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## **Working Paper**

**Ethnic Minorities and Language Issue: a Latvian Case  
(Russian Minority in Latvia)**

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The census data of the 20th century show the contradictory tendencies in the dynamics of ethnic proportions in Latvia. There was a constant growth in the ratio of Latvian nationality from 1897 up to 1940 (78% of the population). In the years of Soviet regime the ratio of Latvians decreased (till dangerous 54% of the population), while the ratio of Russians at the same time rapidly increased (Plakans 1995). At the 21st century the Latvian nation is in a very difficult situation – its percentage of the whole population on its own ethnic territory is only about 60%. Moreover some part of them, especially in the Eastern region of Latvia – Latgale, has lost the features of ethnic identity assimilating in the Slav environment. The reasons for that are not only demographic, but also political ones. Among the latter – active policy of Russification which in the Soviet period became the way of disguising Sovietization. Russians and the so-called ‘Russian-speaking’, those who mainly came to Latvia from the Soviet ‘old republics’, became the instrument of implementing this policy.

The aim of the given paper is to try to examine in general terms the changes of attitude of Latvians to Russians during the 20th century and to find out the reasons for these changes. The problem will be considered in the context of school policy.

When on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1918 the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed the Latvians for the first time in history formed their own state, and Russians, Germans, Jews, Poles and others became national minorities in Latvia. The laws adopted on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1919 ensured for them school autonomy which was recognized as one of the most successful in Europe of that time (Saleniece 2002: 61-64). National minorities received the right to organize schools with the respective language of teaching. Financing of these educational establishments was realized by the state and local authorities proportionally to the number of inhabitants of the given ethnic group. Special branches – German, Russian, Jewish, Polish, Byelorussian – were formed at

the Department of schools of national minorities of the Ministry of Education for managing the schools of mentioned minorities. The heads of these branches were nominated by the respective minority and had the right to participate at the meetings of Cabinet of Ministers when questions concerning the given minority were discussed. The reasons of such favourable attitude towards national minorities, including Russians, from the side of Latvians were various, among them unwillingness to reproduce such national policy, the unfairness of which they felt and experienced themselves (Saleniece and Kuznecovs 1999: 240-244). The situation formed is reflected in Table No1. It contains the data about ethnic composition and the number of schools of national minorities in the Republic of Latvia in the 1920ies.

**Table No1. Schools in Latvia, 1925**

Nationality	1925		academic year 1924/25	
	population	percent	number of schools	percent
Latvians	1 321 200	73.4	1442	73.4
Russians	231 658	12.6	210	10.7
Byelorussians	considered as Russians		37	1.9
Jews	95 675	5.2	86	4.4
Germans	70 964	3.8	89	4.5
Poles	51 143	2.3	29	1.5
Others	about 29 000	2.4	61	3.5
Total	1 800 000	100	1954	100

I. Saleniece. Sources: Latvian census data and official handbooks

After the establishment of authoritarian regime by K.Ulmanis in 1934 school autonomy was cancelled, although Russian and schools of other minorities continued to exist. In spite of the dissatisfaction with the Latvianization policy carried out by K.Ulmanis' government the Russian minority remained loyal to the Republic of Latvia and respectively it was perceived by Latvians.

This attitude began to change fast in 1940 when the Soviet army troops entered the territory of Latvia and pro-Soviet regime was established, what for the local population often meant – pro-Russian regime. The measures carried out by the new power confirmed this opinion. First of all thorough ideological brain-washing of the inhabitants of Latvia began with the aim to instil love of socialist system and feeling of thankfulness towards the Soviet Union. The task was set to copy as soon as possible the Soviet system of education, keeping in mind also Russification, but at first the changes were very moderate. Especially, if to compare them with the methods of activity of the new power in other spheres – arrests, executions, mass deportations of June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1941 and others.

The most noticeable was the confirmation of separate study plans for the school year 1940/41 for schools with the Russian language of teaching. Without doubt it testifies about the significant change of the status of the given schools: there is nothing more to say about Latvian schools and schools of national minorities. The triad appears: Latvian, Russian and schools of other nationalities. Besides a special role of the Russian language as the means to acquaint with all Soviet was recognized. It clearly manifested itself in study plans for the school-year 1940/41 when this subject which was absent before, appeared in the plans not only of Latvian, but also Polish, Estonian, Jewish and other schools. And the number of hours for studying it was rather impressive: in basic schools of national minorities these were 4 hours a

week in forms 3-6 (together with 4 hours of Latvian and 4-5 hours of the native language in the same forms). In secondary schools during 5 years of studies the number of hours a week together for the native language were 17, the same number – for the Latvian language, but for Russian language –19. In study plans for the school year 1941/42 the privileged status of the Russian language was to be confirmed even more openly (Saleniece 2003: 303-304).

One year was quite enough to instil dissatisfaction with the Soviet power to the inhabitants of Latvia, first of all to Latvians, and to change centuries long tradition when choosing between Germans and Russians was to choose a ‘lesser evil’, i.e. the Russians. Since 1941 this liking towards Russian ceased to be traditional.

Interrupted by war the course on Russification resumed in Latvia before the end of the military operations on its territory: the resolution of the bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist (bolshevik) Party of Latvia on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1944 *About the work of schools of Latvian S.S.R.* reads: “In order to acquaint deeper with the practice of socialist construction, with the history and culture of the great Russian nation and also with the aims to strengthen brotherly community of the peoples of the U.S.S.R., the bureau of the Central Committee ...obliges People’s Commissariat of Education of Latvia and regional departments of people’s education to organize wide studying of the Russian language by teachers and pupils.” In the same protocol we find two more resolutions which make up as if two parts of one whole: *About studying the Latvian language by employees of institutions, organizations and enterprises of Latvian S.S.R. who do not know the Latvian language* and *About studying the Russian language by party, Soviet, Comsomol, trade union activists and intelligentsia of L.S.S.R.* But a careful reading of these documents shows that parity principle here is only a fiction. Logics is quite clear: the

newcomers (Russian speaking) heads must know the Latvian language, but local 'upper' managers ought to master the Russian language. But even in the circumstances of the Stalinist regime the nomenklatura by some sixth sense determined which resolutions should be fulfilled and which could be left on paper.

Let us use the data of Jelgava town. Here, the question about studying the Russian and the Latvian languages was discussed at the city committee's bureau on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1944. The decision practically reproduced the text of the corresponding documents of the Central Committee. After two months the bureau came to conclusion that the study of both languages is unsatisfactory. Nevertheless 164 persons studied the Russian language in 10 groups, but for the study of the Latvian language they managed to form only one group of 25 persons, from which only 5-7 persons attended the classes regularly (Салениеце 2001b: 243-244).

Many facts witness the recognition of the priority of the Russian language and the secondary role of the Latvian language in the sphere of education. For example, the number of hours envisaged in post-war study plans for learning the Russian language at Latvian school, beginning with the second form, there were no less than 4 hours a week. But in Russian schools for learning the Latvian language there were no more than 3 hours a week. In 1946 CC of LC(b)P authorised People's Commissariat of Education of LSSR and School Department of CC to develop "a unified study plan for Latvian and Russian schools according to RSFSR school programmes, taking into consideration the study of history and geography of Latvia, and also the study of the Russian language in Latvian schools and the Latvian language in Russian schools", what was done. In 1949 the decision of CC of LC(b)P stated that the improvement of teaching the Russian language in Latvian schools gives the possibility starting with the next school year "to start teaching the Russian literature at these schools in the

Russian language, but in seven-years schools to introduce the teaching of the Russian language according to the programme for non-Russian schools of RSFSR”. Readiness of Ministry of Education functioners already in summer 1949 allowed to approve the study plans which envisaged separate studies of the Russian language and the Russian literature at Latvian secondary schools, that together made 6 hours a week (compare: for studying the Latvian language and literature there was 1,5 times less time – 4 hours a week) (Saleniece 2003: 305).

Among important measures in preparing schools of Latvia for the school year 1945/46 the corresponding decision of the CC bureau of LC(b)P in a separate point states “To oblige People’s Commissariat of Education (comr. Strazdin) to organize in Riga a boarding school for the children of regional party and soviet employees who do not know the Latvian language and do not have a possibility on the spot to send their children to Russian schools”. A little bit later there will be even more radical decision about allowing children of military men not to study the Latvian language. Especially touching this concern about children whose native language is Russian seems on the background of compulsory change of schools of other nationalities to the Russian language (sometimes –Latvian) of teaching. It happened in 1948 when the LSSR schools with the Lithuanian, Polish and other languages of teaching finished their existence (Салениеце 2001a: 134-140). At the same time they declared from the tribunes: „In our country the most progressive state formation was created where the national question and the problem of the cooperation between the nations have been solved much better than in any other multinational state”.

Already in the 1940ies among the newly opened schools the Russian schools were predominant, but since the 1950ies when intensive industrialization began in Latvia and migration grew, the growth of the number of schools with the Russian

language of teaching became very fast. Table No 2 reflects the ethnic composition of population in Latvia and the number of schools and pupils according to the language of teaching in 1994.

**Table No 2. Schools in post-Soviet Latvia, 1994**

Nationality	1994				
	population	percent	number of schools	number of pupils	percent
Latvians	1391469	54.2	641	160881	49.2
Russians	849245	31.1	221	123933	37.9
Byelorussians	105131	4.1	-	-	-
Jews	13325	0.5	1	476	0.1
Germans	2349	0.1	-	-	-
Poles	57209	2.2	4	360	0.1
Others	238137	5.8	135 (incl. mixed)	41384	12.6
Total	2656865	100	1002	327025	100

I. Saleniece. Sources: Data supplied by the Ministry of Education, Latvia, 1994

Relatively small number of schools with the Russian language of teaching is explained by the fact that the main mass of new-comers went to work and settled in towns where schools were created meant for a large number of pupils. One can see that the percentage of Russians among the population of Latvia was lower than the percentage of pupils in schools with the Russian language of teaching. It means that such schools were also attended by children of other nationalities, including Latvians.

But it would be wrong to say that the aim of those in power was the concern about the fate of the Russian language and Russians. Especially taking into consideration that after the Second World War one can see ‘different’ Russians in Latvia:

- ‘local’ Russians, who have lived in Latvia since birth before 1940 and their descendants;
- arrived in Latvia after 1940 and their descendants.

The present paper makes use of the materials of the oral history collection of Daugavpils University (abbreviated – DU MV) that was initiated in 2001 and contains about 700 records of life stories of the inhabitants of Eastern Latvia who were born from 1900 to 1950. The collection produces memories of people of diverse ethnical and religious backgrounds (including Russians belonging both to Orthodox and Old Believer confessions), social status, and education level. The purpose of these sources is to sustain the life story of a concrete person that has been related by him or herself, and to reclaim the information that is contained in the interview. Using of these sources make possible to clarify identity of narrators. Further citations of the sources will be indicated by abbreviated designation of the collection and the file number of the recorded interview.

Informants usually did not directly declare themselves as “Latvians”, “Russians”, “Poles”, “Byelorussians”, etc. or “Lutherans”, “Catholics”, “Russian Orthodox”, “Old Believers”, etc. However, the life stories clearly reveal the belonging of the narrators to an ethnic group and religious confession, the awareness of the realia of the life of the religious group, acceptance of the respective values.

Whatever their ethnic origin they shows very clear features of local identity and usually very carefully separate the ‘local people’ from all others and mention examples of friendly coexistence of representatives of different nationalities and confessions within this community. However, the ‘local people’ do not constitute a homogeneous mass – the respondents pick out differences of diverse nationalities and religious confessions preferring their own nationality and confession for the formation of closer relations with people. Belonging to the ‘local’ group of people is clearly manifested in the communication with ‘alien’, e.g. with those coming from the Soviet Union starting with 1940 (Saleniece 2004; Saleniece 2005; Салениеце 2007). Latvia’s Russians didn’t identify themselves with ‘them’, ‘aliens’ – representatives of Soviet (‘Russian’) power :

*[...] I am Russian and all that, but I can’t forgive **them** for deporting people. **They** destroyed so many people, numberless... [DU MV: 5]<sup>1</sup>*

*Then **these Russians** regarded that they [narrator’s brothers] went there [to Germany during World War II to forced labour] voluntarily and they were forced to the Urals. And they spent three years in Russia [...] They returned so thin. [DU MV: 223]<sup>2</sup>*

During the Soviet period, under the impact of ‘alien’ a part of the local population was changed taking over the ‘alien’ values and acting against the neighbours. Especially Russians (especially new-comers) were used for instilling

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<sup>1</sup> [...] я русская, и все, но за то, что они вывозили людей, я им простить не могу. Они столько людей погубили, не сосчитать... [DU MV: 5]

<sup>2</sup> Тогда **эти русские** [выделено мной – И.С.] посчитали, что они [братья рассказчицы] ездили добровольно туда [в Германию на работы] и их на Урал заперли. И три года были в России [...] Приехали такие тощие. [DU MV: 223]

communist ideology, they were the instrument of party decisions, but Russification was the means with the help of which the communist party hoped to strengthen the existing social-political order. Teaching of the Russian language at schools with the Latvian language of teaching was considered as the task having “the most important political significance”, because it had to be implemented “according to comrade Stalin’s teaching in the questions of linguistics”. In other case the teachers “...make many mistakes of methodological and political character at the lessons. Not knowing the language and elementary questions of theory leads to gross exaggerations in the analysis of the classics of Soviet literature”, so it happened in 1951 in Daugavpils Secondary Schools No1 and No3. City party committee had to oblige City Department of Education “to dismiss the guilty teachers, and also to solve the question about the possibility to use them further as teachers in city schools”. The most important thing was to secure teachers’ and pupils’ following the official directives and recognized stereotypes (Салениеце 2001b: 246).

It is very difficult to distinguish the protest of Latvian population against Sovietization and Russification, they merged together, but in both cases the idea of preserving national features of Latvians was propounded. The forms of protest were the actions of dissidents, till 1959 – the opposition of national communists, but the most representative – passive opposition of the intellectuals, especially creative workers. After the plenary session of creative associations of Latvia in 1988, in the situation of “glasnost” the condemnation of Sovietization and Russification became of mass character. „Local” Russians supported this demands:

*This was... in [19]91. They said that Latvia would be independent. It was occupied, and now it will be independent! [...] Anton [narrator’s husband] was in the garden but I was at home. The radio was on. I was*

*shouting, “Come home, look, Latvia has come!” [The anthem] “Dievs, svētī Latviju” sounded afterwards. Was it so? We thought we would be well off like we were before during the times of Latvia... If it were in the times of Ulmanis, then probably we would live so. [DU MV: 114]<sup>3</sup>*

Testimonies like this show that during the years of independent Latvia (1918-1940), as a result of national policy, first of all – compulsory general free basic education, the Russian people of Latvia started to form a national identity that marks the relation between the human and state. Whatever their ethnic origin, the young people who grew up in Latvia of the 1920-30s observed in their actions the demands and practices of the Latvian (military service in the army of the Republic of Latvia, involvement in civil society organizations, etc.). In diverse situations they showed love for homeland, honouring state symbols and celebrating state festivals. Usually they are speaking Latvian enthusiastically.

In the course of time they felt uncomfortable when fighters for ‘Latvia for Latvians’ did not separate ‘Russian’ and ‘Soviet’ and blamed Russians in the crimes of Soviet regime. In discussions not always one managed to keep the reasonable limits and often the global accusations fell on the heads of subjectively innocent ‘Russians’ – this is the way how deeply rooted Sovietization manifest itself with its intolerance and eternal search for the ‘enemy’. Although, as a rule, when one spoke about acquaintances-Russians, even extreme nationals were not consequent: “he is not to be counted, he is a good man”.

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<sup>3</sup> *Это в... девяносто первом году. Был разговор, что Латвия будет независимой. Она же была оккупирована, а тут будет независимая! [...] Антон [муж рассказчицы] был в огороде, а я дома. Радио говорит. Кричу: «Иди домой, смотри, Латвия пришла». [Гимн] «Dievs, svētī Latviju» – потом [заиграли]. Разве так было? Думали, будем жить богато, как раньше, при Латвии. ... Если бы при том Ульманисе, так, может быть, так и жили бы. [DU MV: 114]*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Russians experienced a loss of their former privileges in Latvia, including language hegemony. Some of Russians returned to Russia, but mostly they stayed in Latvia as loyal inhabitants. They needed to learn the Latvian language if they want to get a job at state institutions. Many of them started to think about future of their childrens in independent Latvia. Both Latvian state policy and free choice of parents provided growing number of Latvian schools in Latvia as reflected in Table No 3.

**Table No 3. Schools in Latvia, 2008**

Nationality	population	percent	number of pupils	percent
Latvians	1 345 100	59.2	184 107	73.4
Russians	638 400	28.0	65 402	26.0
Byelorussians	83 700	3.6		
Poles	54 100	2.3		
Ukrainians	57 200	2.5		
Others	97 700	4.4	1 432 (including pupils of Polish, Jewish, Ukrainian and Lithuanian schools)	0.6
Total	2 276 200	100	250 941	100

I. Saleniece. Sources: Data supplied by the Ministry of Education, Latvia, 2008

Russification in Latvia did not succeed, but the harm done by it (especially in combination with Sovietization) turned out to be two-sided: Latvians, many of whom personally or through their parents lived through repressions, are not ready to discuss

these questions academically, for them it is still non-theoretical suffering that cries for requital. Secondly, part of Russian-speaking population brought up on feeling of personal superiority, as a rule, unconfirmed by nothing else as belonging to the army of ‘builders of communism’, still are not ready to be reconciled with the loss of linguistic privileges and wait for the retaliation. The attitude of Russians in Latvia adopt towards the Latvian language can serve as a criterion of how ready they are to accept a view that there exist cultural differences for the nations in the former Soviet Union, and they themselves are not a privileged group of the population, but one of ethnic minorities of the Republic of Latvia. This situation is also test for Latvians.

In the states of the former Soviet Union where the attitude of intolerance to people of different opinions has prevailed for decades is rather difficult to reach and bring into existence an understanding that ethnic and other differences should not make an obstacles to mutual understanding and cooperation. That is why there still exists some tension in the relationships between the core nation and Russian speaking population. One should view everything from the point of view of time distance, in order to be able to have unprejudiced discussion of the mentioned problems, which could become the basis of the harmonization of relations between Latvians and ‘Soviet’ Russians in Latvia.

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