

# **The Ethnic Russian Minority: A Problematic Issue in the Baltic States**

MARINA BEST  
University of Victoria

During the time of the Soviet Union Russians were encouraged to migrate into other Soviet republics such as the three Baltic States. After its collapse, Russian migrants found themselves to be trapped within independent republics that were trying to rid their past of Soviet control. Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia all dealt with the immigration, integration, and acceptance of these ethnic Russians in very different ways. This paper will examine how these states dealt with these minority populations and compare how well they were able to integrate them into society. I argue that Lithuania's policy of multiculturalism allowed the ethnic Russians living within its borders to become more integrated and better accepted into larger society.

*Keywords: immigration, integration, Russian minority, Baltic States*

## **1 Introduction**

In the modern European world, immigration and integration play major roles in state politics. With the trend towards globalization, or the collapsing of economic and cultural borders, there is an influx of immigrants and migratory workers in the European states. The Baltic States, consisting of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, are three very similar countries, with similar location, history, demographics, and political structure. These three countries are all struggling to deal with their large Russian minorities, and despite their similarities, are handling the situation very differently. Minority groups can be defined as:

a group of citizens of a State, constituting a numerical minority and in a non-dominant position of that State, endowed with ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which differ from those of the majority of the population, having a sense of solidarity with each other, motivated, if only implicitly, by a collective will to survive and whose aim is to achieve equality with the majority in fact and in law. (Deschanes:n.pag.)

This definition explains the situation surrounding the ethnic Russian minority problem in the Baltic countries. The Russian minority is struggling to achieve acceptance and equality, but because of its differences with the majority populations, it is finding it difficult to achieve these desires. This essay will compare the similarities and differences in the areas of immigration, integration,

and acceptance with regard to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania's ethnic Russian minority populations. Lithuania has clearly emerged as the forerunner in dealing with its ethnic Russian population, and because of this, it has fewer problems in that area today. Although the Baltic States seem extremely similar on the surface, this area of minority rights and acceptance is what really set them apart.

## **2 History**

Known globally as the “Baltic States,” Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia are three countries located on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. Small in geographical area and population, they are overshadowed by their large Russian neighbour to the East. The Soviet government dominated all three countries from the Second World War up until independence in the early 1990s. Soviet rule forced these countries to give up their sovereignty and succumb to Soviet power. During this period, Russians were encouraged to migrate to these countries to work, and through this immigration process, the number of Russian residents within these countries skyrocketed (Lakis 177).

By the time of the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the number of ethnic Russians was extremely high: Estonia with 474,843, or 30.3 percent of the total population, Latvia with 906,000 or 34 percent, and Lithuania with 344,500, or 9.4 percent (Heleniak). Lithuania had lower numbers because of their already larger population and available workforce, so the demand for Russian workers was not very high during the Soviet era. Since achieving independence, the number of ethnic Russians has declined in all three of the states. This decline is caused mostly by emigration and naturalization. The percentages of Russians in these countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century had changed to: 25.6 percent of the total population in Estonia, 28.8% in Latvia, and 6.4% in Lithuania (Heleniak). Despite the three countries all being parliamentary republics, they have dealt with their large Russian minorities quite differently since regaining sovereignty.

Both Latvia and Estonia perceive the Russian population to be a reminder of their unhappy past and do not welcome these people into their societies despite years and generations of Russians living in these countries. On the contrary, Lithuania deals with this minority group in a very different manner. It does not perceive its Russian minority to be a threat and honours their culture and history as an enriching part of their multicultural society (BNS).

## **3 Immigration: Statelessness and Citizenship**

Statelessness is a huge problem in former Soviet states since the collapse of the

Soviet Union. A huge percentage of the ethnic Russian population in Estonia and Latvia are stateless. These people do not belong to the state they live in (being Estonia or Latvia), nor do they belong to the state of their ancestors. As a result of the fall of the Soviet Union, the state to which they had once belonged, ceased to exist. Therefore, they were stuck in state of limbo, as they were not citizens of any existing country (Rozenvalds and Muižnieks 98).

In the prospect of European Union accession, Estonia and Latvia needed to meet the Copenhagen criteria's minority policies in order to be considered as valid candidates. This meant that these two countries had to significantly reduce the number of stateless persons. In the mid 1990s Estonia and Latvia began to work on integration methods to reduce statelessness (Rozenvalds 45). After granting some individuals citizenship and achieving European Union accession, the two countries began to slow the process once again. The number of stateless individuals is still alarming in these two countries, as the percentages are at 18% for Latvia and 13% for Estonia of the total population. Lithuania is clearly more liberal in this area of granting citizenship, as its number of stateless persons is just 0.3% of the total population (Aptekar 510). The citizenship and nationality laws of the three countries are a large determinate in the variance of their stateless populations.

The access to citizenship and nationality laws of the three Baltic States reflect their immigration issues. Both Estonia and Latvia follow the principle of *jus sanguinis*, or the “right of blood” principle (Rohtmets 298). This means that citizenship is determined by the citizenship of the parents, not by the place of birth. So those children born to Russian or stateless parents in Latvia or Estonia will fail to obtain national citizenship of their birth countries. In contrast, Lithuania has moved towards the *jus soli* principle of citizenship, or the “right of the soil” principle. Therefore, Lithuanian citizenship is granted to all those born within the country (“Republic of Lithuania: Law on Citizenship”). Thus, the differences in nationality laws show that the ethnic Russian minority in Lithuania is not as segregated as those in Estonia or Latvia. The Lithuanian government has taken initiative on making its residents feel welcome and integrated into society, and through this liberal nationality law, they are very successful.

#### **4 Integration: Language and Educational Reform**

There are several integration issues surrounding the ethnic Russian populations in the Baltic States. Major problems include the areas of language and educational reform. In a 1989 study, about 37.8% of Russians in Lithuania had a good command of Lithuanian, the country's official language. In Estonia and Latvia however, these numbers were 15.2% and 22.4% respectively (Brake). Therefore,

even during the Soviet era, the Russian minority in Lithuania was more integrated into society than its northern neighbours. After independence and the commencement of integration methods, the Russian minority was still linguistically disconnected from the majority populations. Census studies from the early twenty-first century show the continued failure of integration in Latvia and Estonia, with only 67.3% of the population having Estonian as their first language, and 58.2% of Latvia's population having Latvian as their first language. In Lithuania, an astounding 82% of the population have Lithuanian as their first language (Brake).

The language problems in Estonia and Latvia are caused by the restrictive language laws, and are ultimately causing major integration issues. The language laws in these countries emerged after independence as “language proficiency became a key for employment, chiefly in the public sector” (Hogan-Brun 557). This meant that knowledge of the official language became necessary in order to obtain a good job and have a successful life within the state borders. The Russian minorities felt as if the states were trying to strip their culture and heritage away from them, and this caused them to strongly hold on to their cultural roots. Integration through strict language policies did not just remain in the employment sector, but expanded into the schooling systems as well.

Education reform was meant to motivate integration in the Baltic countries. Previously, education had been separated by language, with little attention focused on the official language in the Russian schools. Lithuania started the move towards bilingual schools soon after independence. Although there was a move towards more bilingual education, there remained the ability in dense minority communities to have primary and secondary levels of education instructed in their native language (“Republic of Lithuania: Law on Citizenship”). Latvia and Estonia, however, had waited until the Russian language schools became well established before administering harsh changes.

It was only in 1998, that the Law on Education in Latvia stated that by 2004 all high schools and state-run professional schools will teach in the Latvian language (“MFA of Russia”). Similarly, Estonia passed legislation in 1997 that said that their high schools and other upper level schools will make the change to the Estonia language by 2007 (“Ministry of Education and Research > Transition to Estonia-Medium Education”). As the restrictive language laws took effect, it heavily affected the the schooling systems in the countries. It also became necessary to “certify professional linguistic competence” and state language exams were implemented “as part of naturalization requirements” (Hogan-Brun 557). Language inspectors emerged as a means of monitoring the application of these new language laws. The educational reforms in Latvian and Estonian Russian language schools have not helped integration at all, but in turn have

caused discrimination against Russian teachers. Since 2006, all teachers in Latvia are required to have the highest level of Latvian language proficiency, and because of this the teachers at the Russian language schools became targets for the State Language centre and the language inspectors (Rozenvalds 44). As a result of the new educational reforms in Estonia and Latvia, the teachers at the Russian language schools have been deemed unqualified for teaching (“Ministry of Education and Research”; “MFA of Russia”). Lithuania's more liberal approach towards the educational reform has actually led to increased numbers of Russian parents sending their children to Lithuanian language schools. Therefore, Lithuania's gentle integration methods have been extremely successful in comparison to the severe assimilation methods conducted by Estonian and Latvian officials.

## **5 Acceptance: Intermarriage and Pro-Russian Political Parties**

Acceptance for the ethnic Russian minorities is visible in the extent to which the state is open to having Russian culture and language present in everyday life. This can be seen from the level of intermarriage between the ethnic Russians and the national majority ethnicity, to political parties supporting the demands and interests of the Russian minority. Through the intermarriage of the Russian minority and the national majority populations, one can examine the degree of unity between them. If the two populations are willing to bond with one another on this level, the degree of acceptance must be significant. Estonia has extremely low rates of intermarriage between the ethnic Estonians and minority groups (Aptekar 512). By contrast, Latvia has extremely high and constantly growing rates of intermarriage. This is because the level of residential segregation between the two populations is lower in Latvia than in Estonia (513). This is one major factor setting the two states apart in their relations with their Russian minorities. Lithuania has a large percentage of intermarriage which alludes to the fact that their Russian minority is “particularly well integrated and [has] the highest levels of titular language skills out of the former Soviet Union republics” (515). In closing, intermarriage is a good method of seeing the interactions between the minority and majority populations, as well as examining the level of segregation of the minority group.

The presence of specific political parties voicing the rights and demands of the Russian minority is another means of examining acceptance in the Baltic States. In Estonia, the Centre Party is an example of a party that is supported by much of the ethnic Russian population (Álvarez-River). The Latvian equivalent, the Harmony Centre Party, is a pro-Russian party that has gained a strong voice in national politics, and just recently got the most votes in a parliamentary

election (Schwartz). These two parties have the ability to give the ethnic Russian population a larger voice within the governmental structure. Estonia and Latvia both have parties representing this minority group, but Lithuania is lacking such a specific party in its political system.

The absence of a Russian representative party legitimizes the possibility that Lithuania's Russian population feel well integrated into society and therefore do not feel that voicing their needs through their own political party is necessary. The current parties appear to be meeting their requirements. The level of acceptance of the ethnic Russian minority can be seen through the different means of participation in state culture and life. In Estonia and Latvia, the participation levels are limited and therefore, the need for political parties to voice their demands is crucial for their well-being. The ethnic Russian population is ultimately better accepted in Lithuania in comparison to its neighbours to the north and because of this, they are experiencing higher levels of integration overall.

## **6 The Effect on European Union Member Status**

The immigration and integration issues in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are affecting the wider European integration focus. With accession into the European Union, all countries have had to meet certain guidelines on the areas of immigration. The lack of motivation by Estonia and Latvia to further their integration processes after accession puts a strain on the integration criteria necessary for European Union standards.

A study carried out in 2008 found that the Russians living in Lithuania felt the least discriminated against out of all minorities in the European Union, with just 12 percent experiencing feelings of discrimination. Latvia and Estonia, however, had higher feelings of discrimination, with 25% and 55% respectively (BNS). This type of discrimination is a cause for concern for the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and could ultimately harm their status as European Union members. In a world of globalization, the immigration and integration of minority groups is to be expected. Therefore, these two countries need to come to terms with this factor especially after becoming members of the European Union.

The Schengen Agreement between European Union member states allows for the free movement of citizens between state borders (European Commission). This means that Estonia and Latvia have to be prepared for the potential immigration by other ethnic minorities at any time. If they continue to have such harsh relations with their minority groups, there may be tension with the European Union or its fellow members in the future.

## 7 Conclusion

The ethnic Russian minority population is a major factor involving all three of the Baltic States. One can see this through the way in which the inner workings of these three countries ultimately determine the lives of this minority group within their borders. Although Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are perceived to be three nearly identical countries, on this issue, their differences become more pronounced. Estonia and Latvia are more similar in their harsh assimilation and blatant means of expulsion. Lithuania has had more success integrating its ethnic Russian minority than its northern neighbours. It can be seen through language ability progression and educational reform that Lithuania is truly focused on the integration of this population.

On the subject of immigration, the issue of statelessness and access to citizenship are major factors in determining the future for these minority groups. Estonia and Latvia still have major problems accepting the ethnic Russian minority into its population and as long as it remains so difficult to become a citizen in these countries, the minority group will fail to gain acceptance into the larger society. Lithuania has worked from the very start of independence to shape itself into a multicultural country and, because of this, has very different laws on the subject of immigration and citizenship. This acceptance is visible in other parts of society as well, as the Russian minority feels free to express its culture while welcoming the Lithuanian culture into their lives. Estonia and Latvia's outright rejection of the Russian minority has caused many problems for their countries. By forcing assimilation or expulsion upon the ethnic Russians, they are causing the group to resist integration and strongly hold on to their language and culture. Lithuania has clearly taken the correct path in dealing with minority populations. The ethnic Russians have the freedom to be proud of their culture within their new home country, and because of this, they do not feel like integration is an act of separation from their past, but rather the chance to blend history with the future.

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