

Majority-Minority Integration in Latvia: Prospects and Comparisons

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Preliminary text was presented at the seminar

*Minorities and Majorities in Estonia: Problems of Integration at the Threshold of the EU
Flensburg, Germany, and Aabenraa, Denmark, 22 - 25 May 1998*

1. Regional approach – is it well-reasoned?

All Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia - used to be considered as a whole by external observers. Indeed, common historical background, similar economic conditions and political developments seem to make this regional approach legitimate and well-reasoned.

In the meantime, it is easy to notice that in the last years much more attention has been paid to Estonia than to Latvia. Considerably bigger number of research publications is devoted to Estonia, even studies which deal with the both countries are, as a rule, predominantly based on Estonian practices and experiences - though conclusions are often extended to Latvia too¹. More reports of inter-governmental organizations and international NGOs analyzing human rights conditions and development of democracy and civil society are issued on Estonia rather than on Latvia². Also number of sociological polls, surveys and other studies on Estonia is higher than on Latvia. Finally, amount of research and practical projects financed by Western foundations and sponsors is bigger in Estonia than in Latvia (maybe this fact can be explained by higher activity of Estonian NGOs and governmental institutions).

Only since recently Western politicians and scholars (though it seems not yet media and common people) began to distinguish between the two states. Rather unfortunate for Latvia, revelation of this distinguishing is different treatment of the two countries on the part of the European Union: though the EU representatives used to say that there is no "fast track" for anybody, the attitudes towards Estonia and Latvia in terms of accession, in reality differ substantially.

¹ Evidence of this point can be found in the bibliographical collection Hanne-Margret Birckenbach & Boris Tsilevich. "Russians" in the Newly Independent States: A Bibliography on Conflicts and Preventive Diplomacy. Schleswig-Holsteinisches Institut für Friedenswissenschaften an der Christian-Albrechts-Universität Kiel, S C H I F F - t e x t e , special Issue, 1998.

² See eg the collection of the fact-finding reports in: Hanne-Margret Birckenbach. Preventive Diplomacy through Fact-Finding: How International Organizations Review the Conflict over Citizenship in Estonia and Latvia. Hamburg: Lit verlag, 1997, 424 p.

2. Common vs different

Both Estonia and Latvia have gone a common historical way. Independent statehood of the both countries was established after the collapse of the Russian empire in 1918, they both were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, occupied by Nazi Germany during the World War II, and returned into the Soviet "warm arms" in 1944. These circumstances predetermined similar - but not completely identical - political and demographic legacy after the collapse of the Soviet regime and restoration of independence. What are most considerable differences between the two neighbouring countries?

2.1. Percentage of titular ethnic groups

According to the last Soviet census of 1989, ethnic Latvians constituted 52% in Latvia while ethnic Estonians 61,5% in Estonia. By the beginning of 1998, the proportion of the titular groups grew accordingly: 57% of ethnic Latvians in Latvia and 65% of ethnic Estonians in Estonia.

2.2. Geographic distribution of population

Non-Estonian residents in Estonia are concentrated in some particular areas. 43% of Estonia's ethnic Russians live in Tallinn (where they make up about a half of the city's population), another 32% reside in Narva, Sillamjõe, Kohtla-Järve towns in Ida-Virumaa region. Meanwhile, in Latvia Russians are more evenly distributed throughout urban areas. In Latgale (south-eastern part of Latvia) non-Latvians live also in countryside, and make up a little less than a half of the citizenry in the region. Thus, in Latvia Russians are not geographically separated from the titular group so sharply as are in Estonia.

2.3. Share of pre-war citizens

Surveys estimate that at least 80 000 non-ethnic Estonians have acquired Estonian citizenship through birthright³. This makes up about 8,4% of the "initial" restored citizenry. In Latvia, about 22% of the "initial" citizenry were non-ethnic Latvians⁴. In particular, among ethnic Russians, 38% were citizens of Latvia, Belorussians - 19,5%, Ukrainians - 6,2%, Poles - 61,4%, Jews - 45%⁵. Daugavpils, the second biggest Latvia's town, is a revealing case: ethnic Latvians constitute only 13% of its population, yet, almost 70% of the Daugavpils residents are citizens of Latvia.

³ <http://www.vm.ee/eng/estoday/1998/03cits.html>

⁴ According to unpublished data of the Latvian Citizenship and Immigration department, 1994.

⁵ Dribins, Leo (ed.): National and ethnic groups in Latvia. Informative material. Riga: Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Latvia, National Affairs Section, 1996.

2.4. Language knowledge

According to the data of the 1989 census, 21% of Russians then living in Latvia and 14% - in Estonia claimed fluency in the corresponding titular language. Thus, the “language barrier” was considerably lower in Latvia even in Soviet times, while the level of bilingualism was higher. To a considerable extent, this can be explained with the linguistic peculiarities of the two Baltic languages: Estonian is linguistically much more distant from the Slavic languages and therefore much more difficult to learn for a person whose mother tongue is Russian. Besides, more even geographic mixture of ethnic groups in Latvia also plays a role.

2.5. Mixed marriages

In Latvia, the level of ethnically mixed marriages was traditionally higher than in Estonia. Almost every third marriage was ethnically mixed in 90s, about 20% of ethnic Latvians marry non-Latvians⁶. Apparently, this is to some extent related to the different patterns of geographic distribution of ethnic groups mentioned above.

Thus, one can conclude that at the moment of the restoration of independence the level of separation – both in geographic, linguistic, and social terms - between the titular ethnic group and the Russian-speakers was substantially lower in Latvia than in Estonia.

3. Different political decisions

3.1. Constitutions

Both Estonia and Latvia declared themselves restored – as opposed to the newly independent – states. However, already the approach to constitution-making appeared different. Estonia adopted new Constitution, though essentially based on the Constitution of the pre-war Republic of Estonia. In turn, Latvia in 1993 renewed “old” Constitution (“Satversme”) of 1922, and the first considerable amendments were made only in fall 1998 (the chapter on human rights and freedoms was added to the Constitution).

3.2. Citizenship

⁶ Aina Antane and Boris Tsilevich: Latvia: model etnopoliticheskogo monitoringa. Moscow: Institute of ethnology and anthropology, 1997, 124 p.

The both states chose the “restored citizenship” approach – i.e. only those persons who were citizens of the pre-war republics, and their direct descendants, were recognized as belonging to “initial” citizenry. However, treatment of those persons who were permanent residents at the moment of the restoration of independence, differs considerably.

In Estonia, the citizenship law which sets also the naturalization procedures was adopted already in February 1992, and took effect in May 1992. On the contrary, Latvia first had adopted the Resolution on restoration on the body of citizens (15 October 1991), and the adoption of the “full” citizenship law which allowed for naturalization was delayed till August 1994. Thus, naturalization in reality started only in February 1995 – almost three years later than in Estonia. In between the adoption of the two Latvian laws mentioned above the compilation of the Registry of residents was conducted, accompanied by numerous administrative abuses.

It should be mentioned that initial version of the Estonian citizenship law established much less stringent naturalization criteria than the Latvian one.

3.3. Status of the non-citizens

On the other hand, the legal status of the non-citizens in Latvia was defined in a more liberal manner than in Estonia. While Estonian non-citizens have been juridically defined as foreigners who have to apply for residence and work permits (although in most cases issuing these permits is guaranteed by law, exceptions are rather numerous), in Latvia their status was determined by a special law on the former USSR citizens who have neither Latvian nor other state’s citizenship. Though adopted with a considerable delay (April 1995 vs July 1993 – adoption of the Aliens’ Law in Estonia), this law guaranteed several important non-citizens’ rights. In fact, it introduced a new international legal status: permanent resident former USSR citizens are treated as neither “just foreigners” nor as the stateless persons.

At the level of implementation, complaints about delays, bureaucratic abuses and violations are numerous both in Estonia and Latvia. However, by the early November 1998, about 2/3 of non-citizens in Latvia have received the non-citizens’ passports envisaged by the aforementioned law.

3.4. Participation in municipal elections

Estonia, following the pattern of most North European countries, granted the right to vote at the local self-government level also to permanent resident non-citizens. In Latvia, active voting rights also at the municipal level are linked to citizenship. Estonian approach obviously empower non-citizens to influence

municipal affairs, and thus facilitates better integration, while Latvian one rather provokes further exclusion and deepening alienation.

Apparently, the decision made by Latvian legislature in this respect was determined by the Estonia's experience – in 1993 municipal elections pro-Russian parties succeeded in Tallinn. Due to geographic distribution of ethnic groups mentioned above, in Latvia one might expect similar outcome in most of bigger cities.

3.5. Institutionalization of ethnicity

Latvian legislation stipulates mandatory record of ethnic origin in citizens' passports. Non-citizens' passports don't contain such an entry, meanwhile, indicating ethnicity of the passport holder on the "special notes" page is compulsory. Moreover, also when registering in the Registry of Residents, ethnicity record is obligatory even for newborn kids (in this case ethnicity of one of the parents is assigned to the baby). Special law on how the ethnicity record can be changed was adopted in 1994 (in particular, to change someone's ethnicity to "Latvian", he/she must not only prove the corresponding dissent of at least one of the parents but also demonstrate a document about perfect knowledge of the Latvian language).

On the contrary, Estonian legislation contains no provisions demanding formal registration of ethnicity.

3.6. Language and education legislation

In this field Estonian and Latvian legislation are very similar. Estonian laws and practices in regard of use of languages can be assessed as being a bit more liberal than the Latvian ones (for example, language demands for candidates to parliament and municipalities), but this discrepancy is hardly crucial. On the positive side, Latvia advanced with the development and implementation of the National State Language Training Program, while Estonia earlier began elaborating the State Integration Program.

4. Social differences and patterns of Russian-speakers' behavior

4.1. Naturalization

As of early March 1998, 97 380 individuals (non-ethnic and ethnic Estonians) have received Estonian citizenship by naturalization⁷. In Latvia, the number of naturalized citizens barely reached 10,000 by late 1998.

⁷ <http://www.vm.ee/eng/esttoday/1998/03cits.html>

Besides, according to data provided by Russian organizations in Estonia, 137,000 persons have acquired Russia's citizenship. In Latvia, the number of persons who have registered with the Russian consular institutions as the citizens of the Russian Federation is estimated as approximately 60,000, besides, many of them have probably emigrated to Russia.

Thus, Estonia's non-citizens are much more active both in terms of naturalization and acquiring Russia's citizenship. More than a half of the initial number of de facto stateless persons have already obtained some citizenship. In Latvia, this process is dramatically different. Apparently, this distinction is predetermined by a variety of reasons mentioned above.

4.2. Political representation and ethnicity

In Estonia, political activity of the Russian minority was from the very beginning strongly centered along ethnic lines. In the first composition of the Riigikogu (Estonian parliament) elected in 1992 Russians had no representation at all (one Russian later replaced the MP who left). However, in 1995 the Russian electoral list created by two political parties got 6 seats out of 101.

In Latvia, parties explicitly based on ethnic (Russian) criteria never enjoyed support on the part of a more or less considerable fraction of the Russian-speaking citizens of Latvia. In 1993 and 1995 elections "The Russian list" failed to receive representation in the Saeima (Latvian parliament), only 5-7% of the minority electorate voted for it. Votes of ethnic non-Latvian citizens were divided – almost in equal shares – between leftist Socialist party, minority-friendly left-to-center Popular Harmony party, and Latvian liberal nationalistic parties⁸. In 1998 elections, "the leftist coalition" succeeded to consolidate non-Latvian electorate and gained 16 seats (out of 100). In the meantime, only 1 of the elected 16 members of parliament represented the Russian party.

4.3. Dialogue with minorities

⁸ Paal Kolstoe and Boris Tsilevich. Patterns of Nation-Building and Political Integration in a Bifurcated post-Communist State: Ethnic Aspect of Parliamentary Elections in Latvia. *East European Politics and Societies*, 1997, vol.11, No.2, pp.366-391.

Estonian authorities proved to be much more instrumental in setting up a formal dialogue with the Russian minority than their Latvian colleagues.

The Representative Assembly elected by several Russian NGOs was officially registered while a similar body established by the Latvian non-citizens – the League of Stateless Persons – was denied registration by the Latvian Ministry of Justice.

Minorities Roundtable set up in 1993 appeared an effective tool for discussing urgent issues relevant to inter-ethnic interaction and cooperation, while analogous body in Latvia – the presidential Nationalities Consultative Council established in 1996 – so far has not arrived at any efficient format of its activities.

5. Conclusions

Both Estonia and Latvia pursue politics aimed at achieving and strengthening dominant position of the titular ethnic groups. Common historical background predetermines similar approaches, while demographic and political distinctions – different forms of its implementation.

In general, ethnic domination of the titular groups is better ensured in Estonia than in Latvia, probably this is why Estonians not only benefit from this domination but also feel responsible for the future of the entire country and all its residents. This is hardly the case in Latvia so far.

Usually Estonia is several steps forward in shaping and re-shaping policies towards Russian-speaking minority, Latvia often reproduce the same steps with some delay.

Last but not least, the concentration of the Russian-speaking non-citizen population in Ida-Virumaa region bordering with the Russian Federation, makes the threat of emergence of separatism and secessionist ideas more real than in Latvia. This fact might explain more flexible policies implemented by the Estonian authorities, readiness for dialogue and occasional concessions made. In Latvia no such threat exist, and reaction on the part of the international community remains practically the only factor deterrent for nationalistic aspirations.

Both Estonia and Latvia still face most serious problems regarding the majority-minority relations and integration of their societies. However, it seems that

Estonia is a couple of steps closer to the effective resolution of these problems than Latvia is.