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Judging the book by its cover? Latvian integration beyond the headlines

While the Baltic States are often mistaken for their geographic homonym, the Balkans, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are far from experiencing the type of ethnic cleansing that took place in Yugoslavia with the collapse of communism. Still, Estonia and Latvia in particular, are home to very ethnically diverse populations. Individuals who identify themselves as Russians or Russian-speakers make up more than a quarter of the population in each country. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, these states have struggled to appropriately integrate the sizable minority population into Estonian and Latvian society. Indeed, they are often identified internationally — and domestically — by their integration failures.

The rhetoric surrounding minority integration in these Baltic states is quite damning; but is it accurate? In this paper I focus on Latvia as a case study of integration that is actually working beyond the amplified voices of politicians and the headlines. This paper looks at integration in two issue areas, (1) education reforms, and (2) citizenship legislation. I argue that the country has made real progress in bringing the post-Soviet Russian-speaking population of 1991 closer to a real part of Latvian society in 2013. This is not to say Latvia has “succeeded;” continued improvements to social integration are necessary. However, in the two decades after reestablishing independence, Latvia is moving in a positive direction, despite the deafening din arguing the contrary.

Loud voices, small issues

“There is no conflict at the everyday level, but if you open up a newspaper, it is there, if you close the newspaper it’s gone.” — Focus group participant (cited in Šulmane, 2010)

To start, it is necessary to look at what is most loudly publicized about the nature of integration in Latvia. The Latvian-language media and Russian-language media occupy two separate sectors in Latvia’s media market, with very little crossover. The information that reaches the public can differ extensively, depending on the language of transmission; however, both the Russian-language and Latvian-language media have tendencies to radicalize ethnic tensions to their respective target groups in the press (Šulmane, 2010 p. 243).

Disproportionate coverage of radical individuals as group representatives is used to exacerbate ethnic tensions for political gains. While Freedom House (2012) rates the Latvian press as “free,” ownership structures and the prevalence of key journalist-politicians create a rather murky picture of the media market. In fact, almost all significant news outlets in the TV and print media market have traceable and suspected links to influential politicians in Latvia or Russia (see Delna, 2010; Muiznieks, 2008; Rulle, 2012; Rožukalne, 2012; and others). In addition to Russian-language content produced in Latvia, Latvia also receives a steady stream of media from Russia. Freedom

House rates the Russian media “not free,” and the most influential Russian-language media sources have direct ties to the Kremlin (Freedom House, 2012; Rostoks, 2008).

The Latvian and Russian media effectively highlight the failures of integration, both for Latvian and Russian audiences, as well as for the international community. Controversy sells newspapers, but does it fairly represent the situation for Latvians and Russian-speakers living their daily lives in Latvia? Ethnic violence has not plagued Latvia since independence, and there is a high rate of positive interethnic interaction in the workplace and in social lives. While the ethnic battles are raging in newspapers, we must look beyond the headlines to understand the true story behind the progression of integration in Latvia.

Minority education: a chapter of successes?

The Latvian education system, which socializes children from a young age, is a critical space for promoting integration; however, it has become an area in which legislative and social contradictions prevail. While the presence of ethnic schools has discouraged spatial inter-ethnic integration, students in minority schools are obliged to conduct at least 60% of their education in Latvian at the high-school level, leading to tremendous strides in the linguistic assimilation.

A relic of both interwar and Soviet Latvia, national minority schools operating under different education programs persisted in Latvia until the mid-1990s. The Latvian state continues to finance separate basic and secondary education (now under the same guidelines as Latvian-language schools) in eight national minority programs. Support for national minority education in Latvia exceeds the standard for many other European countries (Muižnieks, 2004). Russian is by far the largest national minority education program in Latvia, though it is not limited to only ethnic Russian students, but attracts pupils with Ukrainian, Belarusian and Jewish backgrounds, as well. In 2011/12, 22.8% of students attended Russian-language schools.

In 2004, controversial reforms to minority education took effect. Due to these reforms, 60% of instruction in minority schools (grades 10-12) is now conducted in Latvian. This reform was accused of forcing assimilation on Russian-speakers. It sparked emotionally intense protests across Europe, which included sending Russian-minority school children to Strasbourg to protest (Petrenko, 2010, p. 71). However, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe supported the increase in Latvian medium teaching (Muižnieks, 2004). Primary arguments for reform hinged not only on the principles of knowing the state language, but also on promoting the success of students from minority schools in the Latvian job market (Muižnieks, 2004).

The 2004 school reforms have been widely successful in improving Latvian language skills among non-Latvians (MFA, 2013a). In practical terms, students in Russian minority schools acquire a bilingual education and subsequently graduate with high-level knowledge of both Latvian and Russian. Conversely, Latvian-language students are in a monolingual setting, where Russian is taught as a *foreign* language and is optional (Dilans, 2009; CSB, 2012e). In a BISS survey, 73% of non-Latvians aged 15-34 said they

speak Latvian well, while only 54% of Latvians in the same age cohort said they speak Russian well (BISS, 2008).

While they are integrating linguistically, non-Latvian youth are improving their Latvian skills in minority schools, perpetuating the lack of inter-ethnic contact among their peers. This segregation continues partially as students leave the k-12 system. While a high percentage of students continue at state universities, there is some indication that ethnic segregation is partially continued in higher education. However, 75-90% of non-titulars say they have at least one ethnically Latvian friend or colleague, which is a positive sign of work place and social integration (Vihalemm & Siiner, 2011b, p. 121). This is higher than in Estonia, where 60-80 percent identify interethnic contacts (*ibid*). Additionally, Latvia has a high rate of intermarriage; 20% of Latvians are married to a non-Latvian (*ibid*).

There is a need for further contemporary research in education and its impact on integration. However, we can determine that there have been both important successes and failures in this issue area. School administrators determine educational content, however, they must legally adhere to the norms set by the Ministry of Education and Science. With the implementation of extensive bilingual education in minority schools, there is limited impetus to amend spatial segregation issues. While there have been some failures in support for education reform, the legal foundations are generally appropriate for minority schooling; positive, if not complete, changes that are taking effect.

Citizenship: Unexpected liberalism?

Changes to minority education has produced mixed, but overall positive steps toward integration on a linguistic and social level, but it is also necessary to look at integration from the viewpoint of civic inclusion, i.e. citizenship. The Latvian parliament (*Saeima*) is in the process of amending and liberalizing the Law on Citizenship for the first time since 1998. Changes will include provisions for dual citizenship, as well as loosening naturalization requirements and easing the path to citizenship for children of non-citizens (Latvijas Republikas Saeima [LR Saeima], 2012). Non-citizenship is a status that applies only to former Soviet citizens; 14% of Latvia's current population is classified as non-citizen. To naturalize, applicants must pass Latvian language and civics tests. While a large portion of Latvian residents still do not have access to political rights, the non-citizen population has diminished since 1995 and it is primarily older individuals that are affected by this status. With high rates of successful naturalization, the 14% may be a segment of the population that actively chooses to remain non-citizens. Marc Morje Howard's has posited that restrictive nature of the Latvian citizenship law (which is often publicized in the media), remains a problem for integration. I argue that contrary to his 2009 assessment, Latvia actually falls well within European norms with regard to becoming a citizen.

When the Soviet Union dissolved into successor states in 1991, it left a significant population in Latvia without clearly defined citizenship. A "zero-option," which would have effectively granted citizenship to all residents of Latvia after the dissolution of the USSR, was rejected. Instead, a significant reduction of the titular population in Latvia during the course of Soviet occupation prompted a return to Latvia's interwar citizenship law in the 1991 Renewal of the Republic of Latvia Citizen's Rights and Fundamental

Principles of Nationality (Krūma, 2010). Invoking the principle of state continuity, citizenship was open to those who had been citizens of the interwar Latvian republic, as well as their descendants (Kalvaitis 1998; Ziemele 2001, cited in Krūma, 2010). Individuals who had arrived in Latvia during the Soviet period were required to naturalize as Latvian citizens. While this process was initially quite restrictive, by 1998, the standards had liberalized to acceptable European norms.

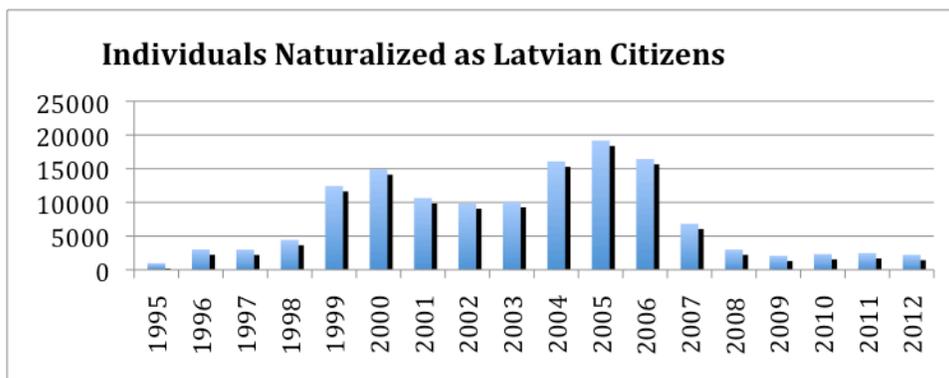
Table 3.1 Population by Citizenship

	2000		2011	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total population	2377383	100	2067887	100
Citizens of Latvia	1770210	74.5	1732880	83.8
Non-citizens of Latvia	503999	21.2	290660	14.1
Citizens of other countries	103174	4.3	44347	2.1
Citizens of EU Member States	703	0.0	5730	0.3
Not EU Member States	102471	4.3	38617	1.9

Data: CSB, 2012f.

Since 1995, 139,886 individuals have become naturalized citizens (PMLP, 2013b). More than 83% of all naturalizations since 1991 occurred between 1999 and 2007, with a spike in 2005. The jump in naturalization begins with the 1998 abolishment of excessively restrictive requirements, and centers around the 2004 accession to the EU (Šūpule, 2007, p. 203). Accessibility to the European job market appears to have been an incentive to naturalize. However, in 2008 Russia opened visa-free travel to non-citizens, and non-citizens were allowed to travel visa-free throughout the Schengen Zone (Ivļevs & King, 2012). Therefore, the incentives to become a Latvian citizen have decreased, particularly for those with connections to the West *and* the East.

Figure 3.1: Individuals Naturalized as Latvian Citizens



Current proposed changes to the citizenship law would permit Latvian citizens to hold dual citizenship with EU, NATO, EFTA and countries with bilateral treaties on citizenship. Significantly, this liberalization would not allow for dual citizenship with Russia, though many individuals living in Latvia with foreign citizenship are citizens of the Russian Federation (PMLP, 2012b).

Politicians currently working on amendments to the law have argued that thousands of non-citizen children eligible for Latvian citizenship are not registered as citizens because the process is overly bureaucratic. The proposed changes to the Law on Citizenship would theoretically ease these bureaucratic requirements, allowing parents to assign their child citizenship by checking the appropriate box when registering the birth.

Approximately 14,500 individuals born in 1991 or later, who had the right to register as Latvian citizens have not done so (PLMP, 2013). This is about 5% of the non-citizen population and less than 1% of the Latvian population as a whole. The number of non-citizens by year of birth has steadily decreased over the years, (see Table 3.2). Only 260 of 19,414 children born in 2012 are non-citizens (1.3% of total births). Considering this steady decline in young people, particularly babies, who are non-citizens, easing the path to citizenship for children of non-citizens is not likely to have a drastic effect in real numbers; indeed it appears that parents see value in assigning their children citizenship and the non-citizen problem is solving itself in the next generation. However, the proposed step toward liberalization of requirements may serve a rhetorical and symbolic purpose for integration. A major effect of this law within Latvian society, according to Zatlers, would be an increase in loyalty and affinity for Latvia among those who would otherwise be born non-citizens (2013).

Table 3.2: Current non-citizens by year of birth

Year	Latvian Citizen	Non citizen (%)	Others	Total
2012	19032	260 (1.3)	122	19414
2011	18763	359 (1.9)	189	19311
2010	19276	401 (2.0)	233	19910
2009	21132	469 (2.1)	274	21875
2008	23159	518 (2.2)	245	23922
2007	22524	549 (2.4)	263	23336
2006	21363	599 (2.7)	313	22275
2005	20487	558 (2.6)	304	21349
2004	19135	600 (3.0)	329	20064
2003	19637	609 (3.0)	286	20532
2002	18671	632 (3.2)	274	19577
2001	18077	656 (3.5)	280	19013
2000	18602	750 (3.8)	246	19598
1999	17724	705 (3.8)	297	18726

1998	16735	625 (3.5)	290	17650
//1991	29215	1560 (5)	543	31318

Data: PMLP, 2012b.

Though there are fewer and fewer Latvian residents who grow up as non-citizens, the 14% of the Latvian population that are non-citizens is often rhetorically cited as a major impediment to integration. Marc Morje Howard (2009) posits that current citizenship law is restrictive toward current non-citizens.¹ Indeed, a Google search for “non-citizen Latvia” will return a series of reports criticizing Latvian citizenship policy or labeling the issue a human rights violation. However, I argue that Latvia is actually less restrictive than one third of the EU-15 countries analyzed in 2008.

Using Howard’s Citizenship Policy Index (CPI) as a baseline for calculations, I argue that Latvia, contrary to popular rhetoric, is far from draconian in its citizenship policies. Instead, it falls firmly in the “medium” category when compared to the EU-15, far above historically restrictive countries like Austria and Denmark.

Table 3.3 Citizenship Policy Index Scores for EU-15 (2008) and Latvia (2012)

Category	Country	<i>Jus soli</i> (0-2)	Naturalization requirements (0-2)	Dual citizenship for immigrants (0-2)	CPI score (0-6)
Restrictive (average) (0 – 1.5)	Austria, Denmark, Greece, Spain, Italy	0.1	0.13	0.55	0.78
Medium	Latvia	1.75	.125	0	1.88
Medium (average) (1.51 – 3.9)	Germany, Luxembourg	0.88	0.27	1.00	2.15
Liberal (average) (4.0+)	Netherlands, Finland, Portugal, Ireland, France, U.K., Sweden, Belgium	1.56	1.42	1.81	4.79

Data (EU-15) & methodology (see notes): Howard, 2009, p. 28.

Since 1998, citizenship legislation in Latvia has not actively impeded civic integration of the Russian-speaking population. Indeed, the number of non-citizens — the population commonly used as an indication of segregationist tendencies of the Latvian government — is dwindling and largely an issue facing older generations. Proposed changes to the citizenship law will further amend the situation. Non-citizens are entitled to social rights, and may even see more benefits of retaining the non-citizenship status, particularly if

¹ Howard focuses on the legal requirements of citizenship, rather than the rights and obligations of citizens, therefore I also avoid the emotional arguments tied to naturalization of non-citizens and focus on legal requirements.

they desire visa-free travel to the West and East.

Conclusions: Surprises and challenges

Listening to media reports and politicians, it is easy to categorize Latvia as a dysfunctional post-Soviet state, mired in ethnic hostilities and vengeful policies against a quarter of its population. While Latvia is far from an idyllic society, it has made leaps and bounds toward moving beyond historical legacies and into a modern Europe. Indeed, in several cases, Latvia has surpassed “Old” European states with liberal and inclusionary policies.

Moving beyond the headlines to look at integration efforts in education and citizenship policies, I have identified several challenges. In education, there is still a spatially segregated minority school system, where students and parents have very few incentives to seek out inter-ethnic education opportunities. With regard to citizenship, a significant portion of the population is without political rights. These are issues that merit continued attention and forward-looking solutions. Yet beyond the minutia of notable problems, overall, the picture of integration in these issue areas is surprisingly positive.

The Latvian-language competency among youth has skyrocketed since 1991 and increased significantly across the formerly monolingual Russian population. Though children are educated separately, they have a greater potential for inter-ethnic contact as they leave educational institutions because of this linguistic gain. There are high levels of interaction in the workplace and in social circles, and the surprisingly high rate of inter-ethnic marriages indicates that on a personal level, the hostile ethnic tensions the media portray do not hold too much water.

Citizenship legislation, both current and proposed, offers a whole host of surprises. Latvia has received abundant criticism for denying political rights to “essentially stateless” non-citizens. While citizenship policies were extremely restrictive in the direct aftermath of the break up of the USSR, for the past 15 years, Latvia has more than exceeded the European standard in citizenship accessibility through naturalization. While the non-citizen population is high at 14% of the population, there are indications that many non-citizens actively choose to retain that status. The non-citizen issue will likely remain a thorn in the side of Latvian integration for the time being. However, it is not a problem that will last forever. Only 260 children born in 2012 are non-citizens — every year the number is declining. As the problem largely solves itself (with some help from proposed amendments), the non-citizen population will cease to be exploited by the media for political gain. Latvia must welcome this development with open arms and it will be a true test of Latvian integration.

Latvia still has integration challenges to overcome, but observers and voters should not be blinded by politicians and media outlets. The surprising successes of Latvian integration should cease to be surprises — the progress from 1991 to now is real, and in the larger context of Europe, Latvia is far from a nationalistic outlier. Controversy draws attention, but the real story of Latvian integration is found in steps toward success.

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