

"I think that a young man must not treat Godmanis like that, offer him to plant potatoes and tend to horses."

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Latvia is not a divided society

Although the integration of society and the promotion of naturalization have been declared official policies, the current political elite is not interested in a real increase in the number of naturalizations as this would be political suicide for the governing parties.

Boriss Cilevics, a member of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and a Member of the Latvian Parliament (Saeima) with the People's Harmony Party parliamentary group, in an interview with Zane Bandere, Transitions On-Line Latvia correspondent



Boriss Cilevics

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As our interview is intended for foreign readers, could you please briefly tell us about the situation regarding national minorities in Latvia? Is there an ethnic conflict in Latvian society?

No, I don't think so. I believe that there is a conflict between the Latvian political regime and the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. The problem is a lack of understanding, a lack of dialogue and a clear refusal to establish this dialogue on the part of the government.

In the meantime, on the everyday level, Latvia is not a divided society, although linguistic problems do exist. Among young Russian-speaking people, there is quite fluent knowledge of Latvian. On the other hand, the ethnic Latvian youngsters speak much poorer Russian than their parents and grandparents. A language barrier unfortunately still exists, but it is not a pretext for conflict.

Peaceful life together exists as revealed by the percentage of ethnically mixed marriages, which is very high. Every fifth Latvian marries a Russian and vice versa. This is a completely political problem that is closely related to the very basic ideas of the restored Latvian state.

So you would maintain the argument you made in yesterday's speech (see end of interview) that ethno-politics and the ratification of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities is a 'political bargain'?

That was not exactly my point. I would say that Latvia's ratification of the Framework Convention (FC) might undermine the official image created through propaganda, that everything is fine and that there are no minority-related problems in Latvia.

The FC is the only instrument that permits legal professional monitoring. As long as this monitoring cannot be put into action, the government has very broad leeway to use traditional political instruments and political propaganda to claim that everything is fine as far as minorities are concerned.

This quasi-discussion is taking place according to the old standards, which were the only possibility before the FC was adopted and took effect. Usually, governments say everything is fine and minorities say it is awful; this is just a matter of public relations. Of course, governments are much stronger as they have more resources at their disposal. I can only explain the unwillingness to ratify the FC with the argument that the government is not interested in replacing the political bargaining with diligent, professional and impartial analysis.

Is it just the government's unwillingness that is keeping the FC from being ratified? Maybe they are afraid of the changes that a ratified convention could bring about?

There would only be one immediate change: legal monitoring would be put in place. All the other changes would be very slow and gradual. In my view, this is first and foremost a problem with the political elite. Due to the ethnic situation that Latvia found itself in at the moment independence was restored, which was almost 50/50, some people believed it was very essential to establish Latvia as a Latvian nation-state in the traditional understanding of a nation-state with a strong cultural and linguistic identity.

A tool to ensure this ethnic domination of ethnic Latvians was the citizenship law that was chosen. Fortunately, this occurred without any violent action through the use of legal tools accepted by the international community, though international law does not contain clear

prescriptions on how to proceed in this case. This was a good way to avoid a potential stalemate in parliamentary activities; but, 'there are no free lunches' and the price we have to pay for this easy solution is a long-term democratic deficit.

But could the implementation of the FC change local election laws to give non-citizens the right to vote?

No. The FC has nothing to do with citizenship, naturalization or non-citizen rights. Informally, yes, it is a matter of interpretation; but, at the moment, the opinions of the Advisory Committee and the resolutions of the Committee of Ministers are not legally binding.

It is a different story as to whether this would open the door to some constructive dialogue that might change something. The problem is that the current political elite came to power under circumstances when the ethnic composition was almost 50/50, but complete political domination was ensured for ethnic Latvians and they tried to use this opportunity to stay in power. Although, since 1998, the integration of society and the promotion of naturalization have been declared official policies, the current political elite is not interested in a real increase in the number of naturalizations as this would be political suicide for the governing parties.

What about people themselves, why are they not interested in naturalization?

It is absolutely clear that these people believe they were treated unjustly. The older generations still remember the pre-election promises and the program of the Popular Front, when citizenship was promised to everybody, very well. They believe that the very idea of what they see as the deprivation of political rights and the suggested ways to naturalize are unjust.

Even if it would give them the right to political participation and, consequently, the possibility of changing the political elite and unjust legislation?

This is the problem of alienation from the state. They do not believe in it, they do not trust the government and this is their only form of protest and demonstration - the non-acceptance of how they were treated. Many people realize that this is the only way to get some impact on the political process. Still, for them naturalization under the suggested conditions would mean a kind of acceptance of the rules of a game they do not accept.

This is a psychological problem that I can understand very well. The very fact that the government does nothing to remove this obstacle is the best evidence that there is no genuine intention to facilitate naturalization. It is clear that those people who naturalize with these kinds of feelings would never vote for the parties that kept them without citizenship. Under pressure from international organizations, the government has to imitate this facilitation of integration; but, the concrete methods and ways these integration programs are drafted and implemented are clearly ineffective and cannot achieve their declared goals.

You say 'they' – who do you mean by that? Non-citizens do not form a homogenous group with the same attitude.

Of course, non-citizens are very diverse; but, they have much in common. The phenomenon that no-one could actually have predicted is that those young people who grew up in an independent Latvia, speak fluent Latvian and would have no problems acquiring citizenship, have in a sense inherited their parents' bitter feelings. In many respects, they are more radical than their parents because their parents still have some understanding and feeling that this is not a black and white situation. Ethnic Latvians have also had a good chance of being oppressed and this feeling of historical revenge, of historical compensation can be, if not justified, then understood.

But, these young people who grew up in a situation where Latvian is the official language, where, indeed, this domination of ethnic Latvians is ensured, don't understand why they should be made responsible for the crimes of the Soviet regime. So for them it is difficult to understand why they are treated differently than the Latvian youngsters they live in the same yard with and attend the same discotheques as. This inherited bitterness is stronger than the initial bitterness of their parents and the government's policies in this respect are counter-productive.

What, to your mind, could be the consequences of the bitterness these young people feel if they do naturalize?

In fact, naturalization has little to do with the elimination of statelessness in Latvia; the figures are very revealing. At the end of the period of registration for residents in 1994, there were about 730 000 non-citizens. At the moment, there are less than 500 000. During this period, the number of naturalizations has barely exceeded 65 000, or less than one third. The question is - where did the other non-citizens vanish to?

In fact, the majority of marriages in Latvia are mixed and there was even a bitter joke that appeared when the citizenship law was adopted that, "Latvian citizenship is like AIDS - it is mostly transmitted sexually." These children who grow up in mixed families where one of the parents is a citizen receive citizenship automatically and they will vote anyway. Fortunately, the results of the elections clearly show that ethnic mobilization, contrary to Estonia, is becoming a more important factor in elections.

What the government is trying to do is to change the situation through the education

system. I am absolutely sure that the quality of education and the promotion of the Latvian language have nothing to do with the plans for the so-called 'minority education reform.' The main idea [of this reform] is to change the content of the educational system and to break the link between the older and the younger generation; to educate these young Russian-speaking citizens according to the official ideology of the state; and, thus, to assimilate [this younger generation] - not linguistically or culturally, which is clearly impossible given Latvia's circumstances - but to assimilate them in their political and ideological dimension, to make them, in a sense, think like normal Latvians should think before they become involved.

I don't think these policies will be effective because, in any case, family ties are stronger than any ties in school; but, unfortunately, this is the worst way to treat the problem. It is not incidental that these attempts to change the education system have triggered a new round of ethnic consolidation in the Russian-speaking minority and, I would say, radicalisation. During the past year, we clearly saw that those political parties that cater to Russian-speakers who are moderate, who try to promote interethnic co-operation and social integration have been losing their supporters while the more radical parties who are asking for more active street actions, asking for help from Russia are getting gradually more support from the Russian nationalistic party.

So the statements by Russian Duma deputy Dimitry Rogozin about national minority discrimination in Latvia - are they welcomed by the Latvian Russian-speaking minority?

It depends. From my own experience, I can say that very few ethnic Russians in Latvia feel any kind of political affiliation with Russia. All the surveys reveal that the absolute majority of Russian-speakers consider Latvia their state. However, this disappointment in [the lack of] dialogue, the disappointment in the lack of opportunities to resolve these problems with their own government increases the influence of the Russian government. In my view, Russia's position is counterproductive; but, every state has a legitimate right to show a certain interest in the situation of their kindred minorities abroad. Some European states, like Hungary, are much more active and have gone further, but the problem is about what is done and how it is done. I would say that Russian-speakers in Latvia have no big illusions about Rogozin; but, maybe it is the only straw they can grasp.

What is the real cause of the conflict between Latvia and Russia that has accelerated in the last weeks?

This is not my piece of cake. I am not interested in formal political relations because they are a bit boring. But in my view, the situation is quite reciprocal; Russophobic emotions are quite strong in Latvia as well. This is, of course, due to the long historical situation and now it has become a sort of tradition, just like the relations between Turkey and Greece, Armenia and Azerbaijan. What is of interest to me are the rights and freedoms of the people who live in my country, Latvia. I see that now, indeed, besides all of our common problems - social housing, employment and so on - Russian-speaking people have additional serious problems that make their life much more difficult and their rights are being violated. These very rude political statements [from Russia] cannot help the situation.

What will be the practical changes and benefits from the Council of Europe's conference? Will it be a benchmark to further ensure minority rights?

Absolutely! This is the next very important step in the right direction. I don't think any one has any illusions that something might change tomorrow before breakfast. As a rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly, I try to analyse the situation quite deeply and to understand what the problems with ratification in those 3+7 states that haven't yet done so are. In my view, the situation is very different and we could have some ratifications relatively soon. For some countries, it will be a major problem.

But, it is quite clear that the more states that ratify the Convention, the greater the pressure that will be exerted on those who have not yet done so. When we come together and speak with people involved in minority issues, experts and NGO representatives, it is very frustrating to hear about these things. But, if we remember the situation just 10 years ago, the progress is remarkable. I am quite optimistic; but, sooner or later, minority rights standards will prevail and I hope that the next breakthrough will be without the catharsis that accompanied the general emergence of the general system of human rights. I hope we will not need another world war to recognize the universal value of minority rights as an integral part of fundamental human rights.

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