

The Changing Discourse of Minority Identities: Latvia

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The issue of minority identities has been intriguing to Baltic researchers ever since the early 1990s. Karklins, in studying national identity, has stressed links between ethnic, state and regime identities.¹ Karklins and Zepa have accented changes in state-based identity in the context of the state's status and of changes in the political regime.² Tabuns, Tabuna and Broks have focused the minority identity problem on the fact that national identity emerges against the background of multi-ethnic identities, providing empirical evidence about that which Latvia's largest ethnic groups (Latvians and Russians) have in common and that which separates them.³ Kirch and Kirch have focused attention on the way in which the identity of Estonia's Russians has changed in the context of integration in society.⁴

In his work, Laitin has looked at the way in which the identity of Russian speakers is developing in four post-Communist countries, including Estonia and Latvia, thinking about the strategies that the minorities are choosing: "As Russians in the near abroad decide whether to assimilate, to organise politically as Russians, or to return to their putative homeland, the basic identity categories that guided them in the past become eroded. Russians in all four republics are, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, inventing new categories of identity to help them make sense of who they are."⁵

For empirical illustrations, authors have commonly turned to data from quantitative surveys. Leitins also employs content analysis of the mass media, as well as experiments. Tabuns, Tabuna and Broks also have engaged in content analysis of newspapers in addition to their survey work.

Changes in identity: the 1990s and the start of the 21st century

In the early 1990s, Karklins and Zepa found that there was a visible change in identities among Latvia's residents. Data from October 1990 and April 1991 indicated that even over the course of just half a year, the number of people who thought of themselves as residents of Latvia had increased significantly. There were fewer people who counted themselves among the residents of the USSR, fewer people who linked their place of residence first and foremost to their neighbourhood or their city. In other words, the restoration of Latvia's independence strengthened the sense of belonging to Latvia among minorities.

¹ Rasma Karklins *Ethnopolitics and Transition to Democracy*. The Woodrow Wilson Center Press. Washington, D.C., 1994.

² Rasma Karklins, Brigita Zepa. Multiple Identities and Ethnopolitics in Latvia. *American Behavioural Scientist*, Vol. 39 No.8, August 1996. p. 33-45

³ National, State and Regime Identity in Latvia. Ed. Aivars Tabuns. BSC. Riga. 2001.

⁴ The Integration of Non-Estonians into Estonian Society :History, Problems and Trends. Ed. Aksel Kirch. Estonian Academy Publishers. Tallinn.1997.

⁵ David Laitin. *Identity in Formation. The Russian-Speaking Population in the Near Abroad*. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey. 2000.

Table 1. Territorial identity: Latvians and minorities (1990-1991)
Percentage of respondents who defined themselves as residents of ...

	October 1990		April 1991	
	Latvians	Others	Latvians	Others
Resident of:				
An area or city	37	44	23	31
Latvia	55	31	65	43
The USSR	1	15	0	10
Europe	0	2	1	2
The world	1	3	1	5
Hard to say	3	3	1	8
No answer	3	2	9	1

Source: Latvian Social Research Centre, 1990, 1991.

More than 10 years later, another study was conducted - "Ethnic Tolerance and Integration of the Latvian Society" (BISS, 2004). Data from that survey show that among Latvia's minorities, and particularly among Russians, people often feel a sense of belonging not only to Latvia, but also to Russia (25%). The sense of belonging to Europe is much less common among minorities in Latvia than is the sense of belonging to Russia (5%). That may be one reason why Latvia's Russians were somewhat doubtful about the country's accession to the European Union.

Table 2. Territorial identity: Latvians and minorities, 2004

How closely linked do you feel you are to ... (% shows those answering "very closely" and "closely")	Latvians	Russians	Others
... your area	66	67	64
... your city	76	79	82
... your region	57	48	40
... Latvia	82	74	74
... Russia	3	25	18
... the Baltic States	15	8	15
... Europe	12	5	7

Source: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2004.

In the more than 10 years since the restoration of Latvia's independence, a new generation has grown up, one in which people have shaped their identities against the background of shifting identities among their parents. The issue of identity among minority young people attracted particular attention once it was found that the greatest number of Euro-sceptics could be found specifically in this group when it came time for the referendum on joining the EU.

In a post-referendum study (BISS, 2003), it was found that there were quite a few more Euro-sceptics among young people than in the population at large, and this was particularly true among minority young people - among them, only 10% had plumped in favour of joining the EU, while 45% did vote in the referendum at all. Among young people who are citizens of Latvia, 40% voted "yes", and 30% did not

participate. Among all citizens, 50% voted “yes”, and 25% abstained; among citizens, participated in referenda, 67% voted “yes”.

Table 3. The vote on joining the EU

	Voted “yes”	Did not vote at all
Minority young people	10%	45%
All young people	40%	30%
All citizens	50%	27%
Citizens, participated in referenda	67%	-

Source: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2003.

Constructing identity

The primary purpose in writing this article is to gain an understanding of the way in which identities among Latvia’s minorities are established and how they change, taking a particular look at that which hides behind the quantitative survey data in this area. Discourse analysis is used as a method here, using it to look at the way in which minorities construct their identities through everyday discourse.

The basic study of identity here is based on the approach of Erikson - one that is used by many other researchers, too: “Identity formation [is] a process ... by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him.”⁶

Other authors, too, have stressed the dual nature of how ethnic identities emerge: “Ethnic identity is the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individuals’ self-identification and outsiders’ ethnic designations-that is, what *you* think is your ethnicity, versus what *they* think is your ethnicity”.⁷

In this article, I will use the results of focus group discussions. The goals of these groups have been different. Some have looked at attitudes vis-à-vis accession to the EU - something which provoked the revelation of one’s identity in a broader context. Others have dealt with attitudes toward minority school reforms, which provoked people into talking more about the discourse of power. Questions which touched directly upon identity were not particularly detailed in this case, but the benefit is that the focus group discussions were held with various kinds of people:

- 1) Young people who are non-citizens
- 2) Non-citizens who are older than 40
- 3) Students in minority schools
- 4) Parents of students in minority schools
- 5) Teachers in minority schools

⁶ Erik H.Erikson. *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York, Norton. 1968. pp. 22-23.

⁷ Joanna Nagel. ... *Identity and Social Change*. Ed. J.E.Davis. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, London. 1998. p.83.

This article is based on the approach which De Cillia, Reigl and Vodak have used in analysing focus group results, as reflected in the article “The Discursive Construction of National Identities”⁸.

The following are the assumptions on which analysis of focus group texts is based:

1) National identity is not an inborn aspect of identity such as race, one that is explained through “primordialism”. It is socially constructed through interaction among family, school, the mass media and the influence of others.

2) Identity is a malleable phenomenon, particularly at times when there have been changes in the status of the state, the political regime or the economic system.

3) The construction of identity involves interaction between the personal and the public space, because the construction of an identity represents both an evaluation of oneself and the evaluation of “others” about “me” and about the group to which “I” belong.

4) The construction of identity is based on emphasising one’s own unique nature, separating one’s identity from others who are different in one way or another.

As did De Cillia, Reigl and Vodak,⁹ I will conduct an analysis which separates out three interrelated dimensions: contents/topics, strategies, and linguistic means and forms of their realisation.

Subjects which participants in focus group discussions decide to debate allow us to look at the aspects which participants in the discussion find to be meaningful. This allows researchers to classify subjects in accordance to their meaning and to get a sense of how the researched phenomenon is constructed: “Through discourse, social actors constitute knowledge, situations, social roles, as well as identities and interpersonal relations between various interacting social groups.”¹⁰

Major topics of discussion when talking about one’s sense of belonging to Latvia

If we look at the major topics which appeared in focus group discussions, we find that discourses via which participants expressed their belonging to Latvia were expressed through comparison and contrast. The construction of an identity discourse is a complicated process, one that is imbued with internal conflict. These are the contrasts which were used most often:

- 1) Latvia vs. Russia (the Soviet Union)
- 2) The past vs. the present day
- 3) The private vs. the public space
- 4) The land vs. the state
- 5) Positive things that attract vs. negative things that repel

In search for a minority identity: Latvia compared to Russia

The construction of a minority identity is based on what the individual says about his or her belonging to Latvia and on what his or her statements repeat from things that “others” have said about Latvia.

Both in the things that participants said and in the things that “others” have said about Latvia, there is often a comparison between Latvia and Russia, with people

⁸ Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Reigl and Ruth Vodak. The Discursive Construction of National Identities. *Discourse & Society*. Sage. Vol. 10(2), pp. 149-173

⁹ De Cillia, Reigl and Wodak.

¹⁰ De Cillia, Reigl and Wodak. P. 157.

speaking about factors such as economics, social security and geopolitical considerations (proximity to Europe). The views of “others” who reside in Russia are mentioned most often, and a great deal of importance is attached to these statements. It is precisely with Russia that Latvia’s minorities have the closest links. Many people have friends and relatives whom they visit in the neighbouring country, and when they talk, one hears the views of “others” about Latvia.

There were many situations like that. I used to live in the East, during Soviet times, and Latvia was seen very much as a foreign country there. When I said that I was from Rīga, everyone fell silent for a long time. (A teacher)

I have relatives in Russia, and they believe that Latvia is a part of Europe. Then I feel a true sense of pride in relation to them. (A teacher)

Some respondents compared Latvia and Russia on the basis of their own experience, and that has allowed them to develop a positive discourse about Latvia:

When I travelled around, I came to understand that we are quite a bit ahead of them [Russia]. (A teacher)

It’s even worse there [in Russia]. Salaries also aren’t paid there, but for longer periods of time. Here in Latvia, if it’s a state-owned company, the salary is paid every month, but not over there. You don’t even get child support subsidies for a long period of time, while here something is paid out every month. I wouldn’t want to return to Russia. (A young non-citizen)

The discourse of a new identity: Latvia’s Russians are “different from Russia’s Russians”

Latvia’s Russians are fond of stressing the fact that as far as “others” are concerned, they differ from Russia’s Russians in language, behaviour and culture. This serves as an emotional foundation for a new identity.

We had been there for a while, perhaps for a week, and then they said that we really were different in outer terms. We spoke in some special way. Perhaps we don’t feel that here, but when we find ourselves amidst real Russians, those who live in Russia, they say that we are completely different people. Perhaps we are a bit more cultured, more unique, and then we are always proud that we are from Latvia. (A parent)

Comparing the past and the present

In talking about their sense of belonging to Latvia, many respondents spoke about the past, about the era of the Soviet Union:

When I served in the army, it was international. When they found out that we were from the Baltic republics, from Latvia and Estonia, they treated us like people from the West. There was a period of that kind. (A teacher)

Respondents were pleased to call up memories about the unified country that was the Soviet Union and about the popularity of products from the Latvian SSR therein. This can be seen as a “nostalgic discourse” of identity, one which simultaneously covers a sense of belonging to the entire USSR and to Latvia as one of its components:

Everywhere we went along Latvia’s borders (St Petersburg, Brest), when people found out that we were from Latvia, from Rīga ... of course, we brought along souvenirs, our famous chocolates. We were immediately recognised because of the

chocolates, the Laima company and so forth. The Uzvara company was still operating back then. (A teacher)

When comparing the past to the present, respondents stress not only Latvia's economic achievements during the Soviet period, but also the Soviet ideology of internationalism, one which respondents prefer over the nation state ideology that is implemented by independent Latvia:

In Soviet times I was really proud, I thought that ethnic relationships here were more acceptable, more harmonic, more tolerant, patient and calm. Recently, if you assign a grade to ethnic relations, then the grade for the state (the government) is negative. (A teacher)

During Soviet times, the assessment which "others" - those who lived in Russia - produced about Latvia's Russians tended to be positive. They were seen as different, but attractive. When Latvia regained its independence, attitudes shifted toward the negative. As far as "others" in Latvia are concerned, their evaluation is perceived by minorities as being negative. Often this represents bitterness over the fact that the sense of belonging to Russia and to Latvia alike is under threat. This could be defined as a "crisis discourse" for the identity of Latvia's minorities.

Attitudes have been changing recently. A while ago I spent one year working in Russia. Attitudes were very different toward me, a Russian, a person who had come from Latvia. We are treated poorly here, now we are also treated poorly there. It was with sadness that I returned. (A teacher)

In St Petersburg they say, 'You are not one of ours, you speak differently. [...] You are no longer one of us.' (A parent)

People in Moscow get tired when they listen to me, they say, 'You speak so slowly that it is impossible to listen to you!' (A parent)

The ideas of minorities vis-à-vis their belonging to Russia are also changing, one notices alienation from Russia, but also a sense of difference from ethnic Latvians. This indicates that a search is afoot for a new identity. We are dealing with a group that might be called "Latvia's Russians", these are neither "Russians" nor "Latvians". One senses an emotional desire to demonstrate a new identity.

I went to visit my parents in Russia. [...] For a long time now, I have not been needed there, I differ from Russians who live there, and I differ from Latvians who live there. I think that I have to be proud of [belonging to Latvia]. (A parent)

By monitoring the discourses which serve to construct the minority identity, we can produce a summarising matrix which compares the "past vs. present" discourses, as well as what minorities think "others" are saying about them, and what they feel about themselves. We can see that if there was a "positive discourse" about the past, then the discourse about the present differs both by virtue of the negative position of "others" and by virtue of the fact that only the self-evaluation discourse is positive in nature.

The matrix of Latvia's minority identity: "Past vs. present", "Others vs. us"

	"Others" in Russia	"Others in Latvia"	Self-evaluation
Soviet times	+	0	+
Now	-	-	+

A new identity: State-based, ethnic or another ...

Minorities today are facing a dilemma. Should their new identity be based on the state, on ethnicity or on some other factor? The evaluation by “others” differs in foreign countries and in Latvia. When they are abroad, minorities find that the evaluation of “others” allows them to feel a sense of belonging to Latvia, i.e., to feel a state-based identity. Here in Latvia, however, the evaluations of “others” tend to stress that which is different - ethnic identity, as well as differing citizenship status:

Whenever we are abroad, then we are from Latvia. When we are here, then each of us has a separate nationality - we are Russians or Latvians. (A parent)

The search for a new identity is also evidenced by efforts to separate oneself from Russia, the desire to receive confirmation from “others” of one’s belonging to Latvia. At the same time, however, the new identity is still fragile - the evaluation of the “others” does not meet expectations:

Once our group travelled to Poland, and the Poles looked at us peculiarly, why had we gone there in the first place? When our people started to speak Polish, then it turned out that the Poles had thought that we were Russians. That was offensive - why Russians? Latvia, that is where we were from. No, right away we’re Russians. Not that Latvia is a separate country, no - we’re immediately Russians. They know very little about our country. It’s humiliating. (A student)

In the search for identity, minorities also repeat the “labels” which radical nationalist politicians attach to them - the word “occupant”, for instance:

*I am an **occupant**. My mother had a profession which meant that in Soviet times, she travelled all around the Union. It turned out that in the last few years we lived in Jēkabpils.*

Minorities do not wish to link their identity to the status of citizen or non-citizen, because they consider the situation to be unfair. As counter-arguments, they use discourses that have often been presented in the Russian language media: “Automatic granting of citizenship”, “living in this country for several generations”, “working on behalf of the state”, etc.

First of all, there is the fact that I am a non-citizen, and in some way I feel that I am not needed. (A non-citizen)

*The fact that they **won’t give citizenship** to people who have lived here for their whole life or half their life **is a direct indication that we are nothing here**. We are not Latvia’s residents, we simply populate this territory. That is not too good either. (A non-citizen)*

So why cannot we automatically receive citizenship in this country in which we live? We work for the state, our children are born here, but we still have to go and fight to get citizenship. I don’t know - that doesn’t seem right. (A non-citizen)

Young people from ethnic minorities find the discourses which prevail in the Latvian public space to be alien and incomprehensible - the idea that citizenship is a confirmation of loyalty, that loyalty is manifested through the naturalisation oath. Things which minority young people said in the focus group discussions suggested that they have very poor understanding of the institution of citizenship as such. The word “discrimination” that is often used in the Russian language mass media is used in an absurd sense - “discrimination in undertaking responsibility”:

The point is neither the money nor the effort. The point is that you have to take an oath when you go to be naturalised. Latvians who are our peers do not have to take this oath before the state. They are automatically citizens of the state. We have to take the oath. That means that we have to undertake a certain amount of

responsibility. We face discrimination in undertaking responsibility by swearing an oath before this country. (A student)

In terms of feeling a sense of belonging to Europe, too, minorities feel quite distanced, and that is basically for two reasons - one is the highly different standard of living in Western Europe as opposed to Latvia, and the second is the fact that democracy has not yet fully developed in Latvia. Only in geographic terms to minorities feel a sense of belonging to Europe. It is of importance here that in discussing their attitudes vis-à-vis Europe, Russian speaking minorities use comparisons with Russia:

This place [Latvia] has nothing to do with Europe. In 15 or 20 years, no sooner, we will be able to feel that we really live in Europe. If you compare us to Russia, then we are living in Europe. Over there you get the feeling that you've gone back in history - 15 years if not more. Here, however, we are far from feeling like Europeans who have the rights of Europeans. (Young non-citizen)

I think that given that everything that is happening here, all of the different kinds of discrimination - well, we are far from Europe, very far indeed. (Young non-citizen).

Europeans. To me, a European is someone who is normal and rich ... well, not quite rich, but a normal person who makes a good living. There aren't many such people in Latvia. It's just in geographic terms that I say "yes". (Young non-citizen)

Belonging to Latvia as a land and as a state

Survey data (BISS, 2004) show that 74% of Russians and other minority representatives in Latvia declare a sense of belonging to Latvia. That clearly demonstrates the close links of minorities to Latvia. The survey does not, however, allow us to understand clearly what the minority people think when they say that they feel a sense of belonging to Latvia. Qualitative research and focus group text analysis reveals the fact that minorities understand this sense of belonging in two different ways. Minorities may stress their sense of belonging to Latvia, but they differentiate between Latvia as a land and Latvia as a state. Respondents speak of Latvia as an attractive land, one which differs from Russia with its Western ways.

I still feel proud of Latvia as a land. When I travel to Russia, I understand that Latvia is closer to Western culture, the spirit is free here. (A teacher)

When the Soviet Union broke up, minorities lost their state-based identity vis-à-vis the USSR and Russia, but a new state-based identity that emerged in the period before Latvia's restoration of independence has not developed into an identity vis-à-vis Latvia as a state in the later years of independence:

I feel nostalgia for the late 1980s, when there was a very great sense of freedom, of pride in the state. There was no division between the concepts of 'strana' ("land" in the Russian language) and 'gosudarstvo' (state). (A teacher)

The public vs. the private space - positive vs. negative

When talking about their belonging to Latvia, participants in the focus group discussion quite strictly differentiated between discourses that describe Latvia as a public space and those which describe Latvia as a space for personal life. When talking about Latvia as a public space, most respondents strictly divided up those subject areas in which they had positive things to say about Latvia and those in which

evaluations of Latvia were mostly negative. Positive statements mostly had to do with achievements in sports or in international competitions. Focus group participants were happy and proud to speak about such things:

In the Eurovision Song Contest, we always support our performers. (A teacher)

Recently awards were given to students from Latvia, at the embassy right here in Rīga. These were students who won prizes in the Russian language Olympiad in Russia. They said that students from the Baltic States, from the former republics of the Soviet Union, were among the best when it comes to Russian language skills. Of course, I feel pride in Latvia. (A teacher)

Respondents also like it when guests have positive things to say about Rīga, Latvia, people in Latvia and their culture, when they compare Rīga to Prague or Paris:

They always say that people from Latvia are always very accurate. For instance, in the hotels, in dormitories where we stayed at school, we always left everything in good order when we departed. (A teacher)

They say that our drivers are very disciplined. I know how they drive in Russia, with no rules at all. (A teacher)

I had relatives who came from abroad when Rīga celebrated its 800th anniversary. It was a fairy tale, of course. I felt such great pride of living in this country. It was very nice for everyone. (A teacher)

Negative subjects vis-à-vis the political space in Latvia mostly have to do with politics. Particular criticism is waged against politicians for the decisions that they take, the reforms that they institute and the selfish goals that they pursue:

I guess that I feel ashamed not about the state as such, because the state is not to blame, but about specific people who run our country, about their thoughtless actions as manifested in concrete laws - the law on education, the decision to close down children's homes, Latvia's participation in the war in Iraq. (A student)

I criticise the government for the way in which it pursues its selfish interests. The government's primary job should be to facilitate the economy and to care for the people, but they forget that, they play political games. The goal that is being pursued by the politicians is to divide up our society into two strata. (A student)

I think that certain politicians turn this into a political farce, they use it for their own purposes, they don't have any noble or fine goals. (A student)

I don't know if anyone who is elected to the Saeima [the Latvian parliament] from a political party continues to think about problems instead of starting to grab benefits for himself. Greed starts to appear - this for you, this for me, but no thought for everyone else. (A student)

I found it very unpleasant, I was very ashamed when a few weeks ago, an MP from PCTVL [the left wing For Human Rights in a United Latvia party] left and joined a different party. (A student)

In stressing the selfish interests of politicians, focus group participants conclude that their own interests are not being defended by anyone. It is understandable that among minorities, this creates more of a sense of alienation than of belonging when it comes to society in Latvia:

I cannot name a single concrete individual who specifically defends our interests. At meetings, PCTVL, Pliners [a well known left wing politician] and other politicians defend our interests, but what is the goal - to defend us or to achieve the political goals of their parties? (A student)

Even as they criticise Latvia's politicians, however, minority respondents do not want "others" to speak negatively about Latvia:

I don't like it when people say bad things about Latvia, when Russian Television, for instance, displays Latvia in a bad light, when it produces a very negative evaluation of the actions of politicians. (A student)

I don't like it that Russia's central television channels have recently been showing only negative things about Latvia. If they show a demonstration, something negative, then there is a lack of any counter-weight, something light. (A student)

A differing interpretation of history

One reason for negative attitudes toward Latvian politics and politicians and for the delay in the strengthening of a state-based identity among Latvia's minorities is that there are different views about history. This most often has to do with the way in which Latvia ended up a part of the Soviet Union. Minority people have all learned the Soviet version of history, one that was backed up by the totalitarian ideology of Soviet times. These are people who are disgusted when they hear the "new" interpretation of history - that the Soviet Union occupied Latvia in 1940 in accordance with the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany:

I don't like it when Latvian politicians often accuse Russia of things that are the fault of the Soviet Union. Latvia was in the Union, after all. Why should Russia be held responsible for this? (A student)

I felt uncomfortable when I read my child's 5th grade textbook about Latvian history. They force the child to learn all of these things. It's so incompetent. We lived in the era which that book describes, and we perceived it differently. (A parent)

If I compare Russian and Latvian schoolbooks, I become confused. I read that Latvia was occupied. As far as I have lived, as far as I know, then Latvia was a part of the Soviet Union, part of a big country. Now I read in books that it was occupied. I know from my own experience that this is not true, but the next generations will read this and think so, too. History is supposed to make people learn from their mistakes. Then let's do that, let's not rewrite history on behalf of some goal of our own. (A student)

Among minorities, there is the very widespread view that the Soviet Union made a great contribution toward the development of Latvia's economy and culture. Here is an excerpt from the focus group discussion among parents:

What's more, the Soviet Union invested a great deal in Latvia.

Yes, indeed - a great deal.

This was the gate to Europe.

Discourses in these minority discussions have not only been influenced by the Russian language press in Latvia, they also serve as multipliers for the discourses of the mass media in Russia proper:

Why should Latvia not take positive aspects from Russia? In addition to the state, Putin also understands education. Each country tries to politicise history in its schoolbooks, to reflect itself as positively as possible. As far as Putin is concerned, I've heard that he has ordered the publishing of schoolbooks without politics, reflecting only facts. As far as I know, the Latvian government has said that it does not need such schoolbooks. It is provoking a split. (A student)

A fragment from the student discussion:

I think that we should have a nationally elected president, like in Russia.

I agree. Russia sets an example for me as a country in which the president understands his country. Latvians should step back from the West and take a look at

Russia, at how the state system is organised there, they should borrow a few ideas for themselves. There is real experience, and we can learn from Russia's mistakes.

Content analysis of the Latvian and Russian language press, as conducted by Broks, Tabuns, Tabuna,¹¹ showed that the two offer a differing reflection of Latvia's history, not least of the events of 1940. With the mediation of the media and of parents, therefore, many young people reproduce differing knowledge about history. As a result, the history that is taught at school does not convince minority young people.

Latvia as a private space: "Biographic identity"

People feel the closest links to Latvia via their memories from childhood, the time that they have spent in Latvia and its accustomed environment and culture. When thinking about the possibility of leaving Latvia, many focus group participants talked about family members and friends whom they would not like to leave. This kind of sense of belonging can be called a "biographic" identity:

When I was in New York, in this great global metropolis, I looked at the city and wanted Old Rīga. I was being pulled back toward Rīga, not toward Moscow or Russia. In foreign countries, you sit around and feel sad for the places that you know. I cannot explain this. (A student)

It's internal belonging. I was born here. When I was little, I was taken to the park, I remember lots of different things. This internal belonging is there, and I can't do anything about it. In foreign countries you sit around and feel sad for the places that you know. That is something that cannot be explained. (A student)

This is the land of our birth, we have lived here all our lives. That is something that is our own. In other countries, we feel as if we are not in our own skin. Different cultures, we don't know how to behave, what's happening there. I went to visit my grandma for a week. I talked to people, I went out into the street and understood that it was not mine. I've lived here for so many years, I feel that everything is mine. (A student)

First of all, this is the land of my birth. I respect the people who live here, I respect their interests. If I live in another country, I will worry about Latvia, I will be pulled back toward these streets. Inescapably, this is the land of my birth. (A student)

I will be sad, for instance, to leave people, my friends in particular. I will feel most sorry for leaving Latvia, not the state, but the land - the nature, the specific places. This is Latvia, after all. Rīga is the city of my birth, and I link so many things to it. (A student)

Rīga is the city of my birth, I have lived here all my life. I walk down the street and remember - here there used to be this, over there - something else. Memories are precious. If you go somewhere else, there are alien circumstances, unknown people, and you think, my God, where am I now? (A student)

It is very hard to gain the trust of people, very hard to find work and, by extension, to find your place in society - only a few people achieve that. It's much simpler here. You were born here, you are accustomed to everything to a greater degree. If you find yourself in trouble, then you know that literally a few kilometres away there are close people whom you will be able to ring and say what you're feeling. You can go visit those people and gain real support. (A student)

¹¹ National, State and Regime Identity in Latvia. Ed. Aivars Tabuns. BSC. Riga. 2001. pp.72-92

Here there are my friends, my parents, people who are close to me, but I guess I could go away to earn some money. (A student)

I intend to stay here, because I understand that no one really needs me over there. (A student)

The search for a desirable identity

Seemingly in contrast to the ethnic divisions in society that are forced upon them by “others”, young people want to stress that which young Russians and Latvians have in common, thus constructing an identity that stands above ethnic differences, one which can unify the two groups. Here is a fragment from the student discussion:

I think that Russians and Latvians have similar problems, and we should not be divided up. Politicians are the ones who divide us up and position us against one another.

I have friends who are Latvians. In our group, there is no thought about going out to fight. Politicians are the ones who are firing us up.

I read Russian and Latvian magazines which contain completely different views. That's a matter of politics.

The interpretation of the minority identity here is closely linked to the desire to avoid conflicts in Latvia. This could be called a “strategy of adaptation”, as proposed by the minority young people:

In Bolderāja [a neighbourhood of Rīga], we have a pact. The Russians don't touch the Latvians, the Latvians don't touch the Russians. Someone new moved into the neighbourhood. One evening, a Russian was beaten up, his gold chain, his mobile telephone and other valuable property were taken away from him. Immediately a Latvian was beaten up. Everyone paid for that. After all, we can all live in peace. Why shouldn't we be able to live in peace in a big city? (A student)

Don't touch us. don't sow the seed of hatred, because aggression will not emerge from nothing, no physical aggression, no aggression at all. Knowing the Russian people, aggression will be manifested as self-defence. Seeking for a compromise, I believe that it is possible to co-exist peacefully, to have friendship. I don't understand why the politicians are trying to get us to hate one another! (A student)

When asked what minority young people would wish for Latvia, they first and foremost talked about the subject of ethnic harmony, and they also expressed the desire to see Latvia as an economically developed country:

The state must seek to ensure that people - Russians and Latvians alike - understand one another to a greater degree, that they are not split, that there is no mutual aggression. Then there would be fewer problems. If people feel happy, they do not want to do anything bad. (A student)

I would wish Latvia consolidation and unity, so that people aren't divided up between Latvians and Russians, so that everyone understands that we have one country and that we are a force when we stand together. Then we'll achieve the economic flourishing and democracy about which people in Latvia are so very worried. (A student)

I would like the energy that is devoted to disputes and to reforms that cannot be understood instead to be devoted to truly serious issues - manufacturing, economic development. We shouldn't have this cyclical running in place, this effort to explain who is right and who is wrong. (A student)

I would like to wish economic progress for Latvia so that it reaches the American and German level. Many problems emerge not only because of not knowing the language, but also from the economy. That's no secret to anyone. (A student)

Conclusion

If we monitor the way in which the identities of Russian speaking minorities have changed over the last 10 years, we find that this has been a period during which the lives of minority people have involved a great search and a lot of emotion. This is true because there has been a need to study the contradictions that have emerged in the construction of a new identity as a result of historical events in Latvia. If we assume that the establishment of an identity is a process in which of equal importance is the way in which someone views himself or herself and the way in which that person thinks about the views of "others" with respect to himself or herself, then we must remember that over the last 15 years, there have been radical changes in the lives of minorities and "others", as well. In many cases, former majorities have turned into minorities, while the "others", who in Soviet times were all the residents of a very big country, have now become the residents of a variety of different countries, Latvia included.

Analysis of the discourse which underpins the construction of minority identities shows that over the last decade, the view of "others" vis-à-vis minorities has become radically negative. Latvia's minorities are aliens in Russia's eyes, and they have faced negative attitudes even in their own "land" - Latvia. This could be called an identity crisis for minorities, or perhaps the "individualisation" of identities. The fact is that this identity was most strongly rooted in the emotional links of an individual with his or her land and biography - family, friends, years spent in Latvia. This is an identity which lacks a positive "external view". In the event, the external view leads to dissatisfaction, criticism and protests (e.g., the participation of young people in protests against education reforms).

We could also talk of an identity crisis for other reasons. On the one hand, minorities wish to feel a sense of belonging in Latvia, but on the other, they do not want there to be an ethnic division in this process - Latvians, Russians, etc. Neither do they want any emphasis on the division between citizens and non-citizens. It is, however, exactly these "identity boundaries" that are put into place by the majority.

It is also true that minority people wish to feel a specific identity which allows them to feel different both from Russian speakers in Russia and from the majority in Latvia. This is a process of searching out a new identity for Latvia's Russian speakers. For the time being, there is no clear answer to the question of what the identity of Latvia's minorities might be.

If we seek to reveal the strategies which Russian speaking minorities use in the construction of their identity, the most important ones, it appears, are "opposing any identity that is forced upon me from the outside" - a strategy which manifests itself in an attempt to emphasise that which minorities have in common with the majority (the same country, unified strength, the same interests) - and also the strategy of "adaptation", which is seen through attempts to seek out compromise and to reach "agreement" on conditions for co-existence. A part of this second strategy is also the "biographic strategy" or the "standing apart strategy" - one that is manifested through a sense of belonging to Latvia because of one's own biography - life in Latvia, family and friends.