

*Seminar on Minority Rights and Resolution of Conflicts in Europe.
Merano, 25-27 April 1997*

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**THE RUSSIAN MINORITY IN LATVIA: COMMON AND PECULIAR
TRAITS OF ETHNOPOLITICAL CONFLICT**

1. Brief notes on history and ethnodemography

In the 13th century the forbears of the contemporary Latvians were conquered by the Teutonic knights. At that time, the Latvian tribes had not yet coalesced into a unified nationality. The Teutonic state formation on the territory of contemporary Latvia and contemporary Estonia existed until 1561. After its disintegration, the Easternmost part of Latvia - Latgale - remained under Polish reign until 1772, when it was ceded to Russia. Between 1629 and 1721 the territory of Vidzeme (North-Western Latvia) was ruled by the Swedish kingdom. It was conquered by Russia during the Great Nordic war. The dutchy of Kurland, covering the regions of Kurzeme and Zemgale (Western and Southern Latvia), existed between 1651 and 1795. At the latter date its territories were incorporated into the Russian empire.

In November 1918, after the collapse of the Russian empire, Latvia proclaimed its independence. In 1920, a peace treaty was signed between Latvia and Soviet Russia. In the early 1920s Latvia achieved official recognition from the leading states of the world and became a member of the League of Nations.

In 1940, as a result of the so-called Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, Latvia was annexed by the Soviet Union. In June 1941, however, the country was captured by the German army. In most of Latvia the German occupation lasted until late 1944.

In the Soviet period Latvia was organized as a Union republic.

During perestroika the Popular Front became the dominant political force in Latvia. In 1990 the Front won the majority of the votes in the elections to the republican Supreme Soviet. On 4 May 1990, this assembly passed a Declaration of Independence, reestablishing de jure the sovereign Latvian Republic of the interwar years. Central USSR authorities recognized the independence of Latvia only in September 1991. From that date Latvia was also de facto independent.

In 1897, the total population of Latvia was 1 929 400 persons, the majority of whom were Latvians (68%). The largest minorities were the Russians (the numbers of Russians in that census data include also Belorussians and Ukrainians), 12%; Jews, 7.4%, Germans, 6.2%; and Poles, 3.4%.

Though there are no accurate data on the Latvian population at the time of the outbreak of World War I, most experts believe that in 1914 it was approximately 2 493 000 within the confines of present-day Latvia, and 2 552 000 if the district of Abrene - presently a part of the Pskov oblast in Russia - is included. The ethnic Latvians made up

slightly more than 60% while the remaining 40% belonged to broad variety of other nationalities. The significant ethnodemographic changes which had taken place since 1897 were apparently linked to, among other things, the rapid industrialization which had taken place in the meantime. This industrialization had required an influx of large numbers of migrants from other parts of the Russian empire.

World War I was a demographic catastrophe for such a small country as Latvia. By 1920, as a combined result of military actions, flight, and evacuation into the remote regions of the Russian empire, the population of Latvia was reduced to two thirds of the prewar levels. By 1919 only 1 480 000 inhabitants were left in Latvia.

The ethnic composition of the population had also been significantly altered. As a part of the war effort large industrial plants in Riga and in other Latvian cities were dismantled and shipped eastward into the interior of Russia. Along with them also the work forces of the plants were evacuated. These workers were mainly non-Latvians. The ethnic Latvians were less affected by these measures since they to a large extent lived in the countryside. Thus, while the total population of Latvia decreased radically, the share of the Latvians increased noticeably.

Neither the return migration nor the natural increase of the population sufficed to reestablish the prewar population, which in 1940 was 25% below the 1914 level.

The first census conducted in the independent Latvian Republic, in 1920, showed that the share of the titular nation comprised 73%. The three subsequent censuses - in 1925, 1930 and 1935, respectively - gave witness to a gradual rise of the percentage of Latvians. In 1935, the Latvians comprised 75.5% of the total population of Latvia. Among the minorities, no particular ethnic group predominated. Among them, the Russians made up the largest group (8.8% in 1935), but also the Germans (3.3%) and the Jews (4.9%) were very influential, particularly in certain fields of the economy and culture. In the state administration, on the other hand, the ethnic Latvian dominance was very pronounced. The overwhelming majority of the bureaucrats were Latvians.

All large and medium-sized minorities had their own schools and these were financed by the state. Also a ramified network of social and cultural organizations serving the ethnic minorities existed. In the 1920s, Latvia and Estonia were regarded as two of the most democratic states in Europe with regard to minority policy. However, after Karlis Ulmanis' coup d'etat in May 1934 the cultural autonomy rights were severely circumscribed. Still, a part of the minority school system continued to function right up to the beginning of World War II.

New dramatic changes in the numbers and proportions of Latvia's population took place during the war years. In 1939, practically all Baltic Germans, totalling approximately 60 thousand persons, were 'repatriated' to Germany on Hitler's insistence. Two years later, the Stalinist regime conducted its first wave of repressions and deportations in Latvia. Latvian researchers usually cite the figure of 15-16 thousand deportees. The deportees were selected not for their nationality but for their social background, and represented no particular ethnic group. Naturally, ethnic Latvians predominated among them since they were the most numerous group in the population at large.

During the German occupation in 1941-42, almost the entire Jewish population of Latvia was exterminated. Together with the Jews, also the majority of the Latvian

Gypsies were liquidated. 32-33 thousand persons were sent to forced labour in Germany. In 1944 more than one hundred thousand inhabitants of Latvia fled to the West in order to escape the approaching Soviet Army. And finally, thousands died in combat, fighting on both sides of the front.

When the war was over, Latvia had for the second time in thirty years lost one third of its total population. According to Latvian and Western researchers, no more than 1.3-1.4 million persons remained on the territory of Latvia in 1945. After the war, arrests and deportations continued, culminating in 1949 when approximately 45 thousand persons were deported at the same time.

Latvia has traditionally had a low natural population increase and these enormous losses could hardly be recouped simply by procreation. The population deficit, however, was compensated for by an influx of migrants from other Soviet republics. Like at the beginning of the century, this immigration was facilitated by an extensive development of the Latvian economy which created a great demand for new work hands. The enforced growth of the Latvian industry led to the establishment of non-Latvian enclaves around the major new plants (Ogre, Olaine, Ventspils, etc.) In addition, a significant number of the new immigrants consisted of employees of Soviet Army units deployed on Latvian territory, and their dependants. Many Soviet officers who had completed their service in Latvia decided to stay on in the country after demobilization.

In this way, in the Soviet period immigration became the most important factor behind both the Latvian population increase and the concomitant change of its ethnic composition. In the 1970s and 80s, Latvia had the highest levels of immigration of all Union republics. The fairly advanced economy, the relatively high quality of the cultural and recreational facilities (by Soviet standards), plus Riga's long-established reputation as a 'European' city, combined to attract many people from other parts of the USSR to move to Latvia. Naturally, this situation left an imprint on the economic and social situation of the indigenous (first and foremost, the titular) nation, as well as on their psychology and world view.

2. The problem of citizenship

The problem of citizenship in Latvia and Estonia is peculiar for the new states of the former Soviet Union and to large extent defines the specific character of the ethnopolitical conflict in these Baltic states. The both anew independent countries were the only post-Soviet states which did not adopt the "zero option" of citizenship after the restoration of independence. Only those individuals who were citizens of Latvia (Estonia) before 1940 and their descendants were recognized as initial citizens of the reestablished states. This solution was based on formal legal considerations - the so called concept of legal continuity.

When Latvia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, all citizens of Latvia were granted Soviet citizenship through a decree of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, while by the same decree their Latvian citizenship was annulled. Many democratic states refused to recognize the legality of this annexation, although the nature of this non-recognition was rather political than legal (eg almost no reservations were made when signing the Helsinki document on inviolability of the borders in Europe, thus, the USSR was admitted within the then its borders, including the Baltics).

In the elections to the Latvian Supreme Soviet in the spring of 1990 all inhabitants of Latvia could participate, including Soviet military personnel. The Popular Front of Latvia won a resounding victory at the polls. Also a significant number of non-Latvian voters supported this, predominantly Latvian, movement. The PFL election program contained what for all practical purposes amounted to support of the “zero option” of citizenship, and this plank in the Front's platform was decisive in securing the support of many Russian-speaking voters.

The Latvian Supreme Council began dealing with the question of citizenship legislation only when the coup attempt in Moscow in August 1991 had collapsed and the international community had recognized Latvian independence. The nationalist faction asserted that since this organ had been elected by the entire corpus of Latvian residents, it did not have the right to decide on the question of citizenship, only to restore the citizenship rights of the prewar body of citizens. A law regulating the principles of naturalization could, they maintained, be adopted only by a Saeima (i.e. genuine parliament) elected exclusively by the “heritage” citizens. The Supreme Council acceded to this point of view. Thus, on 15 October 1991 it adopted a Resolution on the Restoration of the Body of Citizens and on the Main Principles of Naturalization. On the basis of this Resolution a registry of persons who held Latvian citizenship before 1940 and their descendants was compiled. Those who were included in this register as citizens were allowed to participate in the parliamentary elections of 1993. Only in the fall of 1993 did the new parliament, the Saeima, begin to discuss the citizenship law anew.

After the protracted and stormy parliamentary debates and active involvement of the Council of Europe and the CSCE who objected strongly against the quota principle, on 22 July 1994 the Law on Citizenship was passed in an extra (fourth) reading and then promulgated by the president. In the final version of the citizenship law the quota system was replaced by a “naturalization time-table”. Only persons who belonged to certain privileged categories were allowed to apply for citizenship immediately after the law took legal force (eg ethnic Latvians; the Livs; spouses of citizens who had been married for at least ten years and some others). Other noncitizens could apply after certain dates determined for each category depending on place of birth and age of an applicant. In all categories the applicants must fulfill the same criteria of naturalization: five years of residence in Latvia; fluent command of the spoken and written Latvian language; familiarity with the fundamental aspects of the Latvian constitution, of the Constitutional law, of the text of the national anthem and of the history of Latvia. They must also document that they have a legal source of income in Latvia, and renounce their previous citizenship (expatriate). Persons belonging to a number of categories may never apply for citizenship. The biggest group among these were, in case, persons who have chosen Latvia as their country of permanent abode after being demobilized from the Soviet Army.

3. Ethnic aspect of citizenship

The “ethnic dimension” of the citizenship legislation is rather transparent, even leaving aside preferential treatment of ethnic Latvians envisaged by the law.. Although the 1991 Resolution on the Restoration of the Body of Latvian Citizens did not contain any overt ethnic criteria, nevertheless, it automatically turned the vast majority of ethnic Latvians into citizens while the majority of Russian-speaking residents in Latvia were

categorized as citizens of USSR. (When the Soviet Union collapsed shortly afterwards, these became de facto stateless persons.)

Among the citizens, ethnic Latvians made up 78.5% in 1995 while their share of the population at large was around 56%. For the Russians, the figures are 16% and 30%, respectively.

By February 1996, 99% of all ethnic Latvians in Latvia had acquired Latvian citizenship, while only some 38% of the Russians, 19% of the Belarusians, and 6% of the Ukrainians had.

4. The status of the non-citizens

Until April 1995, the legal status of permanent residents of Latvia who had not been recognized as citizens remained undefined. Meanwhile, a number of laws, regulations, and administrative decrees were adopted which limited the social and economic rights of non-citizens, such as property rights, the right to work in certain professions, the right to receive social benefits, the right of self-defense, the freedom of conscience, and a number of others. Unlike in Estonia, in Latvia non-citizens possess neither active nor passive voting rights in municipal elections.

The prolonged legal vacuum led to a situation in which radically-minded officials and local authorities could act arbitrarily. Systematic administrative violations were perpetrated by officials of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration which was entrusted with the task of compiling the Registry of Residents. Persons who were (often contrary to the law) denied entry into this register were barred from legal employment, social benefits, marriage registration, etc. This situation attracted the attention of several international human rights organizations, of the Helsinki Watch, in particular.

In April 1995, however, a law was adopted "On the status of former citizens of the USSR who are not citizens of Latvia or another state". In effect, this law introduced a new legal status: the former citizens of the USSR are regarded as neither citizens of Latvia, nor as foreigners (i.e. they are not citizens of another state), but they are not treated as stateless persons, either.

While the adoption of this law greatly clarified the situation, the implementation of it was hampered by serious problems, particularly, the problem of issuing identification documents guaranteeing freedom of movement, and family re-unification.

5. Conclusions

Nationalistic feelings are rather widespread in all newly independent and post-Communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe. In Latvia, substantial changes in the demographic situation connected with a large-scale in-migration of predominantly Slavic population after the World War II makes the problem particularly sensitive and causes fear of "ethnic extinction" of Latvians. This factor is broadly exploited by most of political forces appeared after restoration of independence. Thus, it is not surprising that emerging legal framework is directly or indirectly aimed at consolidating dominant positions of ethnic Latvians. The citizenship legislation represents the most transparent revelation of this general trend.

On the other hand, permanent (though rather “soft”) pressure on the part of European inter-governmental organizations, to some extent - also very liberal for that time traditions of pre-war independent Latvia, as well as low level of organization and lack of attempts of any violent resistance on the part of the Russian-speaking residents facilitate more liberal policies towards non-titular population.

The main peculiarity of Latvian situation is that “the politicization of ethnicity”, common for all post-Communist states, is channeled here predominantly towards legalistic way (as a rule, even not directly connected with the ethnic factor). Legitimatization of ethnic domination is based upon “the restored state” and “the restored citizenship” concept which generally enjoy support on the part of international community. Restrictive approach to the citizenship problem was the key aspect: as a result, the titular ethnic group, i.e. the Latvians possess the “control package of shares” of political power. In turn, this allows to implement desirable concepts in other areas too (like language policies, education and so forth), avoiding taking into account views of numerically substantial minority population.

Thus, through directing nationalistic feelings along legalistic channel, Latvia managed to avoid not only violent inter-ethnic clashes but also any substantial deterioration of inter-ethnic relations at the everyday level. As some surveys show, share of those Latvians who “accept a Russian as a neighbors but not as a co-citizen” appeared over three times bigger than one of “democratic nationalists” - i.e. those who advocate equal rights for both Latvians and Russians but at the inter-personal level prefer to deal exclusively with the representatives of own ethnic group. In other words, Latvians’ vote is three times more nationalistic than their behavior at the level of inter-personal communications.

On the other hand, such indirect legitimization of ethnic domination (through citizenship, language and cadre politics etc) creates long-term obstacles to the development of universal, inclusive democracy and eliminates incentives for seeking efficient forms of inter-ethnic dialogue.

Not surprisingly, under such circumstances emerging post-Communist political regime in Latvia is taking shape of what is called ethnic democracy, several researchers maintain- i.e. combination of certain principles of general democracy with elements of ethnic favoritism. G.Smith denotes ethnic democracy as combination of three factors: acknowledgment (also legislatively) of basic individual rights; acknowledgment of some minority group rights; and legislatively determined non-equal status of different ethnic groups.

Perhaps, an ethnic democracy regime can evolve either towards “common” democracy, with gradual elimination of the elements of ethnic domination, or towards aggravation of segregation and creation of “purely” ethnocratic state framework. It still remains to be seen which of these alternatives will be implemented in Latvia.

The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to Aina Antane and Pal Kolsto for their extremely valuable help