

Latvia and Its Ethnic Russian Minority: An Improving Yet Perpetually Complicated Relationship

Introduction

Latvia, a Baltic nation of approximately 1.9 million people, sits along the western border of Russia in between its two European neighbors—Estonia to the north and Lithuania to the south. The Baltic region, as it is known to most, consists of these three small countries, which all share a similar recent history as it relates to Soviet occupation and EU accession.

As with most former Soviet republics, a significant portion of the Baltic region's population is ethnically Russian, which is the result of Soviet policies in the 20th century that effectively removed the nation's titular population and replaced them with Russians. Though this tactic took place in both Estonia and Lithuania, as well, Latvia ended up in the post-Soviet era with the most ethnic Russians remaining in the country, even after the collapse of the USSR. Currently, there are around 500,000 ethnic Russians in Latvia, which accounts for approximately 25 percent of its overall population. The majority of this minority population lives in Riga, the capital city, and also Daugavpils, which is located in Eastern Latvia.¹

As I was born and raised in Latvia, I was aware from a very young age of the layer of tension—which is not always known about nor recognized by those outside of the region—in society between my country's titular population and the ethnic Russian minority. The cause of a number of social, linguistic, and political challenges, the Russian minority, in a post-Soviet, sovereign Latvia, struggles to find its place, as both ethnic Latvians and Russians alike find themselves socially separated from one another. Though living in the same country, informal lines are drawn along educational, linguistic, political, and geographic spheres that cause there to be two worlds within the same nation: a Latvian one and a Russian one.

Growing up in Latvia, I witnessed this internal, social tension, and heard about its origins, too, from family members who lived in Soviet Latvia. My parents, who had experienced the years of Soviet occupation, always made sure to raise their three kids—me and my two older siblings—as patriots of our country. This was something I noticed a lot of my friends' parents did, as well, because they had the understanding of how valuable freedom is, having regained it just a few short years prior. I was born in 1998, and at this point, Latvia was slowly recovering from the decades of oppression—which, in many ways, it is still doing today. The years after regaining independence still showed the significant impact the occupation years had left on my country and its people, and it is still clear today to those who have spent time in Latvia.

¹ Population: Demographic Situation, Languages and Religion. (2020). European Commission. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-40_en#:~:text=In%20the%20beginning%20of%202017,%2C%20Tatars%2C%20and%20others.

Matthews-Ferrero, D., Bruge, I., and Steenland, R. (2019). EU country briefing: Latvia. *Euractiv*. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/eu-country-briefing-latvia/>

One major aspect of this impact involves the relationship Latvia developed with its ethnic Russian minority, whom a number of ethnic Latvians view as reminders of their Soviet past. The ethnic Russians, additionally, experienced a number of challenges relating to this tense ethnic environment, but also as a result of government policies that socially excluded them during the early years of independence in the 1990s, which hindered the community's ability to integrate and the nation's ability to form a socially cohesive state. This article aims to address this evolving reality, paying attention to the historical aspects that caused it, and how the relationship and the ethnic Russians function in modern day Latvia.

Latvia under the Soviet Union

For five decades, from 1940 to 1990, the Soviet Union illegally occupied Latvia, claiming my home country as one its many socialist republics, during which Latvian people and our culture experienced a number of hardships, as the USSR attempted to erase Latvian identity in order to clear the way for the establishment of a single unit of Slavic culture—one of the communist regime's leading and underlying goals. To accomplish this goal, the Soviet Union undertook a brutal campaign of mass deportations in Latvia, with the most devastating ones taking place in 1941 and 1949. The objectives and impacts of this deportation campaign were three-fold, having targeted roots in the removal of Latvian culture, the prevention of ethnic mobilization, and the initiation and establishment of an ethnic Russian majority.

My grandparents on my father's side were born shortly before WW2 began, and I still remember myself, as a child, asking them: "What was it like growing up in that time?" The answer from my grandmother was that: "Everyone was in a constant state of fear. Fear was everywhere." Occasionally going into more detail and sharing stories, neither she nor my grandfather would talk about the years of occupation very often . One of the stories she shared, however, was about how she was sent by her mom to get something from a shop, and as she was walking, she had a bullet shot so close to her head, she heard the noise of it go right by her ear. This story was her way of explaining the state of constant fear that existed in Soviet Latvia. Nobody was safe: not men, women, nor children.

As part of the deportations that took place in Latvia, Latvian men were most often shipped off to extreme labor camps, otherwise known as "Gulags," whereas women and children—who comprised a large majority of Latvians deported from the country—were sent to remote settlements in areas of Russia with harsh climates and given very few supplies to survive on their own. In both cases, whether sent to a Gulag or remote settlement, a number of the deportees perished, with a majority also succumbing to death along the journey to the destination, since the conditions in the railways cars in which they were sent were extremely cruel and severe. In 1941, roughly 35,000 Latvians were deported to these labor camps or uninhabitable settlements within Russia. In 1949, the deportations removed 42,000 people, with over 11,000 of the 42,000 deported being children. My grandmother shared some stories about this as well, and she remembers that people would be taken out of their homes, lined up, and randomly chosen by a Soviet official who simply pointed at them and said "You." After those selected were taken

away, nobody ever heard from them again. My grandparents recalled the horror of losing neighbors, and referred to themselves and their families as “the lucky ones,” who avoided being taken away. Many of the deported people were also those the USSR considered fugitives or threats to the Soviet system—for example, poets and artists who took part in the resistance movement against the Soviet rule. Estimations show that overall at least 100,000 Latvians were deported as a result of these two brutal campaigns, and the terror and fear that they caused in society among ethnic Latvian people were also extremely damaging, too. Once the de-Stalinization period began in 1956, the Soviet Union discontinued government-sanctioned deportations such as these.²

Shortly after the deportations, the Soviet regime brought in ethnic Russians to make up for the population loss. The USSR placed the ethnic Russians sent to Latvia into high-ranking government or industrial jobs, which provided the Slavic community with a layer of power in the occupied country. The Soviet government prioritized Russian language and culture, as well, in Latvia, in an attempt to shed the nation of its culture, traditions, and lifestyle. Schools taught children Russian, adults were expected to learn the language, media was in Russian, and so on, leading to the attempted “Russification” and “Sovietization” of Latvia, as the USSR wanted to eradicate the country of all things that made it Latvian.

More and more ethnic Russians arrived to the nation over the years, too, which altered the demographics of the country: in 1935, for example, 76 percent of the country was ethnically Latvian; by the time 1989 arrived, however, only 52 percent of the country was Latvian, 34 percent Russian, five percent Belarusian, and four percent Ukrainian. Thus by 1989, 43 percent of the country was Slavic. With a fleeting Latvian population and a society that promoted Russian language and culture, there was a growing worry among ethnic Latvians that the government wanted to and was going to erase their identity. The same fear existed in the neighboring countries, and because of their bond throughout this period, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians created the Baltic Way in 1989—a peaceful protest movement in which approximately two million people stood hand in hand, from Vilnius to Riga to Tallinn, to show their common wish to be freed of the illegal occupation, and recognized as independent nations. This movement was supported by the entirety of the three nations’ titular populations, but for the most part—with a few exceptions—the Russian communities did not support the message of this movement, as they preferred a world where Latvia remained part of the Soviet Union. This movement marked a turning point in the history of the three nations, however, and the Baltic

2 Strods, H., & Kott, M. (2002). The file on operation ‘Priboi’: A re-assessment of the mass deportations of 1949. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 33(1), 1-36.

Soviet Mass Deportations from Latvia. (2004, August 16). *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Embassy of the Republic of Latvia to the United States of America*. Retrieved from <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/usa/embassy/honorary-consuls-in-the-u-s-and-mexico/789-ministry/briefing-papers/5260-soviet-mass-deportations-from-latvia>.

History of Latvia: A Brief Synopsis. (2014). *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Embassy of the Republic of Latvia to the United States of America*. Retrieved from www.mfa.gov.lv/en/usa/culture/history-of-latvia-a-brief-synopsis.

Stuttaford, A. (2014). Latvia Divided. *National Review*, 66(15), 22–23.

Roeder, P. (1991). Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization. *World Politics*, 43(2), 196-232. doi:10.2307/2010471

Way was recognized all over the world: from the USA and Canada, to the UK, Norway, India, Japan, and others, as people from all corners of the world showed their solidarity with the Baltic countries.



Source: www.lv100.lv

Source: www.iecava.lv

Ethnic Russians at the Onset of an Independent Latvia

Once the 1990s arrived, and after the success of protest and advocacy movements, such as the Baltic Way, the situation in Latvia changed: independence was on the horizon. With the fall of the USSR, Latvia officially regained its independence and established sovereignty in 1991, and

its number one objective in the immediate aftermath of the USSR's collapse was to reverse everything the USSR did and intended to do. This meant shedding the country of all things Soviet and to reinstate and prioritize Latvian language and culture: a reality that frightened the ethnic Russian community.

The government then had to also figure out what to do with the ethnic Russians remaining in the country, who opted to stay in Latvia rather than return to Russia. A number of Latvians, however, viewed the Russian population as a facet and remnant of Soviet occupation, and consequently felt that a Latvia for Latvians ought to be established, which did not include Russian residents in its plan. The Russians that elected to stay understood that the quality of life would be better in Latvia, even if they do not share in the joy of independence or know the language and culture of the country, as opposed to the quality of life in a post-Soviet Russia. This remaining population complicated the Latvian government's post-Soviet plans, since they had to work with a subset of the country who did not speak the language nor understand just how brutal Soviet occupation was for the country, because they had the superior status within the Soviet Union for many years. In addition to this, they did not have any form of citizenship.

The Latvian government instituted a set of restrictive naturalization policies that posed a challenge for ethnic Russians to obtain citizenship. This resulted in a large number of the remaining ethnic Russians finding themselves with no defined citizenship, causing them to be “stateless” and receiving alien passports, because they were either unable or unwilling to obtain Latvian citizenship and also did not possess Russian citizenship.³ The citizenship policies have slowly grown more accessible since then, and especially throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. This thawing of restrictions allowed for ethnic Russians to more easily naturalize. But, as of January 2021, there still remain approximately 210,000 non-citizens residing in Latvia—the majority of these non-citizens live in areas where there is already a sizeable ethnic Russian community, such as Riga or Daugavpils.⁴ Citizenship, among other things in Latvian society that involve ethnicity and language, quickly became a sprawling debate in social discourse and between politicians. In fact, to this day, the nation's two pro-Russia and ethnic minority-focused parties, Harmony Centre and the Russian Union of Latvia, still posit that the government's current naturalization policies are too stringent, and that they specifically discriminate against Latvia's Russian minority. (Note: These two parties are largely supported by the nation's minority population, and they also have previous and current political connections to the Russian Federation and have failed to speak out against the Kremlin's aggressive tactics and actions.)

The challenges regarding citizenship, compounded with other areas of tension within the educational and political fields, specifically as it related to language use, paved the way for the

3 Cameron, D. R., & Orenstein, M. A. (2012). Post-Soviet Authoritarianism: The Influence of Russia in Its 'Near Abroad.' *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 28(1), 1-44.1.1

Ammon Cheskin & Angela Kachuyevski (2019) The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Post-Soviet Space: Language, Politics and Identity, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71:1, 1-23, DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2018.1529467

Cheskin, A. (2013). Exploring Russian-speaking identity from below: The case of Latvia. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 44(3), 287-312.

4 Distribution of Latvian population by nationality. (2021). *The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs*. Retrieved from https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/sites/pmlp/files/media_file/isvp_latvija_pec_vpd.pdf

complicated relationship between Latvians and Russians to this day. The fallout of the USSR's collapse and their lack of Latvian language knowledge also placed the Russian minority in a financially disadvantaged spot, as they were unable to obtain a majority of high-paying, stable jobs because of the language requirement associated with most positions. A sophisticated knowledge of Latvian language was and is very important in the nation's labor market. Areas, for example, with lower levels of Latvian language use and knowledge tend to have higher rates of unemployment, as well. This is demonstrated by examining Latgale, the region in which the predominantly Russian-speaking city of Daugavpils is located, which is the poorest region in the country and possesses a 15 percent unemployment rate: a figure that is nearly double the national average.⁵

In the years that followed the re-establishment of independence, especially during the early 2000s, Latvia experienced rapid Westernization. The nation joined the EU and became a NATO member state in 2004, thereby solidifying itself in European territory and moving away from the label of an "Eastern" country. Nonetheless, the process to obtain EU membership, for example, was hindered by my country's treatment, as the EU defined it, of the Russian minority community. The EU criticized Latvia for its shortcomings, such as with its stringent naturalization rules, and also in protecting, guarding, and improving the rights of the minority community. The review committee in Brussels even laid out certain criteria pertaining to this that Latvia had to accomplish prior to earning membership and joining the union.⁶

Interestingly, even though the EU advocated for minority rights and claimed that the ethnic Russian population in Latvia needed more support from the government to integrate cohesively, a large number of ethnic Russians opposed EU membership. In the eyes of some from this community, a step into the EU meant more Westernization—and this carried the tag of de-Easternization or, in other words, further wiping Latvia of its Soviet past. While the Russians did live in Latvia, many still held pro-USSR beliefs, since their ethnicity was in power during occupation and life was, in several ways, simpler for them back then than in the post-Soviet era. This is still relevant and visible, especially among the elderly population of ethnic Russians.

Because of this, joining the EU resembled a possible social threat to the minority community's identity and culture in Latvia. In fact, Daugavpils, where most of the residents are either Russian or of another Slavic ethnicity, was the sole city in Latvia to have a population in which the majority opposed EU membership in the 2003 referendum.⁷ Furthermore, a large portion—but not the majority—of the Russian community throughout the country overall in Latvia opposed EU membership, as well, with roughly 44 percent voting against it in the referendum, and then only 20 percent voting in favor. This contrasted significantly with the

⁵ State Unemployment Rate - March 2019. (2019 April 29). NODARBINĀTĪBAS VALSTS AĢENTŪRA - National Employment Agency. Retrieved from www.nva.gov.lv/index.php?cid=6.

⁶ van Elsuwege, P. (2004). *Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia: Problems of integration at the threshold of the European Union*. Flensburg, Germany: European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI).

⁷ van Elsuwege, P. (2004). *Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia: Problems of integration at the threshold of the European Union*. Flensburg, Germany: European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI).

ethnic Latvian breakdown of the referendum results, as 57 percent voted in favor of membership and only 18 percent voted against it.⁸

As expected, this created further tension in the country between the two ethnicities, because Latvians viewed the EU as their ticket to the West, whereas ethnic Russians, even though the EU advocated for this minority community to receive more rights, viewed any pivot to the West as inherently dangerous for their own culture.

Ethnic Russians in Today's Latvia

We have seen integrative progress in Latvia over the years with the Russian minority community—but we have seen integrative stagnation, too, that continues to hinder the community's ability to fully integrate with the rest of the nation. That is, as with many facets of society, there is a split within the community: there are those who have integrated and have embraced Latvian culture, language, and lifestyle, and then there are those who have not integrated and, for one reason or another, remain isolated and separated from the rest of the country, preferring to stay in the Russian enclave that still exists—over thirty years after the fall of the Soviet Union—in modern day Latvia.

Many of the issues that are present today are those that existed in the past. Nevertheless, those that remain issues in society also overlap, on certain levels, with social facets that have been improving. The use of language in Latvia, for instance, is a prime example of this. After the fall of the USSR, as mentioned before, language was an issue for the ethnic Russian community—they lacked an understanding of basic Latvian, and many were not interested in learning it either. This divided society, owing both to the linguistic barrier it created and the tension to which it gave way. Flash forward to 2012 and language remained a divisive issue, as demonstrated by the 2012 referendum on language, in which all citizens of Latvia voted on whether or not Russian should become an official second language for the country. I remember how shocked the Latvians were that such a referendum was even happening, and how angry people were about it. This caused tension everywhere, even for me, since the Russian language was a stark reminder to many of the brutality of occupation—and I was only in middle school at this time. The overall turnout, including the results, of course, certainly reiterated that language remained a divisive topic in Latvia on which opinions are split among ethnicity, even over twenty years after independence. The referendum had a turnout of 71 percent of Latvia's population. Only 25 percent—the same percentage of ethnic Russians in relation to the nation's population—of the country voted in favor of establishing Russian as a second language, whereas 75 percent voted against it. It is important to also include the ethnic breakdown of those who participated in the referendum: approximately 72 percent were ethnic Latvians, 20 percent were

⁸ Šūpule, I. (2004). The referendum on Latvia's accession to the European Union: Analysis and conclusions. *Ethnicity Studies*. ISSN 1822-1041.

ethnic Russians, and then eight percent were of other ethnicities, such as Ukrainian, Belarusian, Polish, and so forth.⁹

Though language as a topic in social discourse is debatable and spurs emotions, the actual use of language in Latvia within shops, on the street, and so forth is not quite as complicated—for the most part. According to data collected from 2010 to 2015 by the Latvian Language Agency, a government-funded department, a majority of ethnic Russians can speak Latvian: 91 percent of respondents who do not speak Latvian natively claimed that they spoke Latvian at least at a basic level. The research indicates that knowledge of Latvian will continue to improve in the coming years, which is supported by the proficiency levels of young people in Latvia. The study uncovered that “all young people aged 15-24 and nearly all those aged 25-34 speak Latvian at least at a basic level,” and furthermore that “Latvia’s young people (aged 15-24) speak Latvian better than they do Russian; 100 [percent] indicate that they speak Latvian, while 93 [percent] indicate that they speak Russian.” This finding is significant because, in comparison to all other age groups, an understanding and knowledge of Russian is greater or equal to knowledge of Latvian.¹⁰

That said, more than just a few times, I have been approached by Russian speakers from different age groups, who permanently live in Latvia and likely are Latvian citizens, and they speak to me in Russian immediately, assuming I know the language, but when I would respond to them in Latvian—they would be quite puzzled, and also unwilling to switch to English as a compromise, since I am not a Russian speaker myself. Of course, this is not always the case, and at times, both sides would make an effort to find the common language, but unfortunate moments such as those have resonated with me.

Language is not the only example that exists to show this split between integrative progression and stagnation. With ethnic political parties, Latvia’s political climate reflects this social structure for the ethnic Russian community, as well, because of parties such as Harmony Centre and the Russian Union of Latvia that aim to stoke anxieties for the minority community and exacerbate the existing challenges that they face. And because these parties are largely supported by the ethnic Russian minority, a number of ethnic Latvians see the community’s political beliefs as antithetical to those required to create a strong Latvia, since both of these Russian parties possess pro-Kremlin ideology and have failed to criticize the Russian Federation—Latvia’s enemy to the East—on several key instances.

The education system in Latvia also produces a large debate between the ethnicities, which has placed the two against each other. In 2018, the Latvian government announced its decision to transition into a Latvian-only education system, thus replacing its current system that had “minority language schools” in its structure, which allowed for many students, in areas with a large Russian base, to have a portion of their studies for primary and secondary education take place in their mother tongue. Though the previous structure laid out that 60 percent of studies

9 Referendum for Amendments to the Constitution of Latvia. (2012). *Central Election Commission of Latvia*. Retrieved from <https://www.cvk.lv/en/referendums/referendum-for-amendments-to-the-constitution-of-latvia-2012>

10 Druviete, I. et al. (2017). The Language Situation in Latvia: 2010-2015. A sociolinguistic study. *Latvian Language Agency*. Retrieved from https://valoda.lv/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/LSL_ENG_2017_web.pdf

had to take place in Latvian and 40 percent could occur in Russian, oftentimes that breakdown was not followed by teachers, resulting in the majority of studies happening in Russian, which hindered minority students' abilities to learn the national language. A significant portion of teachers at these Russian minority schools also do not possess adequate levels of Latvian language proficiency, especially in Daugavpils, which several language audits have discovered throughout the years.

Now, three years after the government's announcement of the transition, a majority of schooling is taking place in the national language, or at least, it is supposed to be, even in locations with a large ethnic Russian community. This transition, however, did not come without a response from Latvia's Russian community. A number of protests, pickets, and demonstrations—in addition to circulating petitions online—were organized by members of the Russian community to speak out against this education reform, which they deemed discriminatory and in violation of the ethnic Russians' right to study in their mother tongue.

Even though a number of Russians were against this reform, there were a number who supported and embraced it. These ethnic Russians recognized the important role that a student's education plays in learning the language, culture, and history of a nation—all information that is critical to succeed in today's Latvia. Prior to the reform itself, there were even a number of ethnic Russian parents who elected to send their children to Latvian language schools, rather than Russian ones, so that they could be fully immersed in the language and achieve fluency, which would be a difficult task to do if a student in a Russian school since then the child would be speaking Russian both at home and in class, therefore lacking any real opportunity to become immersed and proficient in Latvian.

Examples such as these crystalize the relationship that the Latvian government and ethnic Latvian people have with the nation's ethnic Russian minority, but they are in no way an all-inclusive list of the barriers that exist for the minority community's integration nor the only issues that complicate the relationship Latvia has with its ethnic Russian population.

Conclusion

Like any other country, Latvia is not perfect, especially in terms of societal issues. I recognize that, and in fact I embrace it. To be patriotic, I believe, is to understand and know how to identify the shortcomings of one's country, rather than sweep them beneath the surface and pretend they do not exist. Although the current situation in Latvia still shows the results of past events, I believe we – both the ethnic Russian and ethnic Latvian community – must move forward with an optimistic point of view, learn from the hardships endured, and use this knowledge to build an understanding, supportive country that can serve as a reliable ally to friendly nations all over the world. Though at times difficult to do, we, as a nation, cannot dwell on the challenges of the past because there are other important matters at hand that require us to operate in the present.

In order to accomplish this, a greater level of understanding must be instilled within people from both communities in Latvia – those from the majority and those from the minority – from which deeper, more significant rates of social integration can begin to be formed from the

bottom-up, allowing for mutual respect and understanding for one another. Such a statement takes time, however, owing to the historical factors that have caused Latvian society to be what it is today. On both sides of the community, whether Latvian or Russian, there are prejudices.

As such, no one community is at fault, but instead both communities are responsible – they are responsible for putting their differences aside for the betterment of Latvia as a whole. Russians must understand and respect the importance of the Latvian language, culture, and history, whereas Latvians must recognize the importance of remaining patient with the nation's minority community. Both communities must prevent political topics and hot button issues, such as education, from dividing them. Such informal social borders are exactly what have hindered integration so far, and will continue to do so until both ethnic Russians and Latvians can come to terms with the fact that there are and have been struggles for both communities, but that such historical challenges must not prevent the nation from establishing a more cohesive, connected society, in which ethnicity is not a dividing factor.

With all of this in mind, it is therefore my hope that, in the years to come, my country can grow more integrated, connected, and socially cohesive in a manner that serves the interests of a sovereign Latvia, as it further develops and becomes a larger player in the EU.