

## The political elite recruitment in the Baltic: the role of the ethnic factor

Smirnov, Vadim

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THE POLITICAL ELITE  
RECRUITMENT  
IN THE BALTIC:  
THE ROLE  
OF THE ETHNIC FACTOR

V. Smirnov\*



*The role of the ethnic factor in political processes in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia has been rather significant since these countries gained independence. The author investigates the following assumption: after the completion of major Eurointegration procedures, the ethnic factor — which became especially important in the Baltics after independence — relegated to the periphery of political life.*

*After a period of 'independence-induced euphoria' faded, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian power groups had to tackle the problem of civil society formation and the development of a political regime based on democratic procedures. In these countries the processes of elite recruitment were largely affected by the factor of ethnic homogeneity of the social structure. This article analyses the process of elite group formation in the Baltics through the lens of the ethnic factor. By applying the ethnopolitical approach, the author concludes that the de facto barriers to non-titular population groups entering power structures, which exist in Latvia and Estonia, 'freeze' the system of elite recruitment. In the conditions of increasing social unrest, it may have an adverse effect on the overall political stability in these countries.*

*The results obtained can be used for research, educational, and practical purposes. In the field of research and education, they can be employed in further research on the transformation of the elite structure in the Baltics in view of the ethnopolitical factor, including comparative analysis of the elite re-grouping processes, as well as in developing corresponding university courses. As to the practical aspect, the results obtained can be used by the authorities of the Russian Federation in making decisions regarding interaction with the representatives of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian political elites.*

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\* Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University  
14, A. Nevski Str.,  
Kaliningrad, 236041, Russia

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Different aspects of the involvement of ethnic groups into political processes have been actively discussed

by political scientists over the last quarter century. As to the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian republics, the role of ethnical factor in politics has been relevant since independence. But can one claim that, after the completion of the main Euro integration procedures, the ethnic factor, to which major significance was attached earlier, was pushed towards the periphery of the political life? Different aspects of the involvement of ethnic groups into political processes have been actively discussed by political scientists over the last quarter century. As to the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian republics, the role of ethnical factor in politics has been relevant since independence. But can one claim that, after the completion of the main Euro integration procedures, the ethnic factor, to which major significance was attached earlier, was pushed towards the periphery of the political life?

With the help of the ethnopolitical approach<sup>1</sup>, let us analyse the actual political interactions in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia paying special attention to the features of political elite recruitment<sup>2</sup>. According to V. Tishkov, the disintegration of the USSR resembled a revolt of a province against the central power more than a politically and legally correct procedure of independence declaration. The political legitimacy was attached to this process by the ‘popular’ (more precisely, ethnonationalistic) movements, in particular, the popular fronts of the Baltics. It is they that developed the “ideology of disintegration”, whose elements were borrowed by nationalist movements other Union republics and autonomous areas in Russia. The replacement of the notion ‘nation’ with that of ‘ethnos’ played an important role in the ideological justification of the imminent disintegration [7, c. 154].

After the euphoria caused by independence had faded, the power groups of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia faced the problems of developing a civil society and creating a political regime based on democratic procedures. In these countries, the processes of elite recruitment have been affected by the ethnic homogeneity of society. Data on the population composition of all three countries over the last 25 years is presented in Table 1.

In Lithuania, the Lithuanian ethnic group constitutes the overwhelming majority; two other large groups are the Polish and Russians<sup>3</sup>. The population composition of the Lithuanian Republic did not undergo any significant changes over the Soviet period. According to the 1959 census, Lithuanians accounted for 79.3 % of the country’s residents; in 1989, their share was 79.6 %. At the same time, the percentage of the title population was decreasing in the other two republics: 74.6 % in 1959 and 61.5 % in 1989 in Estonia; 62 % and 52 % in Latvia [2]. Against the background of stable specific weight of the title nation, the number of Lithuanians at power was constantly increasing. Antanas

<sup>1</sup> For more detail on the heuristic value of the ethnopolitical approach when considering events in the field of ethnonational relation and analysing the causes, forms and methods of intended politicisation of ethnicity see the works of V. Tishkov [5—7].

<sup>2</sup> In this case, elites are viewed from the functional rather than value perspective, i.e. as individual exerting decisive influence on making decisions crucial for the society.

<sup>3</sup> Researcher emphasise that the largest ethnic minorities (the Polish and Russians) generally tend to support the idea of integrating into the Lithuanian society, although they demonstrate different adaptation strategies. — For more detail, see [11].

Sniečkus, the head of the Communist Party of Lithuania in 1936—1974, played a significant role in this process. He was on good terms with the Soviet leadership, and as a result managed to minimise the deployment of large industrial facilities in Lithuania, which would entail an inflow of a considerable number of non-Lithuanian Soviet citizens in the country. In 1953—1990, the number of incoming migrants amounted to 1.09 m people [16].

Table 1

**Population of the Baltics, 1989—2011<sup>4</sup>, million people, %**

Country	1989	2000	2011
Lithuania:			
Total population	3.674/100	3.484/100	3.244/100
Including:			
Lithuanians	2.924 / 79.6	2.907 / 83.5	2.721 / 83.9
Russians	0.344 / 9.40	0.219 / 6.3	0.174 / 5.4
Latvia:			
Total population	2.666	2.377	2.070
Including:			
Latvians	1.387 / 52.0	1.370 / 57.7	1.284 / 62.1
Russians	0.905 / 34.0	0.703 / 29.6	0.556 / 26.9
Estonia:			
Total population	1.565	1.370	1.340
Including:			
Estonians	0.963 / 61.5	0.930 / 67.9	0.924 / 69.0
Russians	0.474 / 30.3	0.351 / 25.6	0.341 / 25.5

Lithuania has several areas densely populated by different ethnic groups. East Lithuania is multi-ethnic; half of the population is Lithuanian, one third Polish, one fifth Belarusian, and one tenth Russian. In Šalčininkai, the Polish account for the absolute majority — 79.5 %, Lithuanians for 10.4 %, Russians for 5 %. In the Vilnius region, 61.3 % of residents are Polish, 22.4 % Lithuanian, 8.4 % Russian. Russians reside predominantly in Zarasai, Trakai, and Visaginas.

Various research and election campaign results show that the ethnic minorities are not very active in the political life of modern Lithuania<sup>5</sup>. Their presence in high-level political structures and governmental institutions is insignificant. If representatives of ethnic minorities manage to secure a pub-

<sup>4</sup> According to national censuses (there is no data on the number of Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, Gypsies, and other groups).

<sup>5</sup> The election law adopted in 1992 introduced a lower threshold for ensuring parliamentary representation of Russian and Polish minorities within political parties participating in election according to the proportional system: the universal threshold was 4%, the one for ethnic parties - 2%. In 1996, amendments were made to the law, according to which the universal threshold was raised to 5%, the one for electoral alliances to 7%, the one for ethnic minorities was abolished.

lic position, in most cases it is one in the Seimas; as a rule, they are supported by 'regular' parties<sup>6</sup>, i. e. those that do not declare the protection of rights of ethnic minorities a priority. The analysis of the post-independence composition of all Cabinets shows that ethnic minorities held ministerial positions only in a handful of cases<sup>7</sup>. Predominantly, they worked at the municipal level. The Polish community has, as a rule, strong presence in the regions of Vilnius and Šalčininkai, and the Russian — in Klaipeda and Visaginas. The ethnic minority parties do not have many members (500—1000 people), their influence on authorities is insignificant (both due to the modest numbers and the positions they occupy), which does not make it possible to think of the parties as an adequate channel for political elite recruitment [10].

In the period of establishing independence, the Republic of Lithuania had a well-defined political structure, whose 'core' was comprised by the members of the Communist Party — the nomenklatura recruited predominantly from the title nation. If, in 1945, Lithuanians accounted for 30 % of the Communist party members, in 1952, their percentage increased to 38 %, in the mid-1980s, to 70 %; Lithuanians also held 91.5 % of administrative positions [13].

In Latvia and Estonia the specific weight of the title nation in the elite structure was rather insignificant. By the mid-1980s, Latvians accounted for less than 40 % of the Communist party members, whereas, in Estonia, the title nation accounted for just above 50%.

As to the bureaucracy, Latvians held 61.3 % of such positions, Estonians 82.2 % [17]. Throughout the Soviet period, the numbers of ethnic Lithuanians in the political elite of Lithuania remained high, whereas other groups constituted the minority<sup>8</sup>.

Lithuania approached the moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union with elite that was ethnically homogenous: the actual administrative levers were the realm of the national Lithuanian elite, which made decisions in line

<sup>6</sup> The Lithuanian Russian Union formed a coalition with the Social Democrat Party of Lithuania in the 2000 election. As a result of the parliamentary campaign, the leaders of the Lithuanian Russian Union – brother and sister S. Dmitriev and L. Dmitrieva – stood in the election with the Labour Party. Before that, the Dmitrievs worked together in the Vilnius City Council. A representative of the Russian Alliance, I. Rozova, became a member of the Seimas running in the election with the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – a party focusing on the protection of the Polish minority, which joined the incumbent governmental coalition.

<sup>7</sup> At the same time, one cannot ignore the case of the famous Lithuanian political of Russian origin, the leader of the Labour Party, a former member of the European Parliament, V. Uspaskich, who served as the Minister of Economy in 2004—2005.

<sup>8</sup> However, it would be incorrect to associate the high percentage of the title nation representatives within the political elite with Lithuanian support for the Soviet regime. The façade of an ideological monolith (which also holds true for Latvia and Estonia) concealed the real attitude, which, according to A. Štromas, boiled down to the total denial of the victory of communism over the Baltic peoples. — For further detail, see [16].

with the Communist Party's policy, but enjoyed significant autonomy. By the end of the Soviet period, although legally accountable to Moscow, the country was administered by the Lithuanian elite, which was even more homogenous than during the interbellum [8].

In Estonia and Latvia, ethnicity became the basis for political segregation after independence. The creation of an exclusive 'environment' for the title nation significantly complicated and almost eliminated all vertical mobility opportunities for representatives of other ethnic groups<sup>9</sup>. Latvian scholar J. Rozenvalds analysed the generalised group of "East Slavs" (see Table 2) [3].

Table 2

**Correlation between population groups in Latvia and Estonia  
in the 19<sup>th</sup>—21<sup>st</sup> centuries, %**

Country	1897	1922—1925	1934—1935	1959	1979	1989	2000	2009—2011
Latvia:								
Latvians	68	73.4	75.5	62	53.7	52	57.7	59.5
East Slavs	12	12.6	12.1	30.9	40	42	36.4	33.3
Estonia:								
Estonians	91	87.6	88.1	74.6	64.7	61.5	67.9	68.7
East Slavs	4	8.2	8.2	22.3	32	35.2	29	28.9

Demographic changes, which had a significant effect on the title groups of Estonia and Latvia, resulted in the dramatic transformation of general attitudes: many Latvians and Estonians started to associate and even identify 'the Russian' with 'the Soviet', thus holding post-war migrants accountable for the Soviet period. To a degree, this was a backlash from the times when the share of East Slavs in the Communist Parties of the Baltics significantly exceeded that in the general population of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia (representatives of the title national accounted for 69, 39, and 52 % of the Communist party members respectively).

It is worth stressing that there are some notable differences between Estonia and Latvia as to the features of development of the Russian-speaking

<sup>9</sup> Lithuania chose the 'citizenship by default' pattern, when it was granted to anyone who resided in Lithuania when independence was declared, and expressed the desire to acquire it. As a result, most members of the Russian community hold Lithuanian citizenship. It was a result not only of the good will of the Lithuanian political elites, but also the disproportionately strong (in comparison to the percentage of Russians in Lithuania) presence of Russians in Sąjūdis during the years of transition. It is that period that saw the development of the conceptual framework of citizenship law, during which members of the Russian community managed to protect their interests. — For further detail, see [14].

communities, since it still has a significant effect on the nature and prospects of their involvement in the political process. The Latvian community is historically more numerous and better organised, which was proved by the 2012 referendum on the making Russian an official language and the 2013 election to the so-called 'Parliament of the non-represented'. Speaking of the settlement tradition, it is important to mention that Russians prevail, as a rule, in the North-Western part of Estonia (for example, in Narva, Estonians account for no more than 4 % of the population) and Tallinn (44 %). Since the rest of Estonian territory is populated by the title nation, such segmentation is an objective obstacle to the possible integration of two ethnic communities, as well as the consolidation of Russians for participating in the political process. In Latvia, the Russian-speaking population is spread more evenly. There are approximately 800,000 Russian-speaking residents (35 %, the total population of Latvia is 2.2 m people). The key areas of their residence are Riga (43 %), Daugavpils (55 %), Rēzekne (49 %), Jūrmala (36 %), Liepāja (34 %), Ventspils (32 %), and Jelgava (30 %).

During the so-called Singing Revolution, two models of declaring independence were discussed in Estonia and Latvia. The first, promoted by the popular fronts, was dubbed 'social-realistic', since it aimed to take into account the post-war situation and gain the support of general public (regardless of nationality). The second — 'legalist', advocated by the so called civil committees, presumed the illegal nature of the Soviet rule, and thus all post-war immigrants were, too, proclaimed illegal, which excluded them from active political life. For example, in February-March 1991 (alongside the Referendum on the Future of the Soviet Union initiated by M. Gorbachev), when the authorities of the Baltics started to study the opinion of the local population about independence (in Lithuania and Estonia, it was considered an electoral consultation, in Estonia, a referendum), in Estonia, the right to vote was granted to the citizens of the pre-war republic, their direct descendants, as well as individuals who made an oral statement of support for independence and were given the so-called 'green cards' from the civil committees (approximately 25,000 people) [15].

The first generation of the Latvian Popular Front leaders paid a lot of attention to working with the Russian-speaking population, resulting in a wide-spread support of the idea of independence among Latvian Russians. In 1991, independence was supported by 94 % of Latvians and 38 % of Russians. Because two thirds of the Russian population had either positive or neutral attitudes towards the initiatives of the Popular Front of Latvia, it was possible for Latvia to peacefully gain independence. However, many promises made in the years of the 'Singing Revolution' were not kept after the event; the leadership of both Latvia and Estonia restored the rights of the citizens of the pre-war republics, whereas post-war immigrants and their descendants were deprived of their political freedoms. The Latvian and Estonian elites ignored the social-realistic model opting instead for the 'legalist' pattern. A large part of the Russian-speaking communities of Estonia and Latvia had limited opportunities for participating in the processes taking place in the republics and influencing the political situation (certain political leaders were marginalised) [3].

According to Latvian scholars B. Zepa and I. Šūpule, through hindering social integration, members of the political elite increase tensions in the society: “They still use ethnicity to appeal to voters. Thus, it is politicians who serve as the major catalyser of ethnic tensions” [1, c. 9]. This perspective was formulated as a result of a study into the ethnopolitical tensions in Latvia focusing on the ways to resolve the conflict, which was carried out as early as 2005. However, as the municipal election held in Latvia in June 2013 showed, it is still relevant.

The problem of the Russian community participation in the political lives of Latvia and Estonia is a product of not only the ethnic factor; the citizenship issue also aggravates it. The so-called ‘aliens’ emerged as a result of independence declared in 1991. In Latvia, the legal framework that brought about this population category was provided by the law on the restoration of the rights of the citizens of the Latvian Republic and the basic conditions for naturalisation adopted by the Supreme Council of the Latvian Republic on October 12, 1991. Citizenship was granted only to the citizens of pre-war Latvia and their descendants. Individuals who did not meet this requirement were not given Latvian citizenship. Legally, the status of ‘aliens’ was introduced by the law on the status of citizens of the former USSR not holding Latvian or any other citizenship adopted on April 12, 1995. The category of ‘aliens’ included former USSR citizens, who did not hold any citizenship at the time the law was adopted and met the following legal requirement: “On July 1, 1992, they were, regardless of the status of the housing specified in the registration, registered on the territory of Latvia or their last registered residence before July 1, 1992 was on the territory of the Latvian Republic or a court decision established the fact that, prior to the mentioned date, they had resided on the territory of Latvia for at least 10 years”. This definition also extended to the children of such persons who did not hold any citizenship.

As a result of following the ‘legalist’ approach, the number of former citizens of the USSR, who were not granted citizenship by default, amounted to 715,000 people in Latvia (the naturalisation process began in 1995) and 500,000 people in Estonia (the naturalisation process was launched in 1992). They were issued passports emphasising their legal status: purple in Latvia and grey in Estonia. Most naturalisation applications were submitted in 1993—1997. Since 1995, when the naturalisation procedure was introduced, 138,000 people have obtained Latvian citizenship in its framework. According to the Latvian Office for Citizenship and Migration Affairs, more than 312,000 aliens were registered in the country in 2012. Most of them are Russian (more than 205,000 people), approximately 42,000 are Belarusians, 30,000 Ukrainians, 8,000 Lithuanians, and less than 500 Estonians. A short increase in citizenship granting, which took place in 2005—2006 (19,100 applicants were granted citizenship in 2005, 15,100 in 2006) was followed by a steep decrease: 6800 people became Latvian citizens in 2007, approximately 3,000 in 2008, and 2,000 in 2009. In the recent years, the naturalisation rate decreased: 1160 people became citizens in Estonia and 2330 in Latvia. The successful completion of all naturalisation tests does not guarantee the obtaining of the status of a Latvian citizen: so, in 2004, the country’s govern-



ment refused citizenship to an activist of the oppositional party 'For Human Rights in United Latvia', Yu. Petropavlovsky, although he had passed the naturalisation procedure according to the Latvian laws.

Latvian 'aliens' are excluded from the political life of the country: they cannot vote either in parliamentary or local elections (unlike, for instance, Estonia, where the institution of 'aliens' also exists but they have the right to vote in municipal elections). However, in 2004, the Latvian Saeima approved amendments to the Constitution, which give EU citizens permanently residing in Latvia the right to participate in municipal elections. 'Aliens' are deprived of a number of social and economic rights — there are up to 80 differences in the rights of citizens and aliens (there were 61 differences in 2004 and 70 in 2006), including 47 professional restrictions (25 in 2004)<sup>10</sup>. In particular, 'aliens' cannot serve as public or municipal officers, hold military positions, works as judges and prosecutors; they do not have the right to establish political parties. As well as citizens, 'aliens' have to pay all taxes but, at the same time, are deprived of political representation. Thus, 'Latvian Latvia' is ignoring the classical principle "No taxation without representation". One can define the regime that has developed in Latvia as 'ethnocracy' — the politically dominant ethnic group 'privatises' the state [7, c. 144—145].

Discrimination and large-scale violation of human rights in Latvia has been mentioned in the reports of the related structures and experts of the UN, OSCE, the Council of Europe, PACE, the European Commission, and Amnesty International. They referred, in particular, to the violation of the 1994 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the 1996 Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities, the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, etc. In May 2005, the Latvian Saeima ratified the European Council's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities with two reservations abolishing the Convention provisions ensuring the right of national minorities to communicate with the authorities within the areas of their dense residence in their own language and to use their native tongue for topographic purposes. An additional declaration almost excluded permanent Russian-speaking residents of Latvia having the status of 'non-residents' from the scope of the Convention.

In Latvia, the need to 'let Russians into politics' has been actively discussed within the political and expert community for many years, however, in practice, political mobility is hampered by ethnic restrictions. The Russian-speaking community has made numerous attempts to overcome the seemingly unbreakable barrier of ethnic isolation. In most cases, these attempts were connected with the initiatives of the political alliances — For Human Rights in United Latvia (FHRUL) and the Harmony Centre.

FHRUL, which considers the recognition of aliens as Latvian citizens with a single legislative document to be the only "morally justified" way of restoring the political rights of non-citizens, supports all intermediate steps in this

<sup>10</sup> For more detail see the website of the Latvian Non-Citizens Congress ([www.kongress.lv](http://www.kongress.lv)).

direction: the ‘default pattern’ for certain categories of aliens, the permission to participate in municipal election, the elimination of barriers to participation in public administration as well as professional restrictions. The party is not represented either in the Riga Council or the Saeima; however, one representative of FHRUL is a member of the European Parliament, his term ends in 2014. The 2013 municipal campaign was a complete failure for the party.

The Harmony Centre advocates the acceleration and simplification of naturalisation, facilitation of the integration of ‘non-citizens’ through granting them more rights, including that to elect municipal representatives, free choice of the language of education at school, and the adaptation of the public administration system to the needs of the multicultural community of Latvia. Since 2009, the Harmony Centre has had a majority of seats in the Riga City Council, the mayor of the city is a Latvian citizen of Russian origin, Nils Ušakovs. As a result of the 2011 election, the Harmony Centre has the largest representation in the Saeima, however, it could not participate in the government formation, since the ‘Latvian’ parties — the Unity, the Reform Party, and the nationalist All For Latvia! — created a coalition. Despite the best result in the parliamentary campaign, the efforts of the coalition robbed the Harmony Centre of any opportunity to make key political decisions. In February 2012, the Harmony Centre leaders supported referendum on making Russian an official language of Latvia, which led to a national political crisis. A new non-governmental organisation — the Non-citizen Congress — that formed the “Parliament of the Non-represented” started its work in March 2013; it counts on support for the country’s rational political powers. The ethnic factor is still playing an important role in the political process in Latvia; it has not been withdrawn from the agenda.

A similar situation is observed in Estonia, where 68 % of the population are Estonian, and ethnic minorities account for 32 %. After the independence, the ruling groups rejected the principle of equal democratic participation of national minorities — the democratic ideal of minority representation was viewed as a direct threat to national independence [2]. Only decades later, according to Estonian researchers L. Kalev and R. Ruutsoo, an attempt at shifting the paradigm from the ethnically centralised to the liberal (civil) model was made [9]. The actions of the Estonian authorities towards the Russian-speaking minority are dictated by the integration policy. Thus, in the post-Soviet period, no Russian-speaking party managed to win seats in the Estonian parliament on its own. The best result — six seats in 1995 and 1999 — was shown by the Russian Party of Estonia (RPE), when it was a member of the Our Home is Estonia alliance (RPE ceased to exist in 2012 becoming part of the Social Democratic Part of Estonia). As a rule, Estonian Russian-speaking voters support the Centre Party headed by the mayor of Tallinn, E. Savisaar [18]. As well as in Latvia, Estonian centrists — despite being supported by the electorate — find themselves in isolation; they were not included into the ruling coalition either in 2007 or 2011. The representation of the political interests of Russians is treated with suspicion by the title nation, which has been prevalent in the elite segment of the society for a quarter of the century [12].

Thus, the ethnic factor has a significant effect on both the political process and the formation of elite groups in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Decades after the independence, the ethnic problems are still relevant, which makes it possible to speak of social lifts being 'sealed' in the conditions of ethnocratic regimes and the system of elite recruitment being 'frozen', which cannot but affect the quality of public administration and relations between the Baltics and Russia. Inefficient ethnic policy initiatives (like putting off the 'alien' problem solution), the 'sealing' of the elite recruitment processes as a result of a narrow understanding of nation (the violation of the voting rights of 'strangers', their isolation from political administration) grant the ruling groups exclusive access to power ensuring the 'stability' of national political life. In the long run, however, such situation can be fraught with social unrest. Increasing tension is manifested in the establishment of grass-roots organisations like the Non-Citizen Congress in Latvia.

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#### ***About the author***

*Dr Vadim Smirnov*, Senior Research Fellow, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Russia.

E-mail: Smirnov.kaliningrad@gmail.com