

Identities and a sense of belonging: young Lithuanians and Latvians from ethnic minorities

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This paper addresses the ways in which new nation building in Lithuania and Latvia since the 1990s affects cultural identities of ethnic minorities in this historically culturally diverse region. Its aim is to identify from a “bottom up” perspective means through which individuals from different ethnic minorities express and negotiate their cultural, ethnic and national affiliations. It explores the ways ethnic minority people retain their own identities amidst globalization/hybridization of culture at the beginning of the 21st century and new nation-building.

Using a variety of empirical, including biographical data, the paper contributes to the theoretical and policy debate on cultural diversity that is rooted in the historical and geopolitical paths of Eastern Europe. This data was collected in the EU- funded project EC FP7 ENRI-East (2008–2011)¹ in which ethnic minorities from Lithuania and Latvia were studied. In the study, ethnic minorities along the new EU border were considered as neither being entirely diasporic or of migrant origin, but as a “quasi-diaspora” group that was mostly created not by recent migrations, but by historic border shifts.

Analysis of the biographical narratives of individuals from ethnic minorities in Lithuania and Latvia showed the complexity of ethnic, national and European identifications, and the ways individuals choose who they are in a rapidly changing cultural environment. The use of the actor-driven ethnic identification approach instead of “grouping” according to the external markers of ethnicity proved to be successful in getting individuals’ reflections upon the changing nature of cultural environment, and also in the historic narratives of association with “place”.

Biographical methods enabled the capture of the dynamics of ethnic identification, biographical life strategies of the individuals, perceptions of the “other” in society, minority (ies)-majority relationship. Comparative analysis of biographical narratives of ethnic minority individuals in Lithuania and Latvia references changing language practices, surnaming convention, historic and cultural memories of the place, religious practices.

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¹ EC FP7 ENRI-EAST: *Interplay of European, National and Regional identities* project. The project was funded by the European Commission through an FP7-SSH Grant No 217227. Geographical coverage of the biographical interviews included eight East Central EU countries and Eastern European non-EU countries and covered twelve ethnic minorities in total. These involved Russians, Belarusians and Poles in Lithuania; Russians in Latvia, Ukrainians and Belarusians in Poland, Slovaks in Hungary, Hungarians in Slovakia, Poles in Belarus; Poles and Hungarians in Ukraine, and Lithuanians in Russia (Kaliningrads-kaya oblast). The data used for the analysis in the present paper is based on the interviews that took place in the following countries and locations: Latvia: interviews were carried out in Riga, Rēzekne and Daugavpils. Lithuania: Lithuanian interviews were undertaken in and around Vilnius.

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Introduction

The understanding of cohesive society in post-Soviet and Eastern European countries since the collapse of Communism has been a core topic of political and academic debates for over two decades. The collapse of old political and societal systems and disintegration of larger states had the result that “individuals lose a sense of belonging and are attracted to ethnic nationalism, which according to psychological research increases a sense of self-esteem. For similar reasons, they may be attracted to family and other traditional values” (Eatwell, 2009, p.53, cited in Guibernau, 2013, p. 23). Although Eatwell’s observation quoted by Guibernau above, mainly refers to the revival of the radical right in the “profoundly individualistic” Western societies (Guibernau, 2013), this pattern is strikingly similar to the developments in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. Using the bottom-up approach, this paper assesses the sense of belonging and “otherness” of individuals from ethnic minorities in culturally diverse communities, when a “conflict” between their formal/external identities and ethnic identification leads to the increased sense of “otherness” and alienation. The present paper includes analysis of ethnic identifications and biographical strategies by ethnic Russian minorities in Lithuania and Latvia through the use of biographical narratives of the younger generations of Lithuanian and Latvian Russians-contemporaries of Lithuanian and Latvian independent states. The paper explores a range of factors that affect ethnic minorities’ sense of belonging in culturally diverse communities and those that cause insecurity that could prompt them to consider emigrating from the “new” nation-states or remaining.

Biographical interviews were part of series of qualitative studies conducted by the EC FP7 ENRI-East project (2008–2011), in 8 east and central European countries and Russia and 12 ethnic minority groups (Nurse, 2013, p. 117–119). Developed approaches and findings could be important for other European studies and policies regarding ethnic minorities’ human security and related to human insecurity migration, particularly in European and post-Soviet countries and also for Western European countries where there is a trend of transfer of power to sub-national layers of government.

Cultural diversity in the nation building in the post-Soviet context

In her book “Belonging: Solidarity and Division in Modern Societies”, Montserrat Guibernau comments on the models of integration, their success and desirability in modern societies. She raises the question “what should be the basis of a cohesive society” and asks “whether this requires the sharing of a common identity grounded upon some cultural, linguistic, religious and civic values among all citizens. Ultimately it poses questions about the conditions for the **coexistence of different identities within a single nation** (emphasis mine LN), thus directly addressing a reflection on the limits of toleration within liberal democracies” (Guibernau, 2013, p. 22). Co-existence of different identities within a single nation became an issue of intensive theorization due to the emergence of increasingly culturally mixed global societies, but discussions were mostly focused on the impact of populations movements, international, transnational migration flows leading to hybridization of cultures (Nederveen Pieterse, 2007, 2015; Lianos, 2013). Increasing hybridization of cultures impacts and challenges individuals’ sense of belonging in rapidly changing societies, be they locals or the “other”. Though



hybridization of cultures is not a new phenomenon, “the pace of mixing accelerates and its scope widens in the wake of major cultural changes, such as new technologies that enable new forms of intellectual contact” (Nederveen, Pieterse, 2007, p. 3). Hybridization of cultures which is accelerated by 24/7 media flows, travel and increased population flows, dilutes the distinctive symbolic borders between local and the “other”, and changes the balance between majority-minority populations depending on historic or political circumstances. This process is asymmetrical not only in global and regional relations, but also from a generational perspective. This unevenness is clearly present in East Central European countries (Nurse, 2013; Nurse, 2011; Nurse, Sik, 2011) which have been building cohesive societies in a historically and culturally diverse part of the EU. The issue of ethnic minority groups’ identification in the Eastern European context is closely intertwined with the national border changes in Europe. The focus of this paper is not on detailed analysis of major historic and geopolitical changes in Europe after WWII, disintegration of the USSR and the enlargement of the European Union to the East for the whole of Eastern Europe; however, these events are reflected in the narratives of the ethnic minority individuals.

Prior to the dissolution of the USSR, in 1989 a series of measures was adopted by the then Soviet Union Baltic republics, regarding their cultural self-determination and language laws (Wright, 2000, p. 55) and later led to the adoption of citizenship laws in 1991. The decisions of that time would significantly impact the way new nation-building was shaped and how it affected Russian minority populations in the Baltic States. In the last decade and immediately after their countries independence a significant number of publications appeared about historic memories and grievances of the new titular nations of the Baltic states regarding their Soviet period (Aarelaid-Tart and Bennich-Björkman, 2012; Assmuth, 2012; Reiter, 2012). One of the aims of these studies was to evoke cultural memories, through individuals’ and families’ life histories and symbolic reconnection of titular nations with their cultural heritage, which became “entangled” with the Soviet heritage. There were two significant aspects in disentangling cultural histories at that time: one was de-ideologization (de-communization), but the other dimension became core to the creation of new national narratives, new nationalisms. Though the two dimensions are connected, they served different purposes in the nation building and reflected differently in the narratives of the local people in Lithuania and Latvia. There was not much dispute about the negative, gruesome legacies of the Communist era, a time of deportations and persecution for ideological and religious views. As a substantial body of research after 1990 showed, no ethnic groups in the ex-Soviet states, including the Russians, escaped the persecutions of the Stalinist totalitarian regime (Bertaux et al, 2004; Bertaux et al, 1996; Humphrey et al, 2003). It is the changing position of Russian ethnic minority individuals in the process of nation-building in the two post-Soviet countries of Lithuania and Latvia that is in the focus of this paper.

The change between different supra-national alliances which the newly-independent countries of the Baltic region were part of: from the Soviet Union to the European Union in just over a decade was rapid and primarily politically motivated. Prior to their admission to the EU, candidate states had to make changes to their laws to comply with the requirements of the EU and the Council of Europe in various areas including “human rights in general and the state’s treatment of minorities. Laws that were deemed to be discriminatory to minorities or policies that adversely affected their ability to compete politically, economically or socially were “red flagged”, and until they were sufficiently amended, the candidate country could not become an EU member” (Johns, 2003, p. 683; Nurse et al, 2002). But somehow policy amendments and special measures to protect ethnic minority rights did not work as planned (Hughes, 2005). As the statistics of ethnic minority populations in the Baltic States show, an increasing number of them are leaving their home countries, despite being born and bred there.

The populations of Lithuania and Latvia dropped significantly between 1989 and 2013; in Lithuania from 3.7 m people to 2.95 m people. In Latvia: from 2.7 m people in 1989 to 1.99 m in 2014 (Shevtsov, 2014). Some experts on migration have observed a trend of increasing migration flows since 2004 when both Lithuania and Latvia joined the EU and their population was keen to move to work in much wealthier countries of Western Europe (Aasland, Fløtten, 2001, p. 1024).

“Mistaken identities”: non-Lithuanian and non-Latvian population in Lithuania and Latvia

The ethnic composition of the minority population differed in Lithuania and Latvia at the time when these countries re-gained independence compared to now. Also their respective approaches to citizenship laws, comparative analysis of the outcome of nation-building policy and response of the minority individuals to new realities 25 years later is remarkably similar. At the last census of the then USSR in 1989, the ratio of non-Latvians and non-Lithuanians were respectively: 48% in Latvia and 20.4% in Lithuania. Russians only accounted for 34.8% in Latvia and 9.4% in Lithuania (Volkovs, 1999 cited in Matulionis et al, 2011, p. 13; Kasatkina, Leončikas, 2003 cited in Matulionis et al 2011, p.19). The historical precedent of culturally diverse populations in large cities and towns in both countries could have led to the creation of modern culturally diverse nation states in all Baltic States. But the history of new nation-building in the last 25 years, mostly driven by historic grievances and cultural memories, has taken a different turn, towards the creation of “ethnic nations” (Bjorklund, 2006) and generally ignoring historical, cultural and linguistic paths of their minority communities.

Apart from the Russians, among those non Lithuanian ethnic groups in Lithuania is an ethnic minority of Poles, whose ancestors have lived in Vilnius since the 15th century, from the time of the Lithuanian-Polish united country, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Though Polish minority closeness with the majority population has one significantly strong institution in the Roman Catholic church, the Polish in our study emphasized that sharing Slavic roots with the Russians made it easier for them to understand the Russian language, as well as create a sort of ‘Vilnius Polish dialect’, so distinctively different from the “mainland” Polish (Nurse, 2013). Russians in Lithuania are also not recent “newcomers”. The Russian ethnic minority group effectively represents different waves of immigration to the country and geo-political changes in the entire region (Matulionis et al, 2011). It is also mixed with other minorities (Poles and Belarusians) linguistically as well as with a majority population. The Slavic population in the Baltic States, in reality, represents a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. People from mixed ethnic origins among ethnic Russians in Lithuania include people of other Slavic groups (Belarusians, Ukrainians, Polish) and other origins: Tatars, Armenians. But at the same time inter-marriages were also dependent on church denominations. The smallest ethnic group in Lithuania, is Belarusian.

‘Russians in Latvia’ is very often a generic term which describes any people who are non-Latvians and who speak Russian as their mother tongue. Historic and minorities research in recent years showed that, contrary to assumptions, they “have been immigrants from poor countries seeking work, or refugees”, the majority of non-Latvians who comprise mainly Russophone Russians and other Slavs demonstrate their historic and cultural roots and heritage in modern day Latvia (Aasland, Fløtten, 2001; Assmuth, 2012; Bjorklund, 2006; Laitin, 1998; Matulionis et al, 2011).

With this in mind, I have summarized information about the ethnic family origin of interviewees from the younger generation of those who identified themselves as “Russian” one way or the other and which will be used for further analysis (Table 1).



Table 1

Biographical cases used in the analysis

Biographical cases	Place of birth	Age ²	Legal status	Family ethnic origin	Ethnic self-identification
“Artjom” ³	Lithuania	17	Lithuanian citizen	Russian/Polish/Lithuanian	Russian in Lithuania/citizen of the world
“Sergeij”	Lithuania	18	Lithuanian citizen	Russian/Lithuanian	Russian
“Natalia”	Lithuania	22	Lithuanian citizen	Russian-speaking Poles from Vilnius and Armenians from Azerbaijan	Russian speaking Russians in Lithuania
“Varvara”	Latvia	17	Latvian citizen	Russians from Latvia	Russian
“Viacheslav”	Latvia	17	Latvian citizen	Chuvash and Belarusians from Latvia	Belarusian, Russian, Latvian and Chuvash
“Georgij”	Latvia	16	Latvian citizen	Russians from Latvia	Russian From Latvia

**We are Russian- speaking Lithuanians and Latvians, but who are we really?
 “...We are not yet natives, neither [are we] the same as before” –
 an excerpt from one interview**

From several case studies that were conducted in the larger project, I have chosen examples from the Vilnius study which I described as: “From one country to another without changing the address” (Nurse, 2013). In that case study I analyzed biographical narratives from three generations of the local population of Vilnius: from the young generation of the Polish and Russian-speaking ethnic minorities in Vilnius. They and their respective parents were born in Vilnius, and claimed to be “truly” local. For the current paper I have selected only young people from Vilnius, whose whole life was shaped in the independent Lithuania, or who like Natalia, an excerpt from whose interview I am quoting in the title of this part of the paper, was born in 1988 and was too young to remember the life before Lithuanian independence. The other two young Lithuanians are Artjom and Sergeij, who at the time of interview were respectively 17 and 18 years old. They are all citizens of Lithuania and are local, for whom Vilnius is their home city, where they were born and their families are also “rooted” in the country in one way or the other. What makes them similar is their “otherness” in the Vilnius cultural context by the language they speak in public places, which according to Sergeij’s observation “made it all”, because it is the only way you can identify yourself as who you are (Nurse, 2013). Natalia, though, observes her own complex identity referring to her ethnic origin and also the language that she speaks:

“... Yes, Russian –speaking, but I am not Russian by origin. Actually, it is in line with blood, so I have very little Russian blood and [I] don’t have Lithuanian blood at all. That depends on [a] country... In some other country it is very exotic to say I am [an] Armenian. [But] as I don’t know that language, I fail to communicate naturally with Armenians, because the identity is different, and our mentality differs very much...”

² Age at the time of interview in 2010.

³ All original names of the respondents have been changed to protect identity of the interviewed.

Artjom's family origin is very complex, but despite having multi-cultural roots from both his mother's and father's side of his family: Russian, Polish and Lithuanian, he describes himself as Russian in Lithuania.

"I am quite of a mixed origin, I have Lithuanian blood and Polish blood and Russian blood. But in principle we all speak in Russian. ... And consider ourselves Russians in Lithuania. Something like this... What else can I add.? I am half- Russian, one-quarter — Pole and one-quarter Lithuanian. My origin is such that on my mother side I completely Russian, but on father's side Lithuanian and Polish". Sergeij also referred to having Russian and Lithuanian roots, but he also described himself as Russian.

For comparative purpose, my selection of young Latvians is also of those who are Latvian citizens and are also truly local to the city of Riga and Daugavpils where they were born and grew up. The reason for this comparative perspective, is that Lithuania adopted a more liberal approach as compared to Latvia in recognizing the right of their minority population by granting everybody who was residing in the country in 1992, full Lithuanian citizenship. Whereas Latvia embarked on the policy of integration of a much larger minority population using an "assimilatory" principle based on one official Latvian language. The aim of this comparative analysis is to observe what difference their approaches made on the younger generations of Lithuanians and Latvians which were exposed to this policy since their birth and biographical strategies regarding their future.

Georgii (Latvian) was born in Daugavpils describes his place of belonging and his identity:

"...Latvia-my home country/birth country. But closer to me anyway will be Russia as a Slavic territory... as my native language I consider Russian"

Georgii also observes that:

" You feel yourself Russian, but you feel like you don't live in your native country. Simply in the country, ... where Latvians dominate,... but you are simply a national minority. Meaning, in fact, your motherland is supposed to be behind the border, but you live in a country where the laws are different, different customs."

Viacheslav (Latvian) was born in Riga, but he describes his family origin as rather mixed: his mother is an ethnic Chuvash who was born in Riga and his father is Belarusian from Latvia. He describes his identity is of mixed Belarusian, Russian, Latvian and Chuvash origin, whereas he considers Russian as his mother tongue.

The third young Latvian is Varvara. Varvara was born in a suburb of Riga to Russian parents and she also identified herself as Russian. She was also eager to mention that her parents are from Latvia, however her father is not a citizen of Latvia, but her mother is.

What seemed to be significant in the biographical stories of the younger generation of the minorities' is their references to their families' ethnic origin, locations where they are from, languages spoken at home, with peers, at school and changes which are continuously taking place since their childhoods. In fact, this is the new dimension in the younger generation, identification which stretches beyond the traditional identity of the place where they live. The young people's sense of belonging to local places by being born in Lithuania and Latvia whilst maintaining their own cultural identity through speaking Russian and also their unique experience of bi-lingualism work as their biographical resource in life decisions. There is some significant similarity between young Lithuanian (Sergeij) and Latvian (Georgii) when they acknowledge that despite the fact they identify themselves as Russians, they actually have never visited Russia, which is just across the border, which Georgii (Latvian) acknowledged as difficult to comprehend. However, they believe that although they are Russians in Lithuania and Latvia, they each believe that in Russia they would be perceived as Lithuanian and Latvian (respectively). Another significant similarity in their biographical accounts is that they both plan to emigrate for further studies to the West, not to Russia.



Young Lithuanians and Latvians were very keen to describe their relationship with Lithuania and Latvia and also their references to the Soviet Union. Their knowledge of the Soviet Union comes from textbooks and occasional meetings with people.

Natalia (Lithuanian) summarizes the relationship of the new generations of young Lithuanians with the Soviet Union this way:

"...New generation evolved, they know about the Soviet Union only from textbooks, they are written no one knows how, it is really unclear who is right and why, if they don't ascribe themselves to it... don't ascribe it in any way. So we are still these mediators who still love the Soviet Union, but this love filters very much [by what] occurred then [in the past]... What was good... still was good... love it, because it did much good for our parents. Altogether we look at the future, with our eyes open, and by no means we live in our history that occurred then, but we still respect it."

She also describes a kind of "transitional status" of people who are not ethnic Lithuanian: that they haven't become "native" yet, though they are not the same as they were in the Soviet time.

Similarly, a Latvian female interviewee, Varvara has also expressed concerns of how official figures in Latvia are so hostile to Russia, in her opinion, without any reason at all. She was referring to a visit from the then Mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov to Riga and the meetings that took place in the Moscow House (Cultural and business center of Moscow in Riga) and a press-conference he gave with the Mayor of Riga Nil Ushakovs. Luzhkov's suggestion of instituting Russian as the second official language in Latvia prompted an angry response from the then President of Latvia V. Zatlers, who according to Varvara, said that he wouldn't listen to the opinion of outsiders and the Russian language will never become a second state language in Latvia. She comments that in a way she understands that he doesn't want to allow Russian to be a second state language, whereas in many countries more than one state language is practiced and even in America, where there are a lot of immigrants from Russia, you can see Russian labels in the shops. She also felt uncomfortable with the tone of those comments, stressing the Latvian officials' lack of sensitivity in a mixed society, where almost a third of the population speaks Russian and define themselves as Russians. But it is on the 9th of May that Varvara feels mostly connected to Russia:

"...For me the 9th of May is a big day, very big! On that day I feel my affiliation with Russians, with Russia. On this day I always have high spirit, every year I go to the Monument [Victory Memorial to the Soviet Army in Riga], and always from the morning till the evening, till 10 o'clock, till fireworks come up, I am there. I socialize with veterans, with those few remained, very few, and very soon there will be none of them, and there will be no people to communicate with to ask how it happened in reality. And it seems to be necessary to absorb from them what they can tell, so that later I could tell my grandchildren, how it all happened in reality. Because history will be altered a thousand and one times... Thanks to Russians, thanks to the victory, we live, we have what we have. Both Riga and Latvia..."

The relationship between Lithuanian and Latvian Russians and other Lithuanians and Latvians, as was referred to in the biographical narratives, was mostly about languages spoken in public places, multi-lingual signs, celebration of historical dates (past and new) and occasional expression of negative attitudes towards Russian speaking people, in a style of "banal nationalism" (Billig, 1995).

Since the time of independence, the Lithuanian language is much more widely spoken in Vilnius, which for some presents as an advantage, whereas others believe that other languages like Russian and Polish must continue being recognized, since the majority population speaks Russian and Polish anyway. Sergeij (Lithuanian) is very much in favour of multi-language practices in line with historical paths and geo-political reality:

"Dully thinking and noticing that older generation is nevertheless, majority of Lithuanians speak Russian language. In my generation they can understand in order to understand but it is

difficult to say something. I mean, and after all it is nice to hear when Lithuanians say that they feel pity that they don't know Russian language. Because, after all there are very many speakers of the [Russian LN] language. It is very cool when you know it. I notice by myself that our older generation was, I mean, knew lots of languages, while living in Vilnius you knew Polish, Russian, and Lithuanian. I, for instance, do not know Polish language. I feel myself a little bit deficient when I speak with older generation. Because there are some who communicate in Polish..."

A young Latvian man, Viacheslav from Riga, also said that in his everyday life he communicates in Russian:

"In Russian, of course. Because I am studying in a Russian school, in a Russian theatre, in a Russian job, I have a Russian broadcast. In shops actually, too, when I come, I speak the language which is convenient for me, that is, Russian. If I need to ask something, how to say, I ask in Russian, [if] I am answered in Latvian, again I [continue] talk in Russian. If some person, I see that he doesn't like that I speak Russian or he puts an accent that "I want you to talk in Latvian", please, it is not hard for me, I have no problem, I can ask the same in Latvian. There are such people, well, I find this disgusting, how many times I came across this... you come up to a person, well, you don't know what you will have — a Russian, a Latvian, I am asking in the language that is convenient for me..."

The negative attitude of the local Lithuanians and Latvians, as observed by young people in Vilnius and Riga who were quoted above, is mostly directed to the Russian language and people who continue speaking Russian in public places. Whereas the locals are much more tolerant to the other "foreign" language visitors in Riga and Vilnius (which are very popular tourist destinations among Western Europeans), be they French, Spanish or English. There is almost something fundamentally faulty in the creation of the new national narrative in both Latvia and Lithuania, in the selective respect of some cultures and the near suppression of cultures and languages that contributed to the unique cultural diversity of the places which were, for centuries, truly liberal and multicultural. This selectiveness creates fertile ground for "social exclusion" by ethnic principle (Aasland and Flotten, 2001) and ironically undermines the future of the Latvian and Lithuanian societies. While Latvians and Lithuanians are "checking on" the Russian accents of their compatriots, other cultures are taking firm ground in their countries-cultures of global communication and movement of people. A Latvian female student Varvara puts it this way:

*"I speak Russian, I can afford not speaking Latvian at all, but **I need to speak English [emphasis mine LN]**, because, well, it is the most global language of all that can be. If you don't speak it, then you don't have any privileges in this life. And you will go to work; [if] you speak [only] one language then good-bye! You need to speak, as minimum, two. I speak German too... And I speak Spanish too. And Latvian..."*

And she adds that studying Latvian is rather a necessity for her than anything else:

"I study Latvian as much and it is needed. Precisely because of the country... To be honest, I would probably, not learn it, if Latvian language would not be necessary for living in this country... In fact why learn it, if you [plan] to live in a different country? I am saying that I don't have interest to learn Latvian here just like that. For, it's like ... I simply study because, simply because it is a national requirement, so to say."

But it is Viacheslav — a young male Latvian student from Riga who observes that there are more Russians now who tend to speak Latvian only:

"There are [such] Russians. It is easier for them [to speak] in Russian, but they will strictly speak only Latvian..."

What the younger generation of Lithuanians and Latvians are observing is that despite their command of new official languages, that they have been learning from their childhood through formal education (kindergarten, school) and also exposure to media, and speaking them in public places, knowledge of Lithuanian or Latvian language alone cannot turn a member of an ethnic minority into a Lithuanian or Latvian. However, they regard practical multi-lingualism as



a great asset in their life choices, but specifically emphasize the great importance of a profound knowledge of English and other European languages. There is a big generational linguistic skills difference between the younger and older Lithuanian and Latvian people of Russian ethnic origin that is evident when the older have to rely on the help of their children and grandchildren or network of friends in writing official documents and getting about in everyday life.

One of the most important observations of the Cultural barometer of the 2007 report “European cultural values” is that the younger generation of Europeans is very keen to learn foreign languages, to be able to travel and maintain contact with the world. At the level of individual countries, Latvia and Lithuania are at the top of the list with large majorities of their population 76% Latvians and 68% Lithuanians who express an interest in learning or improving their language skills. (European cultural values, 2007, p. 48–49). For 14% of Lithuanians and 14% of Latvians the reason for that is to be able to study abroad. For 26% of Lithuanians and 36% of Latvians it is the reason to be able to work in another country; and for 29% of Lithuanians and 30% of Latvians — to get a better job in their own country (European cultural values, 2007).

Life strategies of contemporaries of Lithuanian and Latvian independence

For more detailed analysis of life strategies and plans I chose biographical stories of the informants from the younger generation of ethnic Russian, male and female, information about whom is summarized in Table 1. Despite some similarity, in general life circumstances in Lithuania and Latvia for Russian minorities regarding their position as minorities, they respond differently to the new reality, since Lithuanian and Latvian independence in terms of their future as being the “other” in society. I compared biographical strategies of young ethnic Russians, those who were born in 1990s in the independent states of Lithuania and Latvia.

It is a change in the balance of two causes for individuals to consider their life strategies and two options: to remain or leave. There are several nuances in the biographical strategies which could be generalized as two main options: to remain or to leave, but there are some deeper variations in the motives for each option. These nuances could be summarized in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2

Motives to remain or to leave

Remain	a) Acceptance of being “different” and intention to remain — “tolerable otherness”	b) Uncomfortable being the “other”, but indecisive — both Russian and European
Leave	c) Acceptance of being “different” and intention to leave	d) Uncomfortable being the “other” and plan to leave (to another country, but not connected to their ethnic origin) — “there are better places to live in the world”

These strategies serve as an invaluable source of information about minorities’ identity management in trying to resolve a “conflict” between formal (external) identity and their intention to remain who they are. Let’s look more closely at how these strategies are defined and explained by the younger generation of Lithuanian and Latvian Russians:

a) Tolerable “otherness”, but closeness to the place

Viacheslav from Riga (Latvia) is emotionally attached to his home city, despite the fact that he often struggles with being “pushed” into speaking Latvian on demand rather than when it

makes sense. He recalls, in his interview, his school essay in which he described Riga as his "little Paris". He already travelled to Western Europe and he "loves Paris madly", but when it comes to Riga, it is a special story for him. He likes Riga and he shows a lot of detailed knowledge about the Old Town's cobbled streets and its canal and roofs: "... *Everything is so familiar and everything is so close, [laying/resting] on one hand*". His knowledge of Riga is in high demand when he guides tourists around its streets. This also enables him to see that people who speak foreign languages on its streets are welcome, unless they speak Russian.

Viacheslav also observed that since Latvia became a member of the European Union, the city has built a new bridge and an underground tunnel, "just like in Paris" and this makes him feel more European. He has also mentioned an opportunity to travel and exchange programs which make him feel European. Viacheslav has some considerations about studying in Russia as an actor, but he concluded that:

"... whilst education for actors in Russia, it is one of the best in the world... it is just a problem here, that to have a Russian qualification in Latvia, because Russia is not the same as the European Union".

And if people go to get education in Russia, then most likely they have to stay there to work and live, which wasn't his option at the time of interview.

Artjom from Vilnius (Lithuania) is also of a similar opinion – to remain, when it comes to the choice of moving elsewhere or not. He said that Lithuanian membership in the EU created opportunities for his family to travel abroad and they travelled intensively. He also has friends who moved to England and Sweden and contact with them keeps him well-informed about life abroad:

"... We know that salaries are much higher in England and Sweden, and living standards are higher. Some of my friends have been there in England and Sweden. ... They say that it is heavens on earth there. All children go to school with computers [laptops]. Everything is good there. For me it is not so important. I am comfortable here [he means in Vilnius]".

He also made a remark that Russians in Lithuania are not so discriminated as in Latvia and Estonia, where he heard that about 50% of the population are Russians, because Russians are not a big "nation" in Lithuania.

b) Uncomfortable being the "other", but indecisive

To the second strategy of yet undecided young people, belong those who describe themselves as Russian and European. When an interviewer asked Varvara whether she feels herself a European, Varvara replied:

"No, a Russian more (laughs). Well, actually, if think more, then yes. We live in Europe, why not?..."

Varvara is very realistic in her analysis about linguistic differences, but she has a strong opinion that languages that are spoken by people should not divide them. She explains her position:

"If I go to England, I will speak English, get accustomed to that mentality and I will live my own way, just talking in another language".

At the time of an interview Varvara was not laying out any plans for leaving, apart from the fact that she was considering, exploring possible options, primarily by improving her English and collecting information about courses in Denmark. She also made remarks that her brother and his girlfriend already lived in Ireland, so eventually family connections abroad might prompt her indecisiveness.

c) Acceptance of being "different" and intension to leave

Natalia who is a post-graduate student at Vilnius University generally accepts that she is different to native Lithuanians, due to her family origin and surname which sounds Russian,



although in order to improve their employability, her half-sibling and cousins changed their surnames to Armenian, but she won't do this. Her father lives in Ireland and she has already explored the possibility of moving there to work. One of the perceived barriers to her is a linguistic one. She says that she "knows English almost perfectly", but she cannot understand the Irish accent. Therefore, her intention is first to move to England to improve her English, but not to stay there for work:

"I don't feel I want to work there as my education is really not poor. I know it is not recognized there, all the same it gives a lot to you and I don't want to sit somewhere at the cash [she means check out] or as waitress at a coffee house. It would be the first snooping... just to see where, what and how everything is in that country... If not to England, then to Norway or Sweden. There ... well... again the English language. I'd like to go to Finland very much, really... Maybe"

Although Natalia accepts that moving abroad would also open up new challenges to her in terms of whether she will be able to live and earn money there and also to continue supporting her mother, but what is quite significant of her plans for living abroad is that she is not prepared to "suffer torments". She'll go further.

"...Anyhow I feel this idea is strange, because I never have left for any country, but now it presses, our situation presses, present situation. My friend in Latvia [plans this] too. It is even [much] more horrible there. So one has to leave..."

d) There are better places to live in the world"

If Natalia's main reason for leaving is to escape the "torments" of being different, then Georgii from Latvia has plans for leaving, but they are for a different reason- to continue to study abroad. Georgii was still at school, when the interview took place. He was quite clear about his plans and that he would like to leave Latvia, rather than his home town of Daugavpils. Georgii has studied English intensively, which he believed would be his asset when he moves abroad.

Conclusion. What is the future?

Geo-political delineation of the borders in Eastern Europe in the 1990s resulted in new external identities of new nationalisms (nationalities, spelling of surnames, changed names of places) and evoked constant deliberations about cultural self-identification among ethnic minorities in their search for cultural roots and belonging. The findings of the analysis demonstrate the importance of national discourse about the country's historic paths and place of historic memory in the process of nation-building in the new EU member states.

The findings also provide themes for further debate at the policy level, particularly taking into account the extent to which an expanding titular nations' sense of pride of their achievement in gaining independence in the last 25 years, which was not discussed in every detail in this paper due to its size constraints, could provoke greater divisiveness in the society. The analysis of biographical narratives indicates that a healthy balance within this spectrum is not found within the two countries analyzed, and that country-specific and ethnic group-specific approaches need to be taken to policy re-assessment in both Latvia and Lithuania and at the EU level. The biographical interviews provided practical insight into notions of both pan-European and intra-country social cohesion, which, at policy level is particularly relevant to the EU's mandate on social cohesion. The Council of Europe gives this definition in the recent Report of the High Level Task Force on Social Cohesion in the 21st century: "Social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization".

The importance of communication and cohesion is linked to the language in which the communication between the majority and minority population is taking place: policymakers should

explore the effects of teaching European languages as a further tool of social cohesion. What the biographical interviews of ethnic minorities in both countries revealed was that those respondents who were bilingual in both the ethnic minority and official languages, could engage to a greater extent with the different media sources, and were thus less socially prejudiced towards shared greater collective interests with different ethnic groups living within the same country. They have better access to employment and other forms of participation in the society. Circumstantial bi-lingualism in public space instead of officially imposed mono-lingualism, which could be achieved if people have consensus about this. English is evolving as a new *lingua franca* alongside Russian, Lithuanian and Latvian. Among the younger generation in both countries, English is a target language to learn.

Most of the ethnic minority informants in our Lithuanian and Latvian biographical case study, strongly believe that their original ethnic identity is the most important, because they cannot become ethnic Lithuanian or Latvian, but only become citizens of those countries. The biographical interviews of Russian ethnic minority in Lithuania and Latvia demonstrated controversy in compulsory changes in the official use of languages in a very multi-cultural community.

To conclude, I shall quote an excerpt from an interview with a Latvian student from Daugavpils, who is asking a rhetorical question:

“Has anyone in Europe been interested in conditions of Russians in Latvia? I think some cool sociology guys [might be] interested in this. For ordinary citizens, I think, for them it is not very necessary. But for those who work with it, I think, yes, they are interested in it. And actively. Eventually, not only with Latvia. Because I think, in many countries such [situation] can be found that, well, in short, yes, sharing the country and so on”.

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