

Roundtable on “Ethnic Minorities in the Baltic Sea region”

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Speaking points by Boriss Cilevičs

Russia’s invasion to Ukraine substantially changed both the situation of the Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states and the policies towards them.

The same day the Russian aggression began, both then PM and MFA of Latvia made strong statements stressing that it is Putin’s Russia not Latvia’s Russians who should be blamed and punished. However, this point was forgotten soon.

Several legislative and administrative measures were introduced as a natural emotional response to the atrocities committed by Russia.

To mention some of them:

- a number of monuments, both celebrating Soviet victory over Nazism and more ancient historical events (e.g. war against Napoleon in 1812) have been removed, street names and toponyms changed – also some which existed historically even before the independence of Latvia
- requirements of the state language command have been extended, as a precondition for residence permits, to some additional groups of the RF citizens
- all remnants of education in Russian have been abolished, both public and private schools shall teach only in the state language
- public broadcasting in Russian will be terminated, private media not supported, last-minute news: VAT on sale and delivery of printed media and books in Russian will be 4 times higher
- the Russian language has been prohibited in ATMs and removed from the websites of the state institutions, including social security and welfare agencies
- in healthcare, a patient who doesn’t speak the state language now must ensure interpretation himself (with the exception of the cases of emergency)

Besides official measures, the policy of **de-russification** is actively promoted by some parties and activists, naming and shaming those private entrepreneurs who continue using Russian in communication with clients, as well as private individuals who keep speaking Russian publicly.

All these measures, in fact, **target the Baltic Russian-speakers rather than the state of Russia**. Their practical impact on the security situation - and on the attitudes of this minority - still remains to be evaluated.

In particular, it is not evident *per se* if some command in the state language automatically ensures loyalty to the state.

One example. New language requirements mentioned above apply to former citizens and non-citizens of Latvia - mainly elderly women, who opted for the Russian citizenship during the crisis in 2009 in order to obtain old-age pension from Russia (where the retirement age was lower). If they fail the test, they have either to leave Latvia or – if they have children in Latvia - to change their status to a different type of the residence permit – which, in particular, envisages much more limited state-funded healthcare. Therefore, they stay, but their children – who naturalized long ago – will have to cover much higher medical expenses.

In practice, these requirements apply to around 30,000 persons. As of beginning of September, about half of them either passed the tests or were exempted because of age or disability. 250 were refused residence permits on the grounds of security risk. Some 3000 chose to leave Latvia – accompanied by an unknown number of children, most of whom are citizens and tax-payers. 62 expulsion procedures have been initiated, and approx. 9000 cases are pending.

Does all this indeed improve Latvia's security and encourage loyalty of the Russian-speaking citizens?

Apparently, the strategy is based on the presumption of **equating language with the state**. Loyalty is understood as willingness to accept cultural – rather than political identity. To put it simply – if you belong to Latvia, unconditionally switch to Latvian. **Willingness to preserve native identity**, reference to minority rights is perceived as **manifestation of the loyalty to another state**, Russia, ie an enemy. Diversity *per se* is a security threat.

I believe that current policies are shaped by three major factors.

1. **International influence**, that was crucial for decades because of political conditionality, has virtually vanished. Russian invasion to Ukraine destroyed the system of minority protection – similarly to the late 30s when Nazi annexation of Sudetenland ruined the system of minority treaties under the League of Nations

2. Latvia is a **democracy**, and its principles as such put limits on possible policies. In practice, it is reflected in disputes over the regulation of the use of languages in private sphere – more accurately, about where the border between public and private lies. For example - whether it is acceptable to prescribe the **languages in which schoolchildren informally talk to each other during the breaks**. BTW, the Minister of Education told that in schools where substantial share of children come from the Russian-speaking families, “*Latvian is*

discriminated during the breaks” - the wording reflects complete ignorance of the very notion of discrimination.

In democracy, a state lacks leverage to always define the use of languages. This can be enforced for the persons engaged with public education, social security, or state employment. Independent professionals or entrepreneurs usually know Latvian (well over 90%, according to official data) but cannot be forced use it permanently – what drives language activists up the wall and provokes inventing new and new restrictive measures.

3. High level of inter-cultural socializing, including mixed marriages is typical for Latvia. “Inter-ethnic relations” – despite broad recognition of “growing tensions” - remain rather friendly, no violence has been ever recorded. The calls for “de-Russification” are not always readily accepted – not many Latvians explicitly oppose but often these ideas are not followed in practice. In particular, many doctors prioritise the Hippocratic oath over the language requirements.

Impact of the new trends in two areas are of special importance.

1. Education

- The system of monitoring of quality after switch to teaching in Latvian only is still non-existent. Breakdown by the students’ mothertongue is missing in the PISA data on Latvia, contrary to numerous other indicators such as gender etc. In fact, the only source of data is the school administrations’ answers to the ministry’s questionnaires. Those who report problems are blamed for bad work. Support for the schools is rather declarative, in practice no real help is available - eg teachers’ assistants who are allowed speaking mothertongue to students. Allegedly, the number of early drop-outs is growing, and marginalization of the Russian-speaking youth is increasing, but no relevant data are available.

- ironically, activities under the slogan of “desegregation” led to exactly the opposite outcome – ie co-existence of schools with identical curricula and the same language of instruction but separate for ethnic Latvian children and non-Latvians - with some exceptions like eg best gymnasias. Motivated non-Latvian parents are usually eager to send their children to “genuine Latvian” schools, ethnic Latvian parents are not happy when the number of the Russian-speaking students becomes significant, and administration tries to limit it. On the other hand, Latvian parents, as a rule, try to avoid sending their children to former minority schools, in particular, considering that teachers whose mothertongue is not Latvian offer lower standard of education. No concepts or plans of factual desegregation is discussed.

- the share of students who switch to home or remote education is growing fast. In practice, this means that they are taught privately, often without any formal registration or licencing, also by those former teachers of minority schools who left after the reform. The public education system is a sort of “privatized”. Moreover, allegedly Russian-speaking youngsters attend remote education in the Russia’s schools – where, besides traditionally good lessons of math or physics, they receive ideological indoctrination and intoxication. Therefore, the ban of bilingual education helped Russian “soft power” with this regard.

2. Media

Contrary to Estonia where state heavily invests in both public and private broadcasting in Russian, Latvia chose the strategy of complete “Latvianization” of the national media space.

After protracted debates, the decision was made to abolish very popular public radio programme in Russian. Budgetary subsidies for private broadcasters in Russian are available only in exceptional circumstances and are really negligible – in comparison Latvian-language broadcasters. Moreover, the Regulator tends to exert pressure on some youtube channels and blogs in Russian forcing them to register as media – although the law doesn’t require this. As a result, several Russian-language anti-Putin blogs and channels in Latvia not only receive no support but must resist the Regulator’s pressure.

This policy cannot be described otherwise than the best help for the Kremlin propaganda, and its supporters as useful idiots. Again we face the nationalistic approach: if you belong to Latvia – switch to the Latvian-language media, if you wish to consume media in the enemy’s language – you belong to enemy.

To conclude. The question is still the same: **are the Russian-speakers in the Baltics a security threat, “Russia’s fifth column” - or a demographic, economic, intellectual and military resource?**

There is no one short answer. The Russian-speaking community is very diverse, and the latest events only increased polarization within this group.

In my “bubble”, educated, European-minded Russian-speakers tend to believe that the state’s policy towards them is neither just nor wise. In the meantime, Putin’s Russia is unacceptable to them, in this political confrontation they definitely choose the side of Latvia and Europe.