

Russian-Speakers in Latvia

Russian-speakers in Latvia have been a group that has directly influenced many facets of internal and external policy.¹ From integration policy to EU- and NATO-accession processes, from language policy to citizenship regulation, from education policy to bilateral and regional geopolitical conundrums, the presence of a sizeable Russian-speaking population has also presented Latvia's policy makers with a difficult list of choices, some made only as a result of international pressure. Moreover, language use has been a central aspect in societal and political divisions. This overview seeks to cast a light on who are – and who are not – Russian-speakers in Latvia. It will provide an insight in the data² on ethnic composition, mother tongue and language use in the day-to-day activities. Second, it details the main themes and discussions surrounding this group.

Throughout this overview, the term "Russian-speakers" is employed consistently. Due to the data primarily utilizing this category, it may not always be feasible to differentiate between various sub-groups within this category across all dimensions discussed. It's important to note that some studies may use alternative terms such as "non-Latvians," exclusively reference Russians, or focus solely on Russian-speaking individuals.

History: National Minorities and Immigration

Several distinct ethnic groups that primarily use the Russian language in their daily interactions have a long history of residence within the territory that now constitutes modern-day Latvia. In the 1930s, ethnic Russians comprised approximately 9% of Latvia's total population. They were predominantly concentrated in the Latgale region, and approximately 14% of the Russian population resided in Riga. A similar geographical distribution pattern was observed among other communities, including Poles and Belarusians. During the interwar period, the Russian community in Latvia enjoyed cultural and religious autonomy. This period also featured a higher degree of religious freedom compared to the conditions in Soviet Russia. Moreover, numerous Russian-language schools were established across Latvia during this era (Muižnieks, 2006).

Ethnicity	1935		1959		1989		2013		2023	
Latvians	1467035	77%	1297881	62%	1387757	52%	1237463	61%	1175902	62%
Russians	168266	9%	556448	27%	905515	34%	530419	26%	445612	24%
Belarusian	26803	1%	61587	3%	119702	4%	70273	3%	55929	3%
Ukrainian	1844	0%	29440	1%	92101	3%	46335	2%	56675	3%

Table 1: Population by ethnicity at the beginning of year 1935 – 2023.

Source: Central Statistics Bureau, https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IR_IRE/IRE010/.

¹ For an extensive analysis of the role of Russian minority, see "Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions" by Nils Muižnieks (2006),

https://www.szf.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/szf_faili/Petnieciba/sppi/lat_un_starp/latvian-russian_relations_final%281%29.pdf.

² It must be noted that most surveys of popular opinion in Latvia only question nationals of Latvia (citizens and non-citizens), and not people holding residence permits. Members of Russian-speaking communities could have either legal status, and it may change over time.

However, due to various factors, including forced migration during the Second World War and labor immigration promoted during the Soviet occupation, there was a notable shift in the ethnic composition of Latvia. As indicated by the data presented in Table 1, the percentage of individuals belonging to ethnic groups that used Russian as their primary language of daily communication experienced a significant increase, reaching approximately 42% in the late 1980s. This figure combines individuals from various backgrounds, including Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, who were among the most common immigrant categories during that period. During this time, Riga and Latvia as a whole attracted a substantial number of highly skilled professionals, particularly those with expertise in engineering and technical fields, often employed in the industrial and military sectors. Rozenvalds (2013) has proposed that this influx of skilled labor influenced their perception of social self-sufficiency and their level of influence within society.

Over the past three decades since Latvia regained its independence, the primary source countries for immigrants to Latvia have consistently been Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. However, there have been notable shifts in recent years. The proportion of individuals holding temporary residence permits from Ukraine has increased significantly due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which led to an influx of Ukrainian civilians seeking temporary protection. Additionally, immigration from Russia has been restricted, leading to changes in the characteristics of new arrivals. It's worth mentioning that the majority of permanent residence permit holders in Latvia hold Russian citizenship, often acquired at some point in the past 30 years, and have been long-term residents of Latvia, with many having spent most of their lives in the country.

Country	Temporary residence permits	Permanent residence permits
Russia	8525 17%	39600 83%
Ukraine	19852 40%	2818 6%
Belarus	2553 5%	1899 4%
All non-EU countries	49958	47895

Table 2: All residence permits by nationality as of 01.07.2023.
Source: Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs.

The majority of Russian-speakers who currently reside in Latvia arrived during Soviet occupation or are descendants of Soviet-time migrants, they are classified as people with migration background; at the same time, ethnic Russians are also the largest national minority of Latvia – but only citizens of Latvia have the [status of a national minority](#), while others identifying with this nationality can benefit from the support provided.³ Approximately two-thirds of non-Latvian ethnic groups are of Russian descent. However, Russian is also spoken by other ethnic communities, including Ukrainians, Belarusians, and various other minority groups.

³ At the same time, some people who were citizens of Latvia, gave up their Latvian citizenship for that of Russia, and are now permanent residents. Their status as a national minority is thus debatable.

Citizenship and residence

One of the fundamental factors that defines the situation of Russian-speakers in Latvia is their legal status and citizenship. The application of the 'legal continuity' doctrine after Latvia regained independence significantly influenced the country's citizenship policy. Citizenship was reinstated for interwar citizens and their direct descendants in 1991. However, those who didn't meet the criteria for automatic citizenship, numbering approximately 740,000 people, the majority of whom were Russian-speakers, were effectively left without any legal status until 1994. During this period, the Citizenship and Immigration Department was highly selective and often denied registration to these individuals, perceiving them as closely associated with the still-present Russian Army on Latvian territory. This engendered profound distrust in the Latvian state's institutions. The Citizenship Law of 1994 introduced a naturalization schedule for those ineligible for automatic citizenship, implemented between 1996 and 2003, which required individuals to pass tests in Latvian language, history, and the constitution to gain citizenship (Muižnieks 2006).

The legal status of non-citizens was regulated by the "The Status of Those Former USSR Citizens Who Do Not Have Citizenship of Latvia or Any Other State" law adopted in April 1995. Non-citizen status provided permanent residence but excluded voting rights and access to civil service positions. Despite an extensive naturalization campaign, the number of non-citizens who pursued naturalization fell short of expectations. Even today, intentions to seek naturalization are low, with only 6% of non-citizens from national minorities indicating plans to pursue naturalization in the coming year. Reasons for this reluctance include insufficient knowledge of the Latvian language and lack of motivation (Muižnieks 2006, Mierīņa et al 2017). The number of non-citizens declined from 740,000 in 1995 to 418,000 in 2006, 232,000 in 2016, and 175,000 in 2023 (CSB, 2023). This reduction was due not only to naturalization but also to emigration, mortality, and the acceptance of citizenship from other countries, primarily Russia but also Belarus and Ukraine.

Furthermore, when devising the 2013 amendments to the Citizenship Law regarding dual citizenship, a central argument was made for limiting dual citizenship to member states of the EU/EFTA, NATO, Brazil, Australia, and New Zealand—countries where the Latvian diaspora resides. Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were excluded. In parliamentary debates, this decision was justified by security concerns and fears of disloyalty.

In the 2000s and 2010s, individuals opting for Russian, Belarusian, or Ukrainian citizenship did so for practical and financial reasons. These countries had significantly lower retirement ages, allowing individuals to qualify for pensions earlier, while still retaining access to social support and healthcare in Latvia as permanent residents without having to pass a language test. Amendments to the Immigration Law in 2022, in response to perceived security threats from Russia, stipulated that Russian citizens who had obtained permanent residence permits and were formerly Latvian nationals or non-citizens must demonstrate proficiency in Latvian at an A2 level by September 1, 2023. This affected approximately 25,000 Russian citizens. Exemptions were granted to those over 75 or with severe health issues, as well as those who had received their education in Latvian. This introduced not only a language proficiency test for Russian citizens in Latvia but also tested the capacity of state institutions to process

applications and conduct language assessments. Subsequently, amendments allowed for a retake of the test after the initial deadline. Initial results of the exams indicated that many test-takers did not pass in the first round. On September 14, 2023, the Parliament voted to permit those who did not pass the language test to remain in Latvia with a temporary residence permit for an additional two years, providing them with an opportunity to either pass the language test and resubmit their documents or arrange their departure. A public proposal to lower the age for exemptions to 65 was rejected by the parliament. The discussions surrounding this regulation have once again underscored the significance of knowledge of the Latvian language as an indicator of integration.

Knowledge of the Latvian Language and Asymmetrical Bilingualism

One of the main societal cleavages in Latvia is characterized by the language used in daily communication. While ethnicity, a category mainly institutionalized during the Soviet era, may be seen as a defining factor in Latvian society and is politically charged, Muižnieks (2008) contends that linguistic division is equally, if not more, significant. With the influx of Russian-speaking residents during the Soviet regime, Russian became the de facto language of communication. This resulted in a situation of asymmetrical bilingualism where Russian predominated in official communication, with Latvian remaining the titular language. Consequently, learning Russian was necessary for ethnic Latvians, but this did not encourage newcomers to learn Latvian during that period. Moreover, the Soviet regime did not promote local integration and instead favored cosmopolitanism. As a result, organized opportunities for learning Latvian were scarce (Muižnieks 2006). This historical context led to the prevalence of asymmetric bilingualism, as evidenced by the 1989 Soviet census, where 68.7 percent of Latvians claimed proficiency in Russian, while only 22.3 percent of Russians claimed knowledge of Latvian. The figures were even lower for Belarusians and Ukrainians. Many members of non-Russian minorities adopted Russian as their native language: in 1989, this was the case for 64.7 percent of Belarusians, 49.3 percent of Ukrainians, and 54.2 percent of Poles. Just before independence, more than one million "Russian-speakers" [sic] out of a population of 2.6 million did not speak Latvian (Muižnieks 2006: 13-14). The repercussions of this historical context are still evident in the language proficiency and usage among Latvia's residents.

However, despite this situation, the state and municipalities have not provided sufficient opportunities for Latvian language learning, especially for adults. Latvian citizens or non-citizens who were registered as unemployed or jobseekers could attend Latvian language classes at the State Employment Agency. There were sporadic language courses for those seeking naturalization, and third-country nationals had limited access to language classes, funded by EU funds, starting in the mid-2000s. The lack of language learning opportunities was identified early on. In 2000, 59% of non-citizens cited the main obstacle to naturalization as their inability to pass the language test. This should have prompted intensified language training. However, even today, available slots in language classes are scarce and are filled within hours (Šūpule et al 2014). Furthermore, when former non-citizens accepted Russian, Belarusian, or Ukrainian citizenship between 2007 and 2014 to qualify for early retirement and pension, more than 20 thousand individuals no longer qualified for language courses for non-

citizens, instead attending courses intended for third-country nationals. Simultaneously, in 2014, immigration began to rise, intensifying competition for spots in language classes.

Nevertheless, improvements in language proficiency have been observed over time. In the 1989 census, only 22% of Russian-speakers claimed to have a command of Latvian, but by 2000, this figure had increased to 53%. The percentage of Russian speakers with no knowledge of Latvian at all also declined from 22% in 1996 to 12% in 2003 (Muižnieks 2006), and it has remained at that level to date. According to a 2017 survey of national minorities in Latvia, among those whose native language is not Latvian, 69% assessed their Latvian language skills as average, good, or very good. Among younger respondents (aged 15-44), over 80% considered their Latvian skills as average, good, or very good. Among those aged 65 and older, 30% possessed basic knowledge of Latvian, and 14% had no knowledge of Latvian at all. Among Russian-speakers, who constituted 78% of the survey's respondents, Latvian language proficiency was lower than among other national minorities (Mieriņa et al 2017). In 2023, when Russian citizens wishing to retain their permanent residence status in Latvia were required to pass Latvian language exams at an A2 level, more than 60% of test-takers failed on their first attempt (VISC 2023).

Furthermore, among the younger generation, knowledge of Latvian has not been self-evident. After regaining independence, support continued for Russian-language schools and other schools providing instruction in languages of national minorities. Notably, during the Soviet period, nearly all national minorities attended Russian-language schools, and separate schools were established in the early 1990s (Muižnieks 2006: 18). There were gradual reforms to increase Latvian language instruction in all minority schools, but the results varied due to varying levels of commitment and teacher proficiency in Latvian. On September 29, 2022, the Saeima passed amendments to the Law on Education and the Law on General Education, mandating the transition to education exclusively in Latvian within three years. The 2023/2024 school year marks the first time when 1st, 4th, and 7th grades will receive instruction solely in Latvian, even in minority schools. Subjects related to minority language and culture remain unaffected.

Language knowledge alone is insufficient; it must also be actively spoken. Approximately half of national minorities use Latvian on a daily basis. Some cite a lack of necessity, while others attribute their reluctance to not knowing the language well enough and fearing mistakes. Russian-speakers exhibit the least favorable attitudes toward speaking Latvian compared to other national minorities. Most Latvian language use occurs when interacting with state and municipal institutions, rather than when receiving services (e.g., healthcare) or in informal settings. Even at work, Russian is employed as frequently as Latvian. Notably, the use of Latvian has shown minimal change, with increases primarily occurring in educational institutions and among the younger generation (Mierina et al 2017).

The limited proficiency in Latvian had adverse consequences on the employment prospects of non-Latvians, particularly during the 1990s. Concurrently, the industries predominantly employing Russian-speakers, such as manufacturing and military-related research in Latvia, essentially collapsed (Hazans 2010). Consequently, the transformation of both the socio-

linguistic and socio-economic fabric of society had a detrimental impact on the Russian-speaking community. This left discernible imprints on their income, employment rates, and access to opportunities, including unemployment assistance. Over time, in many sectors, the "ethnic gap" in employment has diminished. Hazans contends that this evolution has also contributed to the development of Latvian language skills through social interactions in the workplace.

The Russian-language information sphere poses a significant challenge to the integration of Russian-speakers, as highlighted by Zelče and Ardava (2016). The widespread popularity of Russian TV channels has raised security concerns for Latvia, given their frequent dissemination of biased and inaccurate information. This includes content related to the treatment of minorities in Latvia, the roles of the EU and NATO, and justifications for Russia's political actions and aggression in Ukraine. Although Russian TV channels also have viewers among ethnic Latvians, they are the primary source of information for over 90% of Russian-speaking individuals. In contrast, the utilization of Latvian-language sources is limited, and there is a shortage of content produced in Russian by Latvian media outlets. The impact of Russian TV channels became even more pronounced and relevant following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Consequently, on June 5, 2022, the National Council of Electronic Media (NEPLP) made the decision to prohibit the distribution of 80 television channels registered in Russia, which were accessible to Latvian audiences.

Language also significantly influences cultural consumption patterns. Although there are relatively few substantial disparities in preferences among different linguistic groups, the availability of books, music, and films in the Russian language is considerably greater, encompassing productions from both Latvia and abroad.

Integration

The concept of integration in Latvian politics emerged relatively late, specifically in the late 1990s, primarily driven by international pressure to enhance societal unity. In 2001, the National Programme for Integration of the Society was introduced, envisioning integration as a process rooted in a deep understanding of Latvian language, loyalty to Latvia, and shared fundamental values (Muižnieks, 2006). Since then, Latvian language and culture have been regarded as the foundational elements of integration within the framework of Latvian state policies. This perspective enjoys widespread support among ethnic Latvians, with over 90% endorsing this approach. However, emphasizing the importance of the Latvian language has encountered resistance from Russian-speaking communities, who perceive it as an assimilation effort. Approximately 43% of ethnic Russians and 60% of individuals from other ethnic backgrounds endorse this approach (Rozenvalds, 2013). Birka (2013, 2023) argues that focusing solely on language and culture cannot achieve genuine integration, allowing Latvian and Russian-speaking communities to coexist separately within their linguistic and cultural domains.

One key issue is the lack of dialogue and mutual understanding regarding the objectives of integration policies and support activities. This deficit means that integration support initiatives emphasizing language and culture might inadvertently lead to alienation rather than fostering

unity. Analysts have observed that civic values could serve as a more suitable common ground to promote societal cohesion, complementing efforts to enhance Latvian language and culture (Zepa, 2011; Rozenvalds, 2013). Additionally, the reliance on project-based funding has resulted in sporadic integration support activities, that are not reflected in the priorities of the national budget. Consequently, while there is a strong sense of belonging among the population, there is also a notable degree of political and civic apathy.

Belonging

A strong sense of belonging and shared identity is prevalent among national minorities. According to a 2017 survey of national minorities, 84% expressed a sense of belonging to Latvia, marking a notable increase from 67% in 2015. Additionally, 86% felt a connection to their city, while 82% identified with their neighborhood. These figures closely resemble the sentiments expressed by ethnic Latvians. Interestingly, 21% of national minorities reported a sense of belonging to Russia, representing a decrease from 28% in 2015. This trend was consistent among both ethnic Russians and other national minorities. The study revealed that global identities were not a common characteristic among Latvian national minorities. Instead, ethnic identity was equally prominent, particularly among Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews, with over 80% identifying strongly with their ethnicity (Mieriņa et al., 2017).

Furthermore, when asked about the extent of their shared commonality, 76% of ethnic Russians in Latvia believed they had much in common with ethnic Latvians in Latvia. In contrast, only 56% of ethnic Latvians expressed the same sentiment about ethnic Russians (Providus, 2021). This finding suggests an opportunity to broaden the scope of integration support initiatives, with an emphasis on strengthening ties within local and regional communities.

Civic life

Simultaneously, civic and political engagement among national minorities, including Russian speakers, has been comparatively lower when contrasted with the local population. Frequently, they perceive themselves as having limited influence on decision-making and legislative processes, expressing skepticism about the effectiveness of consultative councils (Brands-Kehris, 2010). In Latvia, there exist approximately 460 national minority NGOs, but only around a hundred of them are actively engaged. These organizations primarily focus on preserving and safeguarding specific cultural aspects, with some also engaging in advocacy and representation. Interestingly, despite the significant presence of ethnic Russians in Latvia, only about 13% of actively participating national minority organizations are led by ethnic Russians. To provide a comparison, a similar percentage of NGOs are led by ethnic Belarusians, and 10% by Ukrainians (Mieriņa et al., 2017). Considering the varying representation of ethnic groups within the Russian-speaking population, the relatively consistent number of active NGOs may indicate divergent objectives and perceptions regarding the preservation of culture and language.

Participation in elections among national minorities is relatively high, with 73% of eligible respondents indicating their involvement in parliamentary elections and 76% in municipal elections. The participation rates among ethnic Russians are slightly lower, but still substantial at 70% and 74%, respectively (Mieriņa et al.). However, despite their electoral engagement,

national minorities continue to feel marginalized in influencing parliamentary and governmental decisions. A growing sense of political and civic apathy among Russian-speakers has been documented in a 2023 PROVIDUS study. This apathy is not solely due to their skepticism about their capacity to influence policy-making and their lack of trust in institutions, but also stems from a perception of limited freedom in expressing their views and opinions (only 23% of Russian-speakers feel they can do so freely). Their participation in NGOs remains low, often attributed to language barriers and the use of different information channels to engage potential participants (Providus, 2023).

The Russian-speaking community has mobilized around key issues, such as the lead-up to the 2012 referendum on Latvia's official language (in which only 24.8% voted for Russian as a second official language) and protests against reforms in the education system requiring more teaching in Latvian. The most recent protests occurred in 2018 and were followed by a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) alleging discrimination and limited access to education. As of September 14, 2023, the ECHR had deemed the complaint unfounded.

In recent years, there have also been protests and public initiatives by Russian-speakers seeking to distinguish themselves from the prevailing image of the Russian-speaking community in Latvian society. For instance, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a public statement was issued by Latvia's Russian-speakers condemning the war. They emphasized that not all Russian-speakers or Russian citizens in Latvia supported Kremlin's actions and policies, urging members of their community to refrain from celebrating May 9th and to seek out objective media sources (LSM, 2022). This statement drew criticism from both within the Russian-speaking community and the wider society.

Different interpretation of historical events

Living within the framework of asymmetrical bilingualism during the Soviet occupation also had a lasting impact on how various ethnic groups perceived themselves in Latvian society even after the nation regained its independence. Many Russian-speaking immigrants experienced significant shifts in their identity, including alterations in their legal, political, employment, and social standing. Furthermore, Latvian language and history remained unfamiliar to many minority groups, whereas among ethnic Latvians, these elements remained integral to rebuilding their statehood. Importantly, recent arrivals often lacked knowledge of significant periods in Latvian history (Kaprāns & Zelče, 2011).

The resurgence of nationalism in Russia and the messaging disseminated by Russian-language media about Russia's role in World War II also influenced the perspectives of Russian-speakers in Latvia (ibid). When assessing various historical epochs, national minorities, particularly Russian-speakers, express the highest regard for the Soviet period, with 71% considering it positive or nearly positive. This view is even more pronounced among Russian-speakers. In contrast, only 30% and 27% of national minorities hold positive opinions about the period between the world wars and the Awakening period (Atmoda), respectively. Although the positive assessment of the post-1991 era has increased, reaching approximately 44% among all national minorities in 2017, fewer Russian-speakers regarded it as favorable (Mieriņa et al).

The limited understanding, especially among Russian-speaking national minorities, of the historical significance of these periods for ethnic Latvians has led to societal tensions, particularly during celebrations or commemorations of historical events. Prominent dates such as May 9th, celebrated as Victory Day in Russia, have been used to mobilize national minorities and create polarization within society. The destruction of the 1985 monument dedicated to "the liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga" in the summer of 2022 may result in changes in how such commemorative events are publicly expressed.

European values

A study conducted in 2020 to explore the value orientations of Russian-speaking individuals in Latvia revealed that 73% of them endorse European values, and 65% identify themselves as Europeans. While 70% of the respondents express satisfaction with Latvia's European Union (EU) membership, only 32% express contentment with its NATO membership. Notably, individuals who align with European values tend to exhibit more progressive attitudes on various fronts, including anti-discrimination measures, immigration policies, recognition of same-sex partnerships, adherence to the rule of law, and other related aspects. Furthermore, a substantial 88% of all survey participants expressed support for the right to receive education in one's mother tongue (Spektr, SKDS, 2020). These findings suggest that the endorsement of European values among Latvia's residents, including Russian-speakers, could potentially serve as a unifying factor promoting societal cohesion, as previously suggested.

Conclusion

Russian-speakers comprise a substantial portion of Latvia's population, and the issues related to their integration into Latvian society have persisted for the past three decades, gaining more prominence due to regional geopolitical shifts. While there has been some progress in improving Latvian language proficiency, particularly among the younger generation, the promotion of Latvian as the primary language for daily communication continues to face obstacles. Both Russian-speakers and non-citizens harbor feelings of resentment towards the Latvian state and exhibit skepticism towards state institutions, resulting in a perception of limited influence in shaping policies. On the other side, Latvians still identify Russian-speakers with their painful historical experience of occupation and Russification. The root cause of existing tensions in Latvian society lies in the absence of constructive dialogue between linguistic and ethnic groups. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, a noteworthy portion of national minorities, including Russian-speakers, express a sense of attachment to Latvia and their local communities. Latvia's integration policy objectives demonstrate a readiness to address these challenges, emphasizing the need for innovative and inclusive approaches that foster dialogue and extend beyond a narrow focus on language and culture.

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