

Ethnopolitics in Latvia: Ethnopolitical Activities of State Institutions and Non-governmental Organisations and their Influence on the Social Integration Process

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ABSTRACT. The article is based on data from the survey "The Ethnopolitical situation in Latvia and its influence on the social integration process in the year of 2000". Through the commentary, the general climate of civil activism and ethnic relationships is highlighted. The paper concludes that despite many organisations, there is little constructive interaction between them; therefore their input in promoting social integration has been *limited* so far – both from the governmental and the non-governmental sides.

There are many reasons that provoke ethnopolitical activities in Latvia. As we know, Latvia is a state with an ethnically divided society. There are more than 130 different nationalities in Latvia; however, 99 percent of the population belongs to the ten largest national groups. These are Latvians, Russians, Belarussians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Roma/Gypsies, Germans, and Estonians.

The complicated ethnic structure is not stable and proportional to all aspects of ethnic relations. For example, the use of language and cultural affiliation does not correspond to the ethnic structure of society. Linguistic affiliation divides the society into two parts, because people usually use either Latvian or Russian in their families. However, cultural affiliation forms a different structure, which corresponds neither to ethnic nor linguistic structure. Moreover, many people in Latvia do not belong to any single culture, and sometimes they form culturally a marginalised part of society.

The real potential of national minorities does not appear in the official statistics of Latvia because the amount of people who are involved in national minority activities and who really belong to national minorities is considerably smaller than the formal size of any concrete ethnic group shown in the statistics. This is one of the reasons for political manipulation, and it is therefore too difficult to formulate a concrete definition of national minority in Latvia. In general, we may define this situation as an initial period in the process of national minority formation, where self-identification from ethnic groups to na-

tional minorities is characterised by many organisational and political cleavages. In this article, I prefer to use a term “ethnic integration” and understand it as a process in which national minorities get involved in all aspects of life but at the same time maintain their ethnic identity, language, traditions, and way of life that are different from the dominant ethnic group. The active search for ways to influence politics and at the same time to preserve the ethnic integrity of one’s group is at the core of ethnopolitics.

For the purposes of my article, I would like to define ethnopolitics as a harmonisation of interests among the state, the dominant ethnic group (Latvians), and the subordinated ethnic groups (national minorities). In order to maintain national security and reduce the possibilities and threat of ethnic conflicts, the state should be responsible for the coordination of all of these interests. The lack of clearly defined ethnic policies does not stimulate social integration. The goal of ethnic policies is therefore to strengthen integrative groups and to discourage non-integrative groups. The basic problem of ethnic policies in Latvia is how to maintain Latvian national values and at the same time guarantee the rights and interests of national minorities.

The aim of the legislative process regarding issues of language and education, which is still going on and which affects the whole ethnopolitical situation, is to change the historically formed legacy of ethnic relations. The other aim of legislation is to ensure a stable normative basis to protect the ethnic identity of Latvians. Latvia’s demographic situation at present is also becoming a problem of ethnopolitics. The legacy of the russification policy pursued during Soviet times still has a strong impact on the ethnopolitical situation both as a demographic fact and as an issue in public perceptions. For instance, a factor of its own that is a part of this legacy is the large share of recent post-war, non-Latvian, immigrants.

All the aforementioned reasons form the basis of activities with a political content and give possibilities to different political subjects to implicate ethnic relations. This means that ethnic processes and the interests of national minorities are sometimes placed under the purposes of political parties. Some political parties that have an active role in ethnopolitics try to ensure voter support in parliamentary or local elections. As a result we get a politicised climate of ethnic relations that makes the process of societal integration more complicated. Therefore a contradiction appears on one side between the interest of the national minorities to maintain their ethnic identity, which could be realised mostly by developing their own cultural activities, and political activities on the other side.

Taking into consideration all these aspects, I will review the relevant state institutions, political parties, NGOs, and mass media and their main characteristics. I will argue that a vast number of public actors are in fact unavoidably

involved in ethnic politics. The article is based on data from the survey “The Ethnopolitical situation in Latvia and its influence on the social integration process in the year of 2000”¹.

Activities of state institutions

The Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and some institutions subordinated to these ministries have a significant role in the fields of ethnopolitics and social integration. According to the jurisdiction of these institutions, we may point out activities with ethnopolitical content. These are: the language policy implemented by the state, the education policy, the naturalisation policy, the human rights protection policy for national minorities, and the policy of social integration.

The fact that the Latvian language and cultural rights must be strengthened by the law shows that the situation of the dominant ethnic group is not seen as secure yet. In further legislative processes this fact will remain relevant as well. However, the attempts of the state institutions to protect the dominant ethnic group provoke an active reaction among the various national minority organisations.

The dialogue between the state and national minorities is not sufficient. For example, in the process of adopting the new State Language Law in 1999 and the Regulations on its implementation in 2000 (promulgated 1 September 2000) the government and responsible state institutions conferred with international organisations and experts from Europe but not with representatives from the national minority organisations. That can be seen as a political mistake. The Regulations on the State Language Law have a direct impact on the national minorities because they elaborate in detail the circumstances under which the government can regulate language use in society, thereby impinging on the rights of people belonging to minorities to use their own languages.

The Regulations cover issues such as the circumstances when translation into Latvian must be provided at conferences and public meetings and the Latvian language requirements for various professions in the public sector. In amendments to the Regulations passed by the government on 21 November 2000, the government listed those professions in the private sector subject to Latvian language regulation. The list contains 34 categories that can be termed as proportionate and falling within a legitimate public interest. The list includes various health care professionals and security-related professions, as well as advocates and taxi drivers. However, the most critical will be the process of the imple-

¹ The survey was prepared by six researchers, including myself, from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the University of Latvia. The official presentation of the survey took place on July 3, 2001.

mentation of these Regulations, not the content of them. For example, in the state sector problems have become apparent in implementing the provision that state and municipal institutions may receive documents only in Latvian. Earlier documents could be submitted in Russian, German, and English. But I must regret that in practice this provision is not observed in many state institutions, including Parliament.

In the state's administrative level, there is no institution with appropriate capacity that could be responsible for cooperation with national minority organisations. This means that the whole mechanism of cooperation with these organisations is unclear. The same could be said about the order and size of financial support for national minorities cultural associations from the state budget. The 1991 "Law on Unrestricted Development and Right to Cultural Autonomy of Latvia's Nationalities and Ethnic Groups" is inadequate for present demands, and therefore it is necessary to adopt a new law and regulations on its implementation.

Also unclear is the reorganisation process and prospects to resume the activity of the "Consultative Council on Minorities of the President of Latvia". The Consultative Council was established in 1996. Representatives of eleven different national minorities, as well as members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Rights, came together several times a year. The aim of the council was to exchange and regularly discuss information related to issues affecting national minorities in Latvia, with an aim to provide guidelines and recommendations for actions. Despite a promising beginning, the former President Guntis Ulmanis was not able to fully develop this opportunity to strengthen government-minority dialogue and minority participation in public life, and the new President V. Vike Freiberga thinks that the reorganisation of the council is not suitable at all. The Consultative Council has not been officially abolished, but it is not convened any more. The problem is that members of political parties deliberated with each other but not with the representatives from the national minorities.

Even though the ethnopolitical cleavages keep deepening the gap between citizens and non-citizens, between the Latvians and the Russian-speaking part of society, the implementation of the National Programme for the Integration of Society in 2000 has been delayed. On 14 November 2000, the government decided to allocate \$ 26,500 from the 2001 budget to create a three-person Integration Department within the Ministry of Justice to prepare the implementation of the programme. On 14 November the government also referred to Parliament a draft law on the creation of a Social Integration Fund through which government and donor contributions are to be channelled to support integration-related projects. In November, the Minister of Justice also created an Advisory Council on social integration issues, which met several times to discuss the draft programme, the draft law on the Integration Fund, and the work of the new Integration Department.

A number of integration initiatives at the municipal level also deserve mention. In April, the city of Ventspils adopted its own integration programme and created a non-citizen's Advisory Council, whose members participated in the work of the City Council during the remainder of the year. The Liepaja city government established a working group for the promotion of integration in 2000 which prepared a draft city integration programme.

Activities of non-governmental organisations

The first national minority organisations began their formation process before the restoration of the independence of Latvia in 1991. Today more than 20 minority cultural societies are members of the Latvian Association of National Cultural Societies. However, not all national minority organisations belong to this association. The Russian minority organisations work independently from the association and they form other societies.

It is important to distinguish between ethnopolitical and ethnocultural tendencies in national minority organisations' activities:

- Ethnopolitical tendency is represented by a few politicised Russian organisations.
- Ethnocultural tendency is represented by various minority cultural organisations.

Speaking about activities of NGOs, I would like to put major attention exactly on the politicised Russian organisations and their activities, and therefore I will describe the main ones.

The Russian Community of Latvia was established in 1993. Compared to the other organisations, the Community is more active in political life; it has close ties with some politicians in Russia. The Russian Community stands for preserving the previous status of the Russian language and the status of schools with Russian as a language of training. Besides that the Community advocates the right of non-citizens to vote at local elections and the revision of the Citizenship Law. In spite of this, different sociological research data prove that after 1998, when Latvia's Parliament had accepted amendments to the Citizenship Law to cancel the age quotas of naturalisation and give Latvian citizenship to the children of non-citizens, who were born in Latvia after 21 August 1991, the question of citizenship had already lost its importance to non-citizens. According to the research "On the Way to a Civil Society" (2001), at the end of 2000 only 20 percent of non-citizens were planning to apply for citizenship.

The main activities of the Russian Community in 2000 were connected with a campaign against the State Language Law. The Russian Community was one of the organisers of the public meeting that was held on 3 March 2000 to pro-

test against the language policy in Latvia. The Russian Community took part in all of the activities from June till September 2000 that related to the discussions and adoption of the Regulations on the State Language Law by the government. The Russian Community has a negative attitude about the government's National Programme "Integration of Society in Latvia" because it thinks that the programme anticipates the "assimilation of non-Latvians under compulsion".

The Latvian Human Rights Committee is also a well known organisation thanks to its activities related to issues of citizenship, education, and language. The Human Rights Committee considers itself a defender of the human rights of all non-citizens and non-Latvians in Latvia. The Human Rights Committee opposes the ethnic policies implemented by state institutions in Latvia. The Committee is against the social integration policy and promotes the idea of Latvia as a two-community divided state. The Human Rights Committee also contested the so-called bans on professions for non-citizens. In 1999 the Committee considered that non-citizens were discriminated in 55 areas compared to citizens of Latvia. Among them were 19 bans on professions. But today the Committee has changed this opinion and has recognised that the main opportunity to overcome these limitations is naturalisation and the further activity of so-called new citizens in elections and the political process.

The Latvian Support Association for Schools with Russian as a Language of Training was established in 1996. The aim of this association is to defend the interests of schools with Russian as a language of training and to try to preserve the previous status of these schools. In April 2000 the association took the initiative to prepare an appeal in which it called for changes in the Latvian Law on Education to stop the transition to state-supported education only in the state language. Representatives from ten national minority organisations put their signatures on the appeal. I would like to note that the new Law on Education had been accepted in 1998, establishing that in all state and municipal educational institutions (starting from Grade 10 in secondary schools) "education is received in the state language" (Article 9). Shifting all education to the state language should be finished by 2004.

But Article 9 of the new Law on Education also states that education can be acquired in another language: (1) in private educational institutions; (2) in state and municipal educational institutions in which minority education programmes are implemented. However, the content of "minority educational programmes" is not specified in the law, but is "to be worked out by the educational institutions in accordance with state educational standards using the general educational sample programmes approved by the Ministry of Education and Science as a basis". Article 41, paragraph 3 of the new law states that "The Ministry of Education and Science determines the subjects within minority educational programmes that are to be acquired in the state language". Another questionable provision is contained in Article 59, paragraph 2, which says that "The state

and municipalities may participate in funding private educational institutions if they implement state accredited educational programmes in the state language". This means that the possibility for minority private schools to receive state subsidies has been restricted, if not eliminated.

The consolidation process of Russian national minority organisations

In order to achieve political aims, 15 Russian minority organisations established a **Coordination Council of Social Organisations** in 1999. In August 2000, the Council united 23 organisations. The basis of the Council is the politicised organisations such as the Russian Community of Latvia, the Russian Society in Latvia, the Latvian Human Rights Committee, and Russian National Cultural Autonomy in Latvia. From other national minority organisations, only one Belarusian and one Ukrainian organisation are involved in the activities of the Coordination Council. Some organisations, for example, the Russian Cultural Society of Latvia and the Union of Citizens and Non-citizens, support only some activities of the Council.

In 2000 the Coordination Council has organised some political activities such as initiating a collection of signatures for minorities and non-citizens rights and preparing an "Appeal to the UN, Council of Europe, European Commission, OSCE, and CBSS". The aim of this process was to ask the international community to influence Latvian authorities and state institutions. The appeal was handed to the Parliament of Latvia in June 2000. Till that time 57,000 mostly non-Latvian signatures were collected. The demands included in the appeal represented the main trends of ethnopolitical activities of Russian minority organisations in 2000. Those included the following aims:

1. To ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities signed by Latvia in May 1995.
2. To ensure the possibility of the official use of national minority languages in areas that have dense populations of national minorities.
3. To guarantee the further existence of the state-supported educational system in the languages of minorities along with effective teaching of the Latvian language.
4. To grant voting rights at municipal elections to the permanent residents of Latvia who do not have Latvian citizenship but have lived in Latvia for five years or more.

The Coordination Council has regular and close ties with the parliamentary fraction of Union of Political Organisations "For Human Rights in the United

Latvia". The cooperative mechanism between this parliamentary fraction and the Coordination Council is comprised of two social councils. One of them is the Social Council for Education and the other is the Social Council for Human Rights. These councils are led by deputies from the parliamentary faction "For Human Rights in the United Latvia," and representatives from the Coordination Council of Social Organisations are involved in the daily work of the councils. Russian national minority organisations which are united in the Coordination Council of Social Organisations do not appreciate the cooperation with the aforementioned parliamentary fraction and see it as conformist with regard to the interests and policy of any political party.

Politicised Russian minority organisations have a critical attitude to the Latvian Law on Education and to the State Language Law, and in such a way they try to influence the whole ethnopolitical situation in Latvia. At the same time not all Russian minority organisations choose political activism as their main strategy. Several Russian minority organisations (for example: the Russian Cultural Society of Latvia, the Baltic Slav Society, and the Association of Russian Cultural Officials) consider the preservation of an infrastructure and environment of Russian culture as their most important duty. However, when the state does not offer possibilities for a dialogue with national minorities and the "Consultative Council on Minorities of the President of Latvia" is not convening, Russian cultural organisations are seeking ways to solve their problems through cooperation with politicised organisations. No matter whether the dialogue with the state is successful or not, all Russian organisations are united regarding the strengthening of the position of the Russian language and the further existence of schools with Russian as the main language of training. The other national minority organisations are basically oriented to cultural activities, and they refrain from participation in political actions and meetings.

To sum up, by the year 2000, ethnopolitical activities in Latvia had evolved to produce several tendencies:

1. A consolidation process among the politicised Russian minority organisations arose as a reaction against the language policy implemented by state institutions. The consolidation process is a good example of the politicisation of ethnic interaction. From a theoretical point of view, it means that national minorities are mobilised to use political resources in order to protect their ethnic interests.
2. Incapable of obtaining a dialogue with the state, Russian national minority organisations found themselves more effective in interaction with the parliamentary fraction Union of Political Organisations "For Human Rights in the United Latvia." The tactics and goals of minority organisations have been adapted to the politics of the parliamentary fraction.
3. To achieve their goals, politicised organisations chose confrontational tactics and opted for public meetings and street pickets.

4. The chosen tactics of these organisations did not achieve broad support among the Russian-speaking population of Latvia. This fact proves that for the present these organisations have weak links with state institutions and the majority of the Russian-speaking population.

Conclusion

The large number of different ethnopolitical subjects in Latvia means the whole intensity of ethnopolitical activities is rather high. The ethnopolitical subjects that inspire activities or initiatives in the fields of ethnic relations usually (with some exceptions) are not well educated in the questions of solving ethnic problems and conflicts. The term to characterise this problem could be “ethnopolitical amateurism,” which is widespread among individuals as well as the authorities of state institutions and the deputies of Parliament. And this is one of the reasons why the Russian-speaking population has a deep-rooted opinion that state institutions and authorities provoke wounded feelings and indignant emotions among a certain part of the Russian-speaking society.

It is remarkable that Latvians, in comparison to Russians, do not have a significant non-governmental organisation that could be involved in the solution of ethnopolitical problems. In other words, Latvians rely on Latvian political parties and state institutions, which act in the name of the law for the protection of their interests. The important Latvian mass media (especially the main newspapers), in comparison to the Russian mass media, also stand aside from active and emotional reflection on the ethnopolitical problems in the country.

In the opposite situation are the Russians in Latvia, who do not expect that their ethnic interests will be protected by the law. Therefore the Russian-speaking part of society is an important resource for political actors where they can seek support. Their ethnic interests and any small-scale activities become inevitably politicised due to cooperation with such political actor as the Union of Political Organisations “For Human Rights in the United Latvia”.

The “third force,” Russian newspapers, joined the tandem of Russian minority politicised organisations and the Union of Political Organisations. This united force appeared long before the year 2000, but it was consolidated during the language policy crisis and then it became a significant ethnopolitical subject among non-Latvians in Latvia.

Considering all of the above, the widespread opinion that there are no possibilities for ethnic conflicts or confrontation in Latvia to appear is simply an ungrounded, but common, stereotype. I must conclude that the progress towards implementation of the social integration policy has been very slow. In spite of many attempts in 2000, the government adopted the National Programme for

the Integration of Society only on 6 February 2001. However, since the spring of 1999 the government has engaged in a dialogue with national minorities after it launched a draft programme on the Integration of Society. In the well organised dialogue in many places in Latvia, thousands of people got their first idea about societal integration and its role in society. Unfortunately, the well initiated dialogue was changed in 2000 into non-integrative public meetings and street pickets with an ethnopolitical content. Besides passively reacting to the dynamics from the NGO side, there are many tasks for the state to actively shape coherent policies, create their implementation mechanisms, and involve other public actors in the policy process. Latvia as a state and as a society could achieve more:

- if the intensity of ethnopolitical activities were decreased;
- if all ethnopolitical subjects became better educated in the fields of social integration and ethnic relations as well as solving ethnic conflicts;
- if ethnopolitical subjects linked separate ethnopolitical actions with a prospects of the state's national interests, with the two declared priorities of foreign policy of Latvia – to join the EU and NATO - and with an idea of social integration;
- if state institutions and Latvian political parties overcame the opinion that ethnopolitics is just an unimportant component of public life in comparison to economic problems and the process of privatisation.

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