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RUSSIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE BALTIC REGION

Viktor Voronov

RUSSIANS IN LATVIA: PECULIARITIES OF SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND IDENTITY

The author identifies trends and variations of the socio-cultural identity and integration of Russians in Latvia. According to the author, since the middle 1990s, two trends have been recognized - first, the “ingrowing” of ethnic Russians into the life of independent Latvia, and second, forming their new identity. The article presents a number of factors hampering the integration of ethnic Russians into Latvian society. Variations and options of socio-cultural identity and integration (or assimilation) of the Russian population of Latvia are shown.

Key words: Latvia, Russians, Latvians, socio-cultural adaptation, identity, integration into the life of Latvian society, assimilation.

Historically, Latvia has developed as an ethnically diverse country. More than 100 nationalities (42 %) permanently reside in the country, but the majority of them is represented by relatively small groups. According to 2007 data [2], 2,281 million residents account for: Latvians — 1 346 686 (59.0 %); Russians — 645 435 (28.3 %); Belarusians — 85 274 (3.7 %); Ukrainians — 57 642 (2.5 %); the Poles — 54 744 (2.4 %); Lithuanians— 30 975 (1.4 %); Jews — 8 545 (0.4 %). The ethnic structure can be characterised by, first and foremost, the dispersed residence of national minorities among Latvians. They do not form large enclaves, which objectively stimulates adaptation and integration. Russians are the largest ethnic group after Latvians. Moreover, the Russian community in Latvia is the biggest one in the world. Latvian and Russian population amounts to 2 million people, which is the absolute majority. Economic success, strengthening of democracy and the atmosphere in society in general depend on their interrelations. Among the Russian group, a minor share is represented by old residents, while the majority moved to Latvia after the Second World War. Russians have lived in Latvia for many centuries, but their presence was insignificant until the end of the XVII century. While Old Believers were driven from Russia after the XVI century, Schism islands of Russian peasant settlements started to emerge. In the XVIII century, when Latvia became a part of the Russian Empire, the local Russian cultural environment began to develop. 210 thousand Russians resided in the first Latvian Republic (1918—1940), mostly Latgalian peasants and a small number of culturally developed urban

population. The life style of local Russians, deep-rooted in Latvia, was based on the orthodox and old — orthodox traditions.

Historically, local Russian population decreased in percentage during the Soviet migration in the 1950—1980s, since the number of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians rose from 12 to 24 %. The social image of a Russian urban resident was closely connected with industry, but still was not sufficiently integrated into the local cultural environment. The character of the interrelation between Latvian and Russian population in the independent Latvia as well as in Lithuania and Estonia was relatively peaceful, without acute conflicts. Since the mid-90s, with the development of the national legislation, double integration processes have started to intensify: first, “rooting” of the Russian population into the life of independent Latvia, and second, the emergence of a new identity [1]. First of all, one can observe a certain distancing of Russians living in Latvia from the Russian life. There is certainly an interest in Russia (as it is the spiritual motherland), but rather an interest of a stranger. The differences between Russians in Latvia and their compatriots in Russia are growing more evident. 70—80 % percent of Russians admit it, saying that they are becoming more practical, getting closer to the European cultural pattern. The Russians who have lived in Latvia for a long time adopt the peculiarities of the local lifestyle. Adaptation to the geographical environment (the influence of the proximity to the Baltic Sea) and environment in general (local patriotism is more vivid than the state one) is to take place first. Then elements of everyday material culture (interior, clothes, cuisine) and external behaviour are adopted. As Russians themselves admit, they are becoming more reserved. A more difficult and time-demanding task is inclusion into local spiritual culture; the adoption of Latvian cultural values is hardly taking place. In the early 1990s, Russians evidently resented the status of a minority; there was a certain psychological resistance: “we are not a minority”. At the same time, other ethnic groups (Ukrainians, the Polish, and Jews) went through the process more rapidly and less painfully. It was in the middle of the 1990s, that a change from the initial shock triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union to adaptation to the Latvian lifestyle took place. It was then that the law on the citizenship was adopted. Now the feeling of conformism towards Latvia is more often to be seen among Russians.

The process of forming a new identity with simultaneous integration of Russians into Latvian society is hampered by objective internal political and economic factors [1]. The legislation is still to be perfected. The ratification of the EU Council Convention on Protection of Minority Rights by the Latvian Seim in 2005 obliged the legislators to specify some clauses of the laws on the state language and on education. The resistance of some political parties impedes the integration process. A serious obstacle is the socioeconomic stratification of society. Different perception of the XX century history hampers integration. Russians and Latvians are divided to a greater degree not by ethnic or cultural specificity but by political history connected with the dispatch of the Soviet troops to Latvia in June 1940, the results of the Second World War and the evaluation of the consequences of the Soviet period in Latvia. Take a recent event: in August 2008, military aggression of Georgia

against South Ossetia was interpreted differently by Latvians and Russians. The majority of Latvians supported Georgia, while the majority of Russians — South Ossetia and Russia. Psychological complexes of Russians, developed already in the post-Soviet period, as well as the archetypical peculiarities of the character and lifestyle inherited from previous generations are of considerable importance. The belonging of states and peoples to different types of culture (collectivist, individualistic, ‘feminine’, ‘masculine’) helps explain some peculiarities of lifestyle and human behaviour. Russia and Russians beyond Russia are usually referred to the ‘collectivist’ and ‘feminine’ cultures. If the relevant traits of Latvians, belonging to the individualistic type of culture, are law obedience and, at the same time, aspiration to individual success, those of Russians are quite different. Russian ‘we’ identity hinders their assimilation in Latvia. The orientation towards justice but not law generates a tendency towards questioning laws but not organising life according to these laws, though unjust from the moral point of view of the Russian national character. Both Russian and Latvian cultures are feminine, which brings Russians and Latvians close to each other. ‘Feminine’ moral values dominate in Latvia and Russia (unlike Japan, for instance), it is customary to care more about your neighbour. Such features of Russian national character as the ability to socialize, their openness, readiness for contacts, flexibility, and ability to adjust to the living environment of the country of residence contribute to adaptation. It is well-known that regardless of their mentality peculiarities and traditional type of behaviour, groups of people living outside their ethnic homeland should always be more dynamic and constructive than in their own country. In the 1990s, Russians were overcoming their identity crisis with difficulty; it resulted into adapting to the realities of market economy (behavioural tendency towards profit and competition), alien to their mentality. Russians consider the laws on citizenship and state language unjust and feel alienated from public bodies. As a result, negative stereotypes fortify and social anxiety lingers on. The danger of the marginalisation of Russians in modern Latvia has emerged and is strengthening. There are numerous reasons for it, but the most general one is the fact that millions of people in Eastern Europe will hardly be able to adapt to market economy because of principal discrepancies between Western and Easter-Slavic (Russian) cultural values. There are following variants of sociocultural identity and integrity (or assimilation) of Russians in the life of the republic taking shape in modern Latvia; they depend on the period of residence, social status, age and education [1].

Firstly, it is the past oriented but present sociocultural identity looking back to former historical homeland. In Latvia, they are usually elderly people of a lower social status. A lot of them are immersed in the life in Russia via Russian television; sometimes they get information about events in Latvia from the same source. The person lives physically in Latvia but is not mentally connected with the country. The expected integration into Latvian society does not occur.

Secondly, it is active integration of a person into the social and political life of Latvia, which is connected with the person’s self-realization in professional sphere. This degree of integration cannot be achieved without a good knowledge of the state language. At the same time the person may be

not interested in Latvian culture — people have the right to choose a culture to give priority to. This level of integration can be called pragmatic; it is optimal for the formation of civil society. Thirdly, it is conformism regarded as convergence with Latvian culture. The second and the third types are characteristic of a certain part of Russian and Russian-speaking intellectuals and educated youth. These people clearly understand their connection to Latvia, they are good at languages, and they are ready to support the process of ‘conformist integration’. As surveys show, they have a little bit alienated attitude towards Russia, they look for information about Latvia in the republican press and television. It is the part of young educated, professionally qualified, pragmatic Russian and Russian-speaking people who have found their place in modern Latvia as an EU country.

Fourthly, sometimes one can choose another personality type — assimilation. Assimilation into Latvian (as well as Russian) environment occurs in children raised in mixed marriages. The main characteristic of the new sociocultural identity of Russians in Latvia is the recognition of their connection to the country. At the same time, the national mentality is not attenuated, on the contrary, the process of ethnic revival and the development of national language identity are taking place, but the consolidation of Russians faces difficulties (0.5 % of ethnic Russians in Latvia are members of non-governmental organisations).

Recent opinion polls show that six largest ethnic minorities (Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, the Poles, Lithuanians and Jews) have strengthened their identity and formed their ethnic culture infrastructure: societies, mass media, schools, amateur art societies, etc. They are not afraid of ethnic assimilation; on the contrary, it is more reasonable to speak about the so-called ethnic mobilisation of ethnic minorities in Latvia.

In 2004, Latvia acceded to the EU and since then has been introducing the new standards of Western liberal democracy. This European factor, the external one) contributes to conformist integration. The internal factor facilitating such integration and the development of the new sociocultural identity of Russians is the whole system of nongovernmental organisations including Russian cultural societies in Latvia. At the present stage of sociocultural development, Russians in Latvia face the task of forming values and goals, and authority, primarily on the basis of the traditional spiritual values of the Russian nation. Employment or an entrepreneurial activity of different social status, as the application of the capabilities of Russians in Latvia, defines a system of traditions, norms and rules regulating individual and social behaviour of Russians, serves as a basis for the identification and solution of practical and personal problems.

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