

Latvia: Language and minority rights



Latvia's Russian community demonstrates against the new education law which severely restricts teaching in the Russian language in the country's schools. Riga, 1st September, 2004

Introduction

During the whole period of so-called democratic “transition” in Eastern Europe, minority rights have been a growth industry for international human rights activists. They have received special attention in the Balkans, where minorities have been at the heart of international involvement in the region since the treaty of Versailles. In Macedonia, in Romania and in Serbia the issue of minority rights - especially the right to education in the minority mother tongue - has frequently been at the forefront of political debate. So great is the importance attached to them, indeed, that in the case of Serbia, the changing of the school history curriculum in Kosovo in 1989 to include more Serbian history, and less of the history of neighbouring Albania, was seriously advanced as one of the *casus belli* for the Albanian uprising ten years later. In Macedonia, from 2000, the failure of the Macedonian state to recognise the freelance, Albanian-language University of Tetovo was also given as a reason for starting an armed rebellion – a rebellion which was tolerated and perhaps even encouraged by the international community. By the same token, in Bosnia, the scrupulous respect of language rights has become a key demand, especially where the provision of media outlets and schools in “Bosnian”, “Croat” and “Serb” is concerned - even though these are all variants of the same language, Serbo-Croat. The same is also true of other parts of East Central Europe, notably in countries like Slovakia which have large Hungarian and gypsy minorities, where minority rights have also often been on the political agenda.

It is surprising, therefore, that Latvia, an EU and NATO member state, has been able to introduce a radical “reform” of its education system, the main effect of which will be to reduce drastically the amount of teaching in the Russian language in schools. This is in spite of the fact that Russian speakers make up well over one third of the population of Latvia, and constitute probably the largest minority in Europe (in percentage terms). A law, passed in 1998, came into force on 1st September 2004: its main provision is to require all minority language schools to teach 60% of their classes in Latvian, whereas they currently teach 100% of their classes in Russian or another minority language. Many Russians in Latvia fear that the purpose of this measure is to make them feel unwelcome in their own country, or to cause them to assimilate and become “ethnic” Latvians. Both of these policies would be quite incompatible with the standards required of other post-communist states. BHHRG visited Latvia as well as to neighbouring Estonia, where a watered-down version of the same law is being introduced to investigate.

Language and citizenship

Historically, Latvia has always been a multinational place. Originally colonised by the Teutonic knights in the 13th century, the territory was first governed by German-speakers. As it fell under Polish, Swedish and then Russian domination – Latvia was incorporated into the Russian empire in 1710, albeit with its Swedish and German feudal lords remaining in place - the languages spoken and taught varied accordingly. The first Russian school in Latvia was opened 250 years ago; Latvian schools opened later. In addition, Latvia was home to Jews, Poles, Estonians and Byelorussians, who often had their own schools too.

When Latvia became an independent state after the First World War, the state education policy of the new country reflected this linguistic diversity and this long multicultural tradition. Citizenship was awarded to people regardless of their ethnic background, and there were schools which taught in Latvian, Russian, German, Yiddish, Polish, Estonian and Byelorussian. The education law of 1919, indeed, said that all citizens of Latvia had the right to be taught in their mother tongue. In 1934, when Prime Minister Karlis Ulmanis dissolved parliament and established a dictatorship, the education system was changed to prevent people from choosing to send their children to a school in a different language category from their mother tongue: Poles could no longer elect to send their children to German schools, for instance, even though they considered the teaching there to be better. Consequently, the number of minority language schools fell after 1934.

From then on, education policy was inevitably influenced by the events surrounding World War II. In 1939, Latvia was secretly incorporated into the Soviet sphere of influence by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and the country became part of the USSR in 1940. Many Baltic Germans were repatriated, and German schools were closed. In 1941, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union and occupied the Baltic States, driving out Jews: Yiddish schools naturally did not survive, but Latvian and Russian ones were left intact. German language teaching was of course intensified. When Latvia was reincorporated into the Soviet Union in 1945, teaching was provided in Latvian, Russian and Polish. Universities taught in both Russian and Latvian. The Latvian schools had 6 periods of Russian language and literature a week. Now there are seven Polish schools (primary and secondary), one Lithuanian one, one Estonian one, two Jewish schools, and of course hundreds teaching in Russian.¹

Latvian minorities

There has been permanent friction with the Russian minority ever since 1991. This friction has got worse over time, even though Latvia has been incorporated into the main Western institutions. This is in spite of the size of the non-Latvian population in Latvia, a fact with which any wise government would surely try to find a civilised accommodation. According to the census carried out in 2000, there were 2,375,339 people in Latvia: 57.6% of them are ethnic Latvians; 29.6% ethnic Russians; 4.1% Belarussians; 2.7% Ukrainians; 2.5% Poles; 1.4% Lithuanians; 0.4% Jews. This means that at least 36.4% of the population is Russophone: someone who is, to all intents and purposes, Russian can be categorised as “Ukrainian” if his family came from there, or as a “Jew”, rather as a purely Anglophone Briton can be “Welsh”, “Scottish” or “Irish”. The true percentage of Russophones may well be higher than this census: because hundreds of thousands of Russians in Latvia are stateless (see below) they cannot emigrate as easily as Latvians. There has been huge emigration from the Baltic States, as the employment situation there has gone from bad to worse. Certainly, Russian is almost universally spoken and BHRG had the impression that many ordinary people were quite happy to speak the language.

¹ These figures, as well as the numbers of pupils in each category of minority school, can be found at <http://www.latinst.lv/multiethnic.htm>

As BHHRG reported in 1998,² the relations between Latvians and Russians have not been good since 1991. In 1998, Russian pensioners protested at the rising cost of living, Waffen SS veterans marched to the Freedom monument in Riga, and a bomb went off near the Russian embassy. These events confirmed that the difficult relations between the various ethnic groups in Latvia had not improved since 1991, when the citizenship issue caused a lot of bad blood. Russian speakers, many of whom came to live in Latvia in Soviet times, voted for independence in 1991, no doubt expecting that Latvia would imitate the other former Soviet republics and offer citizenship to all residents. Tensions rose when instead the Latvian government pursued a vigorous policy of de-Russification, of which the 1989 language law was an early indication: it imposed the use of the Latvian language in all public situations. Latvian was in any case classified as “the state language,” which means that the mother tongue of two-fifths of the population is officially a foreign language. Teaching in Russian in state universities was suppressed, and Russians were obliged to write their names in the Latvian form, e.g. by adding an ‘s’ at the end for men. This can cause offence to Russians, as when the transliteration into Latvian causes their names to appear as obscenities. The hostile attitude of the Latvian state to its Russian residents and citizens is also illustrated by the fact that the Ministry of Education’s web site is available in English, which is not a language indigenous to Latvia, but not in Russian.³

The citizenship law was eventually adopted in 1994, after much debate with the OSCE and the Council of Europe. It gave citizenship automatically to all those who had held it before the war, and to their descendants. But everyone else (with some exceptions) had to apply for naturalisation. They were (and still are) required to pass tests in the Latvian language, and on the country’s constitution and history. In the past, BHHRG has examined the questions put to candidates for citizenship and found them to be difficult, obscure, irrelevant to most contemporary people’s needs, and often implicitly anti-Russian.⁴ Very few people applied for naturalisation: as of 30th September 2004, since the introduction of the procedure, only 84,827 applications have been received, for the naturalisation of 95,359 persons. Of these, only 78,540 have been granted citizenship.⁵

For this and other reasons, 20% of the Latvian population - nearly half a million people - still do not have citizenship.⁶ (The same problem exists in neighbouring Estonia.) In Riga, the percentage of non-citizens is 32%. These people are therefore stateless: they do not have passports from any other country (e.g. Russia). The failure to resolve this issue can only be the result of government policy, and it is clearly an example of discrimination. Citizenship confers numerous political rights, but it also allows people certain material rights, such as the ability to exercise certain professions (working for the government or in the law). It is interesting to note that the Naturalisation Board, the institution within the Latvian state which implements this discriminatory policy, is funded by Freedom House, the American NGO which is supposed to be promoting the values of democracy and citizenship around the world.⁷

The difference is therefore striking between the attitude towards non-Latvian residents of Latvia in 1919, when the independent state was created of which the present one claims to be the successor, and now. The approach is also the very opposite of that which has been adopted by Western democracies which have large linguistic minorities. Although Quebec is famous for having strict rules which promote the use of French, it is in fact a requirement that all non-French speakers in Quebec must be able to communicate with the organs of the state in English if they wish: it in fact remains possible to live in Quebec speaking only English, despite the reluctance of the authorities. In Belgium, the law also

² “Nationalism and citizenship in Latvia”, <http://www.oscewatch.org/CountryReport.asp?CountryID=14>

³ <http://www.izm.gov.lv/>

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<http://www.oscewatch.org/CountryReport.asp?ChapterID=61&CountryID=14&ReportID=11&keyword=>

⁵ http://www.np.gov.lv/en/faili_en/lpp1_angl.doc

⁶ According to the figures provided by the Naturalisation Board, http://www.np.gov.lv/index.php?en=fakti_en&saite=residents.htm

⁷ <http://www.np.gov.lv/index.php?en=>

provides for bilingualism, although Belgium's two composite regions are both aggressively monoglot.

These examples put into context the Latvian government's claim that its education reform is justified because the Latvians simply want to be able to speak their own language throughout their country: it is inconceivable that the slightly more populous Flemings in Belgium would be able to demand that Walloon schools teach 60% of their lessons in Flemish, simply so that they could order a beer in Flemish in a bar in Liège, or that the Anglophones in Canada would require Quebec schools to have 60% of their lessons in English. There are plenty of countries in the world where the national language, for good or ill, is not widely spoken: few people speak Romanian in the Szekely region of Transylvania; few Hungarians in Eastern Slovakia speak Slovak; try ordering a pizza in Gostivar in Macedonian and see what happens. But a state policy in any of those countries which effectively forced people to speak the state language would be regarded as deeply oppressive and intolerant.

V. *The educational reform*

It was as part of this policy of state-sponsored de-Russification that the new education reform was introduced. Its main provision is to insist that 60% of classes in minority language schools be taught in Latvian, i.e. not in the minority language (usually Russian). Such a rule represents a major attack on the principle of having minority schools at all. BHHRG interviewed people on both sides of the debate. The main government spokesman on the reform issue is Sergey Antsupov (Sergeys Ancupovs). Antsupov peddled the usual government line that the citizenship test is easy, and he claimed that there was numerous provision of Russian on the various Latvian state television channels. Antsupov claims that the Latvian government has made a "strategic mistake" by not having enough Russian speakers (like himself) to "explain" government policies to the Russian population. This is a roundabout way of saying that the government is itself overwhelmingly staffed by Latvians, itself anomalous in a country where nearly 40% of the population is Russian-speaking. On closer inspection, the claim that the problem was one of a lack of communication did not really stand up: Antsupov seemed to imply that the fact that the new regulations requiring 60% of teaching in Latvian were being introduced only gradually, at age 16 this year and then progressively for children in lower years, meant that the education reform had somehow been misunderstood by its critics. Yet the fact that a reform is being introduced only year-by-year does not mean that its opponents have not understood that, in a short space of time, Latvia will have closed down huge swathes of teaching in the mother tongue of a very large number of Latvian citizens and taxpayers.

Antsupov claimed that Latvia was developing a "mutinational concept" of education, and that it was very "competitive". He strove to present Latvia as a country in which education could be in English, German or Russian, and said that the level of achievement was higher in multilingual schools. The implication was that children forced to be bilingual in what have hitherto been monoglot Russian schools will do better. This argument would be more convincing if the bilingualism was applied also to Latvian schools, which are the majority, but of course the rules there do not apply. Latvian language schools will remain glumly monoglot under the terms of the new reform. Antsupov said that he was against assimilation, which is what the reform's critics allege is its true purpose, and he also claimed that most schools were ready for the change. This was challenged by other people BHHRG interviewed.

Mr. Antsupov was, for the most part, fluent in the language of political correctness. However, he made something of a slip when the subject of the reform's opponents came up. Upon mention of the name Jakov Pliner (Jakovs Pliners), he replied, "He is not a Russian. He is a Jew!" While this language does indeed reflect the old Soviet habit of categorising Jews as a nationality, and is therefore technically correct (at least according to an old Soviet mindset) Mr. Antsupov's reaction reflects the general government tendency of artificially reducing the numbers of Russophones by hiving off substantial numbers of people into other nationalities (including Ukrainians and Byelorussians, who are in reality Russian-speakers).

Antsupov also seemed to want to denigrate the opposition to the reform by claiming that it was being politically “exploited” by the PCTVL party. But what else is a Russian party in Latvia supposed to do if not defend the interests of Russians? It seems likely that Latvian government officials like Mr. Antsupov are genuinely worried at the size of the grass-roots opposition to the reform, which has indeed garnered the support of a broad cross-section of the population. Indeed, he partially admitted the scale of the problem when he said that it would compromise the authority of the Latvian state itself if it backed down now on the educational reform. He said, “Latvians will revolt if the state abandons the law.”



According to news reports, the crowd at the 1st September demonstration consisted mainly of elderly people - as this photograph shows!

Antsupov claimed that the opponents of the reform actually wanted to provoke conflict. So, to gauge the nature and extent of the opposition, BHHRG attended a big rally organised by the protesters in Riga on the first day of school, 1st September 2004. Reports at the time, for instance in *The Baltic Times*, alleged that the majority of protesters were old, but this was untrue. BHHRG observed people of all ages and social backgrounds, with a predominance of middle-aged professional people – precisely the kind of people who object to their children’s education being tampered with for political reasons. The tone of the meeting was peaceful and scrupulously correct. Speakers insisted that their aim was not to denigrate Latvian culture or language, which they said they respected, but instead to fight for the Russian minority to retain its rights and identity. The customary entertainment was provided – loud rock music - and everyone left peacefully. The deployment of police, however, was totally out of proportion to requirements, with policemen lining the streets every few metres. There seemed absolutely no need for such a massive police presence, and the policemen themselves, who are all ethnic Latvians, seemed determined not to exchange any pleasantries with the protesters.



More 'old people' at the 1st September demonstration

At the same time as the big demonstration was taking place, a counter-demonstration was organised in the centre of the old town of Riga in favour of the reform. It was organised by Antsupov’s wife, and there was a rock concert to encourage people to come along. Nine

men chained themselves to the railings outside the Ministry of Education, in a protest which led to their arrest. They had to appear in court the following morning. BHHRG interviewed one of the men arrested, Gennadi Kotov, shortly after charges had been dismissed at court the next day. A deputy in the Riga town council, Kotov was on hunger strike. He claimed that the arrest and court appearance was intended to intimidate him. Kotov alleged that the purpose of the education reform was to assimilate Russians, and he said that the President of Latvia, Mrs Vaira Vike-Freiberga, had said that if the Russians did not like the way things were done in Latvia, they could go back home. (Were such a statement ever to be made by a Western politician about an ethnic minority, he would be immediately branded a racist.) Kotov claimed that there were already Russian children in Latvia who could not write Russian properly.

Kotov and the other members of the “Headquarters” campaign against the reform had suggested that children boycott their classes on the first day of school, in protest at the reform. Such a strategy seemed doomed to failure, because children simply have to go to school. (Predictably, therefore, the government was able to proclaim the following day that the “empty schools” protest had been a flop.) Kotov then said that the HQ had suggested that children respond to their teachers in Russian, during the classes which were supposed to be in Latvian, but this also seems designed to fizzle out in confusion and futility. Kotov justified such tactics by saying that most teachers were too intimidated to undertake much protest of their own: they feared for their jobs. He also said that the political parties and government in Russia gave the Latvian Russians no help whatever, and that the European institutions, in whom they had placed some hope, were equally unhelpful.



Jakovs Pliners: For Human Rights in a United Latvia deputy in the Seimas (parliament)

BHHRG also interviewed Jakov Pliner, one of the leading opponents of the reform. A former headmaster, Pliner knows his subject. He argued that the education reforms had been introduced with no prior consultation whatever. He said that teachers themselves had not been given the training necessary for such a changeover. As he points out, bilingual education is a special task, and it requires special books and training. He also claimed that educationalists had shown that bilingualism in schools (he quoted the Canadian educationalist Colin Baker) was invariably politically-inspired – as opposed to driven by the needs of children – and that it usually led to assimilation. Pliner said that he had spoken against the education reform as soon as it was proposed in 1998, and that he and his fellow opponents had attempted to mitigate the bill’s effects by putting down some 15 amendments. All were rejected by the governing parliamentary majority. It was because of the failure of these amendments that he and others had called for peaceful and lawful demonstrations. He claimed that since a big rally was held on 20th May 2003, some 200,000 people in total have demonstrated against the reform. Pliner and his colleagues have collected over 113,00 signatures, calling for retention of the status quo in minority schools and good teaching of Latvian. Pliner pointed out that by 2007 all exams will be in Latvian only, and this will clearly reduce the use of Russian even further.

Pliner pointed out that there are other ways in which the state prosecutes its de-Russification policy. As has already been mentioned, state technical colleges and universities

have already been forced to close down their Russian teaching and teach only in Latvian. The state also gives subsidies to private schools – but only to those which teach in Latvian, not to those which teach in Russian. This policy is clearly discriminatory, especially when one recalls that Latvian and Russian residents of Latvia pay equal taxes. As Pliner says, the greatest mistake was to divide the residents of Latvia between citizens and non-citizens. National minorities are now massively underrepresented in the government and civil service.



Alfreds Rubiks: former first secretary of the Latvian CP. He spent 61/2 years in jail on treason charges

BHHRG also interviewed Alfreds Rubiks, the onetime Mayor of Riga under Communism. An ethnic Latvian, Rubiks cannot be accused of harbouring anti-Latvian sentiment, the accusation usually made against the Russian opponents of the reform. Rubiks also knows the history of his country, and he knows that it is bogus to pretend that the territory was anything other than a colony for a succession of great powers, starting with the Teutonic Knights. There was simply no Latvian nation before that. Rubiks made the point that he could understand Latvians wishing to bolster their own national identity and language, but argued that the education reform did not do this: it simply sabotaged teaching in Russian. Rubiks said that it was illogical to emphasise Latvian independence (from Russia) all the time, and then join the EU and NATO. He also expressed the fear that the drive for de-Russification and Latvianisation might lead even to secessionism: important parts of Latvia, after all, are nearly 100% Russian populated, such as the city of Daugavpils. Like Pliners, Rubiks seemed to suggest that the apparent use of a *divide et impera* strategy to pitch one section of the Latvian population against another was itself a way of distracting attention from the deteriorating economic situation in the country. Rubiks also attacked the argument which says that 60% of teaching must be in Latvian in order for students to be able to attend university, by saying that the number of people who drop out of courses because they do not know Latvian is tiny. He also pointed out that only 6% of the school population attends university anyway.

VI. *The Baltic States, Russia and the West*

There seems little doubt that Latvia is pursuing a nationalities policy which, if adopted anywhere else, would be the object of universal condemnation. There is effectively no criticism at all of this full-frontal assault on the established rights of a sizeable and historic population. Instead, Latvia continues to receive support for its policies. Estonia is in a similar position. There, a similar version of the same law is being introduced, albeit with a longer transitional period. BHHRG interviewed a former director of the Russian Cultural Centre in Tallinn, Arkady Prisjazny. Married to an Estonian, Prisjazny said that there was simply no dialogue between the Estonians and the Russians in Estonia. He quoted examples of aggressive anti-Russian sentiment being expressed by government officials, such as when on 29th January 2002 the new head of the secret police said that the country's primary goal was to get rid of the "Russian spectre".

In some ways, the situation in Estonia is worse for the local Russians. They are a smaller minority than in Latvia. There is no exclusively Russian political party in Estonia, and no seats are reserved for them in the parliament. There are only three Russian deputies in the Estonian parliament, and no Estonian parties do anything for their Russian compatriots. This is in spite of the fact that about half of the population of Tallinn is Russian. Russians are excluded from all government jobs, as well as from many other professions. There is a feeling that they are forced to do the "dirty" jobs, or to remain unemployed. It is partly for this reason that crime and prostitution are so widespread among the Russians in the Baltic States. The better qualified Russians have already left Estonia, leaving only the less privileged sections of society. Moscow gives little help: there are ten Russian higher educational institutes, but the government wants to close them down. Help from Russia comes mainly in the form of pensions for army veterans. The European Union seems to have dashed the hopes of the Estonian Russians: whereas they had been positively disposed towards Brussels in 2002, their hopes for any help have been cruelly dashed. Prisjazny also claimed that all the media in Estonia, including the Russian language newspaper, was under government control. He and other people BHHRG met confirmed that there is no information at all about the EU and the implications of membership: BHHRG was able to ascertain, for instance, that Estonians did not know that they would receive a mere fraction of the agricultural subsidies paid to existing member states.

How can one explain the silence of the European institutions and the human rights establishment in the face of such an assault on a sizeable and historic minority? Many people BHHRG interviewed believed that geo-strategic considerations played a role. Because they were not sovereign states at the time of the signature and ratification of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) the Baltic States have never signed this agreement which limits the movement of conventional weapons. Consequently, they are legally able to move heavy NATO weaponry onto their territory, putting it within a few minutes (and 40 miles) of Russia's second city, St. Petersburg.

Politically, the Balts are useful in the West's resurgent anti-Russian stance. Here are some examples of this.

1. The foreign minister of Latvia was among the most aggressive EU ministers in blaming Russia's policy in Chechnya for the massacre at Beslan in North Ossetia.
2. There are long-standing links between the Chechens and the Balts, as evidenced by the "Dudaev Street" in Riga or the "Dudaev Suite" in the Hotel Barclay in Tartu, named after the first leader of the Chechen rebellion.
3. Many Estonians believe that the \$10 million dollars which disappeared from the Estonian Central Bank in 1992 under the stewardship of the new Estonian European Commissioner, Siim Kallas, were physically taken out of Estonia in a military plane flown somehow connected to Dudaev, the Chechen leader and former Soviet fighter pilot.

4. Lithuania recently reluctantly closed the virulently anti-Russian and pro-Chechen website, www.kavkazcenter.com. Moscow had protested that it was inciting violence.
5. Generally, the Balts regard Chechnya as an “honorary Baltic state” and show considerable sympathy to its cause.⁸

Once you know that the Chechen cause is also supported by the most powerful geo-strategists in Washington, through the Committee for Peace in Chechnya, Western tolerance for the anti-Russian stance of the Baltic States becomes clear.⁹ The American government has made its own position clear: in an interview with Reuters on 14th September, the US Secretary of State said that Russia was rolling back democracy, and that it ought to seek a political solution in Chechnya.¹⁰ This position is the polar opposite of that taken with respect to America’s own response to terrorism and its backing of any refusal to compromise by favoured allies in the “war on terror.”. Like Chechnya, the Baltic States are a useful vehicle for reducing the power and presence of Russia in areas deemed to be of strategic importance to NATO, and it is surely this which explains the West’s tolerance of such blatant hostility by Latvia and Estonia to their large Russian-speaking national minority.

⁸ <http://www.ce-review.org/99/24/amber24.html>

⁹ <http://www.peaceinchechnya.org/>; see especially the list of members:

http://www.peaceinchechnya.org/about_members.htm

¹⁰ Interview with Reuters, 14th September 2004, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/36177.htm>