the contrast provided by more stubborn nationalisms of the Latvian kind. In the long run, that prospect may be more constructive than clinging to an identity slowly growing devoid of a cultural heritage that is being claimed by an increasingly alienated Russian state.

Given that this thesis makes use of an explorative qualitative research design, a few more obvious limitations apply as well. Ten interviewees, however carefully selected, can hardly be representative of all existing sentiments and leanings. Some factual claims, like those pertaining to Harmony's allegedly long-sought membership of the Party of European Socialists, could not be sufficiently corroborated. Some professional bias may also have occurred, with journalists eagerly discussing Russian influence in the media landscape.

Nevertheless, by comparing statements made by politicians from an influential and topical political party to the answers given by journalists who were confronted with the same kinds of questions, the assumption remains that widely-held opinions are likely to have come to the surface in the scope of these interviews. Moreover, given the largely comparable bandwidth of opinions to have come up in both sampled groups' answers, in addition to the internal confirmation of a number of surprising or controversial claims, it appears that a modest approximation of a Russian-Latvian *communis opinio* has in fact been attained. Far from claiming that the opinions voiced here are definitive, they will still to an important degree be representative of the Russian-Latvian contribution to the Latvian public debate.

Having based this study on the two-sided assumption that in international affairs, people matter because they can be exploited for the betterment of powerful states, the Latvian case shows that sometimes, a less-powerful state's own ethnic nationalist narrative can render a particular minority an easy target for power-hungry great-state manipulators.

By turning a blind eye to Russian Latvians' changing identities and language needs, and stressing the ways in which Russian Latvians are deemed to be insufficiently Latvian, Latvian politicians contribute to their own minorities' falling prey to Russian influence.

That conclusion has implications for the treatment of the Russian diaspora in the wider post-Soviet region. One of the last acts of former President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko, for example, was having a law passed that forces Ukrainian public officials to conduct their official duties in the Ukrainian language.<sup>272</sup> Disregarding for a moment that the Ukrainian population is bilingual to a much larger extent than is the case in Latvia, the findings in this thesis suggest that such laws are likely to do the issuing state more damage than good in a Krasnerian conception of minority-rights-related international power play.<sup>273</sup>

But Russian Latvians appear to be a tough crowd for Russian efforts to gain a footing in the Baltic region, and they oftentimes feel closer to Latvia than they do to Russia, regardless of their having to put up with ardent Latvian nationalism. So much so, that many respondents figuring in the present inquiry did not even mark their ethnicity as Russian in official records, a fact that points, perhaps, more towards a conceptual problem with Latvia's ethnic registry, than to shortcomings in research that, like this thesis, relies in part on such official data. The Latvian case could well serve as a small-state testing ground for future research into the practicability of ethnicity registration in the present age.

As a final point for future consideration, Latvia may not have been the best place on the globe to study the effectiveness of a compatriot policy that clearly has not been very successful in attracting the attention of Russian Latvians. For more meaningful work in this regard, a series of interviews with Latvians that successfully resettled in Russia may prove to be informative. A leaving persons' perspective of this sort may shed additional light on the political opinions of an otherwise hard-to-find group of Russia-leaning Russian Latvians.

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<sup>272</sup> "Draft Law on Ukrainian Language Adopted by 278 Lawmakers," *UNIAN* (Kyiv), 25 April 2019, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10530402-draft-law-on-ukrainian-language-adopted-by-278-lawmakers.html>.

<sup>273</sup> See, again, Krasner, *Organized Hypocrisy*, 104.

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## Appendices

### A. List of Interview Topics

#### **Nationality**

How do you identify in terms of nationality?  
How would you characterize belonging to that nationality or culture?  
Do you discuss your identity with relatives and friends?

#### **Citizenship**

What passport do you have?  
Is there anything written in your passport's "nationality" field?  
When did you obtain your particular citizenship status?

#### **Language**

When did you learn the Latvian language?  
Are you proud to have learnt the Latvian language?  
What languages do you speak at home?

#### **Employment**

How did you get into politics/journalism and what did you do before?  
What do your parents or children do?  
Is it more difficult for Russians to find employment, than it is for Latvians?

#### **History**

What are the important historical moments for this part of the world?  
Russian history has been explained both in terms of multinationalism and in terms of imperialism. Which of these classifications do you think is more appropriate or fitting?

#### **Politics**

Is there any (other) political party or politician that you could sympathize with?  
Can you describe the nature of Harmony's past agreement with United Russia?  
Where do you think Latvian politics is headed?

#### **Russia**

Does the Russian Federation exert an influence on Latvia?  
Does Russia's compatriot policy apply to you?  
Do you discuss Russian foreign policy with your friends or relatives?

#### **Closing**

In Latvia, can you be as Russian as you like?  
Is there anything that you think I missed or should have asked you about?

## B. Informed Consent Form

Please tick the appropriate boxes Yes No

**1. Taking part in the study**

I have read and understood the study information dated 22 May 2019 or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

I understand that taking part in the study involves an audio-recorded interview that will be kept by the student for the purpose of extracting relevant, anonymized quotes.

**2. Use of the information in the study**

I understand that information I provide will be used for a Master's thesis.

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the student and his supervisor.

I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs.

**3. Signatures**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant                      Signature                      Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of student                      Signature                      Date

**4. Study contact details for further information**

L. (Bert) van Laar BA  
+31 6  
@ .com

### C. Study Information Sheet

**The purpose of this research** project is to conduct a systematic inquiry into how Russian Latvians themselves perceive the geopolitical context surrounding the historical process of their integration into Latvian society.

**By conducting semi-structured interviews**, several well-connected, well-informed, and influential politicians and journalists of the Russian-Latvian community will be asked a series of questions that serve to individually position them somewhere in the continuum of discourse between two constructed extreme narratives.

**Participants' cooperation is completely voluntary**, and they may freely withdraw from the study at any moment before or during the interview. Participants may also withdraw by contacting the student via the contact information offered below, provided such requests are received by the student before 8 July 2019.

**The data will be used** solely for the purpose of this research and will be archived only by the student. If so requested by the thesis supervisor, the student may share the data only with the supervisor for the sole purpose of verification. The thesis supervisor will not archive the data.

**Participants will be cited anonymously**, using only non-retraceable signifiers to note their position in Latvian society, such as their gender, their age group, their nationality, and their profession or field of expertise insofar as it is not uniquely tied to their person.

**The thesis will be submitted** to the partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in International Relations at Utrecht University.

**The student may be contacted** by email, at \_\_\_\_\_@\_\_\_\_\_.com, or by telephone, at +31 6 \_\_\_\_\_. Complaints concerning the student's conduct may be directed to the Utrecht University MA programme of International Relations in Historical Perspective's thesis desk, at MAIRHPThesisDesk@uu.nl.