

# BULLETIN

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## The (Un)resolved Problem of National Minorities in the Baltic States

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*A majority of Latvian voters in a February referendum rejected the possibility to make Russian the country's second official language. This result was predictable, however, as it challenged the effectiveness of Latvia's integration policy. The current situation of ethnic Russians living in Lithuania, and in great numbers in Latvia and Estonia, varies. Although the Baltic States treat the issue of national minorities as a purely internal matter, the solidarity amongst them for the protection of national languages will increase.*

In December 2011, as a result of a citizens initiative, the association called "Mother Tongue" created a draft law amending the constitution and giving the Russian language official status. This amendment was rejected by parliament and thus could only be voted in through referendum. On 18 February, the majority of active voters in Latvia (75%) opposed the proposed changes, a result primarily driven by the mobilisation of Latvians and only partly related to the fact that half of the ethnic Russians in Latvia are so-called "noncitizens" and can't vote. After the announcement of the results, Lithuania and Estonia congratulated Latvia and expressed the need to protect their national languages. In contrast, Russia again criticized the Latvian authorities' actions, accusing them of violating human rights.

**National Minorities in the Baltic States.** The issue of national minorities was one of the major problems in the Baltic States after the collapse of the Soviet Union. An inflow of Russian-speaking people during Soviet times changed the demographic structure. In the early '90s, various minorities accounted for between almost 20% and 45% of the total population in each country. Currently, the most ethnically homogenous country is Lithuania, where the inhabitants of other nations number less than 20%, including Poles (6%) and Russians (5%). However, in Latvia this portion of the population reaches almost 40%, while in Estonia it is 32%. In both cases, the largest groups are Russian-speaking minorities, dominated by ethnic Russians (28% in Latvia and 25% in Estonia).

Moreover, citizenship is still an important and sensitive matter. After regaining its independence, Lithuania chose the so-called "zero option", in which most residents were allowed to obtain citizenship. This issue remains controversial in Latvia and Estonia, where those who do not meet formal criteria have to undergo the naturalization process. 100,000 residents in Estonia and 300,000 in Latvia are not yet citizens of those countries. Moreover, "noncitizens" are deprived of national minority status, at least formally in Estonia and under some restrictions in Latvia.

**(Un)realized Claims.** Compared to others, ethnic Russians are less politically active in Lithuania, where they cooperate with the party representing the Polish minority. Meanwhile, in Latvia since 2009, Harmony Centre, which mainly represents the interests of the Russian-speaking minority, has strengthened its position on the political scene. It did this by using slogans not only with a nationalistic character but also ones based on social issues. In Estonia, these minorities do not have direct representation in parliament; however, they generally support the most favourable one for them—the Centre Party. Both of these parties have signed declarations of cooperation with Russia's ruling party, United Russia. Although Russian culture is still rejected in Latvia and Estonia, it is accepted in Lithuania, where Russians do not make many claims.

Although the catalogue of demands made by national minorities in the Baltic states might seem to be consistent on various issues, in fact the situation for each group is different. In Lithuania, there is no problem with naturalization, and Lithuanian Poles, unlike the vast majority of Russians in the

Baltic States, are indigenous people. In Latvia and Estonia, the Russian-speaking minorities invariably demand a simplification of the naturalization procedures, arguing that recent amendments in this direction are inadequate. Meanwhile, for a few years the number of people applying for citizenship decreased in Latvia and Estonia. In both countries, the minorities have proposed automatically granting citizenship to children of “noncitizens”. At the same time, they are calling for further simplification of the language examination. The controversy arose from the need for documented knowledge of the official language to engage in certain professions. In Estonia, “non-citizens” can participate in local elections (only as voters). In Latvia, this participation is one of the demands of the Russian-speaking minority, supported by the High Commissioner for National Minorities OSCE, Knut Vollebaek. Currently, only Estonia allows bilingual topographical names in areas inhabited by an ethnic minority if it constitutes more than 50% of the population. In Estonia, although in a very limited way, the national minority may use the national language as an auxiliary language in local government (for instructions).

In all the Baltic States, reform of the education system has caused controversies. Latvia launched such reforms in 2004, attempting to unify the system by introducing bilingual programs for minority schools and gradually increasing the number of subjects taught in Latvian (up to 60%). Estonia’s reform was similar Latvia’s and started in secondary schools in 2007. When Lithuania announced the reorganization of its education system, it often referred to the Latvian model. Lithuanian Poles, supported by the Russian-speaking minority there, protested against what was, in their opinion, too rapid a pace of unification in examinations in Lithuanian (that is, the tests were organised under different criteria).

**Conclusions and Recommendations for Poland..** The Baltic States are signatories to the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Therefore, they ought to adapt its recommendations to combat discrimination. Although, the implementation of these recommendations is progressing, it has encountered various obstacles. Moreover, the situation of national minorities in these states is increasingly being determined not only by formal factors but also by socio-economic ones as well, especially since the onset of the economic crisis, which has affected the labour market and caused an increase in immigration by young people. Because of the complex and diverse situation of national minorities in the Baltic States, the different legal statuses and nuances make it difficult to evaluate the countries’ integration policies. However, in all three countries the authorities tend to push for the unification of society through a common language, as a result not only of history but also with regard to a national identity shaped by the national language.

Latvia’s referendum result will strengthen the solidarity of the Baltic States in their efforts to maintain the current legislation on official languages. Therefore, it should not be expected that existing integration policies in these countries will be redefined, especially when it becomes a tool for political struggle, as is happening with the changing status of the Russian language in Latvia. It is also highly likely that the referendum result will increase the polarization of the Latvian political scene and the result in stronger demands from the Russian-speaking minority.

Poland should strive to fight attempts to compare the rights of Lithuanian Poles to the situation of Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia. The indigenous origin of Lithuanian Poles should be emphasized along with their long-standing tradition and presence in Vilnius. The various legal statuses of Poles with Lithuanian citizenship, in comparison to the substantial part of Russian-speaking people without citizenship in Latvia or Estonia, should be highlighted. Moreover, in order to continue supporting the demands of the Polish minority matching European standards (such as using original spellings of names and the use of bilingual topographic names), the Polish authorities should support bilateral discussions between Lithuanian Poles—citizens of Lithuania—and Lithuanian authorities. It is also important for Polish–Lithuanian relations that these states continue a historical dialogue, preferably amongst a group of experts and academics who would then share their research with the wider public. Simultaneously, Poland should initiate action in the EU on anti-discrimination programs and work to develop educational projects that include its own minorities.