

# Latvia's new integration guidelines: No participation before re-education?

## Description

**The article examines the new integration policy in Latvia in the context of the debate on nation and nation-state in Eastern Europe and traces the connections between this document and the peculiarities of ethnic politics in Latvia.**

Latvia, occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940 and for fifty years one of the Soviet republics, regained independence in 1991 and joined the European Union in 2004. In accordance with the doctrine of continuity of the Latvian state, former Soviet citizens who settled in Latvia between 1940 and 1991 and their descendants did not receive Latvian citizenship and had to naturalize in order to become Latvian citizens. Those who did not do so remained in the so-called „non-citizens“ status, they are Latvian passport holders without the political rights reserved to citizens only reserved. In view of the new integration policy (2011), these persons (there are approximately 14% non-citizens among the Latvian population) are considered as „immigrants“ in the sense of European Union's policies on immigrant integration. According to these policies, their integration implies their political participation *„in the democratic process and in the formulation of integration policies and measures, especially at the local level“*.<sup>[1]</sup>



## The ideological premises: the State-nation and others

In the summer of 2010, months before the parliamentary elections, the annual Lawyers' Meetings (an informal gathering of the country's influential lawyers) were dedicated to an unusual topic: National Identity and the Nation-State. The keynote speaker was Egils Levits, the judge representing Latvia at the Court of Justice of the European Union. Steeped in the German constitutional law tradition, which grants a more culture-related meaning to the word Volk (the people or nation) and is not based on social contract theory, E. Levits presented to the largely approving audience a concept of Latvian statehood that has cultural nationalism at its core. The Latvian state, according to E. Levits, was founded by the Latvian nation (defined in cultural, not political terms) with the purpose of exercising the right of self-determination and preserving the Latvian culture. With the act of founding, the Latvian nation has transformed itself into the „State-nation“ (*valstsnācija*).<sup>[2]</sup> E. Levits rejects the primacy of the political nation (the entire body of citizens), claiming that the Republic of Latvia was founded in 1918 by the State-nation and not by all of its inhabitants, and that the explicit priority of the state should be to preserve and develop the State-nation, while also granting freedom and protection to national minorities (these traditional minorities are defined as distinct from post-war immigrants). For immigrants, the path to inclusion according to E. Levits lies either in assimilating and becoming part of the State-nation (with language as the crucial sign of belonging) or through joining one of the national minorities and exercising cultural difference only in the private sphere.

A very similar concept of a hierarchical relationship between the Latvian-speaking Latvians as the State-nation on the one hand and the Russian-speaking Latvians as immigrants or as a minority on the other is ensconced in the National Identity and Integration Policy Guidelines developed under the leadership of Sarmīte Ēlerte, member of the Vienotība political bloc, who endorsed E. Levits' vision as soon as it was first articulated in public.

According to the new government policy document (October 20th 2011), true integration is only possible for the Russian-speaking population of Latvia, citizens and non-citizens alike, if they accept the primacy of the preservation of Latvian language and culture as the central political goal of the Latvian state, use only the Latvian language in the public sphere and correct their faulty social memory.<sup>[3]</sup> While participation is mentioned by the document as an important element of

integration policies, no novelties are envisaged to improve the participation of non-citizens in democratic processes – not even at the local level. Broadening the use of the Latvian language and changing the social memory of Russian-speaking Latvians are the two main topics dealt with in the document. These are the features that lead the author of this article to see the new policy document as primarily a re-education programme, rather than an integration programme.

### **„Distorted social memory“**

The authors of the National Identity and Integration Guidelines insist on correcting the ‘distorted social memory’ of Latvian Russian-speakers, particularly regarding the events of the 20th century and the occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union.

For more than twenty years, since the Popular Front movement in the late 1980s, references to the trauma of Soviet occupation have constituted a large part of Latvian political debate. In the Latvian context, the argumentation used to attribute historical blame is based on the unspoken premise that it was the ‘alien’ Russian-speakers who supported the totalitarian regime, and the native Latvians who opposed it.

It is important to add here that in Latvia, the public scrutiny of the transgressions of the Soviet past has been mostly political and restricted to the domains of citizenship legislation and memory politics. There has been no comprehensive case-by-case criminal prosecution of individual guilt for concrete acts committed against individuals or groups of people in the interests of the Soviet regime, and only two men have been indicted for mass executions or deportations of citizens during the early stages of Soviet occupation. 2009 Katja Wezel has rightly pointed out that the absence of a clear prosecution of individual guilt permits the attribution of collective blame for the crimes of the Soviet regime to the entire Russian-speaking population of the country.<sup>[4]</sup>

Eva-Clarita Onken has stated that today the paradigm of suffering and heroism “*has been established quite successfully as the dominant memory regime in all three Baltic states*”.<sup>[5]</sup> This memory regime, however, extends the topoi of suffering and heroism only to the majority ethnic group (in our case, the ethnic Latvians), leaving to the second biggest group (the Russians) the role of perpetrators who are collectively responsible for the sufferings inflicted, or, at least, who stubbornly and collectively deny that those sufferings have taken place. In part this impression is upheld by the uncritical stance towards on the transgressions of the Soviet past of Russian-language newspapers published in Latvia.

The theme of collaboration with the Soviet regime is hardly represented in Latvian historical research.<sup>[6]</sup> The low articulation of this topic, along with the paradigm of suffering and heroism mentioned above, allows politicians and opinion leaders to manipulate public discourse based on the presumption that the ethnic Latvians as a group have been the sufferers, and the ethnic Russians and russified Slavs, who had immigrated during the Soviet period, have been the perpetrators. This discourse precludes political dialogue and compromise as long as the perpetrators (not an individual category, but a symbolic collective group identified as ‘the Russians’) have not admitted their guilt.

### **How to improve memories?**

The Integration Guidelines openly uphold this discourse by including a set of policy outcome indicators that measure the desired effect of new memory policies only among the Russian-speakers. These indicators purport to measure ‘the percentage of Russian-speaking inhabitants who consider that the deportations (of Latvian citizens) to Siberia in 1949 have been the worst thing in Latvia’s history in the 20th century’ (expected to rise from the current 13% of all Russian-speakers to 25% by 2018), and the percentage of Russian speakers who wrongly assume that Latvia had joined the Soviet Union voluntarily (expected to fall from 55% to 25%). There is no set of indicators proposing to measure, for instance, the percentage of citizens of any ethnic group who perceive the Holocaust as a national tragedy of Latvia, or indicators proposing to measure the percentage of ethnic Latvians who admit that persons of their ethnic group have collaborated with the Soviet regime.

Methods suggested by the Guidelines for correcting the social memory of the Russian-speaking Latvians are somewhat vague, but include, significantly, a suggestion that closer monitoring of history teaching in minority schools would be a good idea. The insistence on control (rather than dialogue or debate) is a characteristic feature of Latvian language

policies so far. The Guidelines take this approach a step further, suggesting that control could be extended to spheres where social memory is reproduced.

By openly pointing at the Russian-speaking community of Latvia as the only part of society 'at fault', the authors of the new Integration Guidelines have, in accordance with a widespread East-Central European tradition of ethnic politics, chosen a 'method of political communication complicating the civic dialogue by its very non dialogic nature'.<sup>[7]</sup> The negative reception of the new policy document by the Russian-speaking community of Latvia (as seen in the local Russian-language media and among ethnic minority organisations) confirms this observation.

As before (throughout the years of restored independence), thus also during the intense discussions surrounding the hypothetical inclusion of Harmony Centre in the governing coalition in October 2011, not only the notion of Soviet Occupation but also the attribution of guilt for this occupation to the only political party voted in predominantly by the Russian-speakers have been part of the rhetoric used by the members of *Vienotība* party.

Even after naturalizing (and thus formally accepting the continuity of the Republic of Latvia founded in 1918), new Russian-speaking citizens and politicians voted in predominantly by those citizens (the case of Harmony Centre) are viewed by some of *Vienotība* spokespersons as inherently suspicious and not worthy of governing the country they have become citizens of.

## Conclusions

It is true that the concepts of statehood and nationhood differ greatly within Europe, and these conceptual differences understandably have great impact on citizenship policies. As Bauböck, Perchinig and Sievers point out in their study on citizenship in the new Europe, unlike the old Member States, many of the new ones have not existed as independent states within their current borders before the 20th century, and their relationships with ethnicity, citizenship and belonging are complex.<sup>[8]</sup>

Nevertheless, there are some fundamental principles of the functioning of democratic policies that no nation-state within the European Union should be prepared to easily ignore. One of these is the equal entitlement of all citizens (independently of mother tongue, origin and duration of their citizenship rights) to influence the current and future policies of the country, no matter how different (possibly) their cultural preferences are from those of the majority population. The second of these principles is the freedom of opinion that stretches to differences on historical questions, even those of state-founding nature. By denying that the main basis for participation and integration is the citizenship itself, the National Identity and Integration Guidelines undermine the first of these principles. And by suggesting that the majority should simply teach the minority the right interpretation of history, the document comes dangerously close to undermining the second.

## Notes:

[1] Cf. [www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/jha/82745.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/jha/82745.pdf)

[2] The term is ambiguous: clearly coming from the German *Staatsnation* (political nation or entire body of citizens) and first used in Latvia as such, this new use is obviously a diversion of the original meaning.

[3] „Nacionālās identitātes, pilsoniskās sabiedrības un integrācijas politikas pamatnostādnes 2012. – 2018.gadam“, Kultūras Ministrija, October 20th 2011.

[4] Katja Wezel, „Latvia's Soviet Story. Transitional Justice and the Politics of Commemoration“, *Atslēgvārdi/ Keywords*, 2, 2009.

[5] Eva-Clarita Onken, „The Baltic States and Moscow's 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe“, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59:1, 2007, 31.

[6] A rare exception is Martiņš Kaprāns, „Then and Now: Comparing the Soviet and Post-Soviet Experience in Latvian Autobiographies“, *Atslēgvārdi/ Keywords*, 2, 2009.

[7] Grigorij Mesežnikov & Oľga Gyárfášová, „National Populism in Slovakia“, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2008, 33.

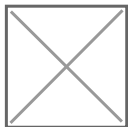
[8] Rainer Bauböck, Bernhard Perchinig, Wiebke Sievers, *Citizenship policies in the new Europe*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

---

\* PhD

[\*Translation in French.\*](#)

**Photograph:** Victory Memorial, Riga (Eric Le Bourhis, 2009)



[Retour en haut de page](#)

**date créée**

15/12/2011

**Champs de Méta**

**Auteur-article :** Maria GOLUBEVA\*