



NATIONAL IDENTITY POLITICS AND STATE CONSOLIDATION IN LATVIA AND ESTONIA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

G.K. Olchikenova , Zh.Zh. Kiyubek * ,

L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan

E-mail: gulmira14k@gmail.com, kiyubek@gmail.com

Abstract. This article explores how Latvia and Estonia have addressed significant challenges related to forming national identity, consolidating their states, and distancing themselves from the Soviet legacy since regaining independence. The objective of the study is to analyze the key factors that have influenced nation-building in both countries, with a focus on language policy, memory politics, and the integration of Russian-speaking minorities. The research is qualitative in nature and draws upon academic literature, legal documents, statistical data, and policy reports. It incorporates elements of discourse analysis, historical comparison, and case-based examinations of political and cultural transformations. The findings indicate that the restoration of Latvian and Estonian statehood necessitated not only political and economic restructuring but also a reevaluation of cultural and linguistic foundations that were weakened during the Soviet era. The analysis reveals that citizenship laws, minority integration frameworks, and language reforms were pivotal in redefining national identity. Additionally, memory politics played a crucial role; interpretations of World War II, the removal of Soviet monuments, and disputes over historical narratives significantly influenced public discourse and state policies. The study highlights that, although Russian-speaking minorities initially faced exclusion, gradual policy adjustments and European integration have helped alleviate tensions. Nevertheless, Russia's geopolitical actions – including the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – have notably hastened the Baltic states' efforts to diminish Russian influence. This study emphasizes how small states with complex ethnolinguistic landscapes can effectively consolidate their nationhood. The experiences of Latvia and Estonia offer a valuable comparative model for understanding post-Soviet state-building, the politics of memory, and the challenges of managing historical legacies while integrating into European structures.

Keywords: national identity, nation-state, memory politics, Latvia, Estonia.

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a range of new goals for all former member states to achieve as newly independent nations. Today, the former Soviet republics have established their political systems, legal frameworks, economic structures, and national currencies. Russia struggled with internal conflicts and economic instability. It faced secessionist movements in regions such as Chechnya, Tatarstan, and others that sought independence in the early 1990s [1]. Simultaneously, despite these internal and economic challenges, Russia attempted to reassert itself on the international stage as a main political actor. It was a predictable scenario for the Russian Federation, as the successor of the Soviet Union, to attempt to influence its former member states and keep them within its sphere of influence. Belarus, for example, unlike the Baltic states, has had a complicated relationship with the European Union and has mainly remained pro-Russian. Despite being part of the EU's Eastern Partnership program, Belarus remains under Russia's influence. Russia's influence affects not only the political sphere but also the social and cultural domains, especially in Central Asian countries where the status of local languages remains a sensitive issue. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the Russian language holds official status at the constitutional level [2,3]. This contrasts with the Baltic states, where Russian does not have official language status [4]. It is worth mentioning that Georgia took a similar path by not recognizing Russian as an official language and turning toward the European Union. However, the reasons behind this shift are complex and include factors such as military intervention, internal conflicts, and geopolitical tensions. Also, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania refused to become members of the Commonwealth of Independent States. This organization symbolized unity and friendship among the former Soviet republics, according to official statements. However, the CIS functions as one of the tools used by Russia to exert influence over former Soviet states [5]. The organization still holds meetings at the presidential level, but tensions between the member countries over geopolitical issues persist. Economically, mostly Russia benefits from these exchanges, as the region remains a key market for selling its products [6]. In general, the political course chosen by the Baltic states to distance themselves from the Russian Federation came with several challenges, like those faced by other post-Soviet countries, but was more complex due to their pivot toward the European Union, which required meeting significantly higher standards across various sectors. The main challenges faced by these states were largely rooted in the Soviet legacy and the consequences of Soviet political decisions. In this article, I will focus on several of these challenges, particularly those related to language, memory politics, and identity.

Research methods

This research adopts a qualitative design that emphasizes the analysis of secondary data. The primary methods utilized consist of discourse analysis, historical comparison, and case study approaches. Data was gathered from various publicly available resources, such as academic papers, national legislation, government reports, statistical databases, and policy documents from Latvia and Estonia. These sources were chosen to provide a thorough understanding of the sociopolitical dynamics influencing national identity and state consolidation.

The examination of language policy was based on formal legal documents, including the Language Acts from Latvia and Estonia, reports on education reform, and census information. The subject of memory politics was investigated through the analysis of public debates, government measures concerning the removal of monuments, and academic interpretations of conflicting historical narratives. The examination of the integration of Russian-speaking minorities involved the use of demographic data, survey findings, and reports from international entities like the OSCE.

This research did not involve new empirical methods, surveys, or experiments. However, it references findings from existing surveys conducted in Latvia and Estonia that examine minority integration and public opinions about Soviet monuments. These surveys included voluntary participants and adhered to the ethical standards established by the institutions that conducted them. As the current study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary sources, no further ethical approval was necessary. The combination of these methods allows for a multidimensional analysis of national identity formation, language policy, and memory politics in the Baltic states.

Results and discussions

The issue of Russian-speaking identities in the Baltic states has been studied through the lens of integration dynamics. According to John Berry's theoretical model of intercultural relations, individuals confronted with cross-cultural contact follow one of four main acculturation strategies: assimilation (giving up one culture and

adopting another), integration (embracing both cultures), separation (maintaining one culture and avoiding the other), and marginalization (alienation from both cultures) [7]. Some scholars argue that Russian speakers are gradually integrating into Baltic societies by learning the state language and adopting local traditions. Others suggest that as the Russian-speaking population gains political strength, it may resist assimilation and maintain a distinct cultural and political identity. This tension creates uncertainty about whether integration, assimilation, or political consolidation will prevail in the long term. David Laitin proposed that Russian speakers would naturally assimilate over time because learning the local language provides economic and social advantages [8]. Some studies support Laitin's argument, showing that Russian speakers in the Baltics want to integrate and they are willing to learn the local language and culture but also wish to retain their Russian identity. Thus, while more Russian speakers are learning Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian, they are not necessarily losing their cultural identity. Pisarenko uses the term "competitive integration and bilingualism" rather than assimilation, emphasizing that Russian speakers are balancing both identities instead of choosing just one [9]. Initially, Estonian and Latvian governments focused on structural integration—one of the four conceptual dimensions of integration, alongside cultural, social, and identificational. Nimmerfeldt et al. define structural integration as gaining rights and equal access to major institutions, cultural integration as cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal changes from cross-cultural contact, social integration as the level of interaction between different groups, and identity integration as ethnic and national self-identification [10]. However, the language proficiency (structural integration) does not guarantee social or identificational integration. For example, in 2007, riots in Tallinn erupted over the removal of the Bronze Soldier memorial, and many of the young Russian speakers involved were fluent in Estonian. The issue of identificational integration relates not only to citizenship but also, for example, to collective memory. Some members of the Russian-speaking community are nostalgic about Soviet heritage or influenced by Russian historical narratives, which is evident in disputes over symbols or markers of identity such as monuments and street names related to the USSR.

The first and most fundamental issue in the Baltic states was an identity problem that all former Soviet Union states faced due to the ideology imposed for over 50 years in the Baltic region. In the Soviet Socialist Regime, nationalism and national identity were officially unacceptable as the promoted ideology relied on the unity and equality of the nations [11]. Alongside the identity of the Russian-speaking minority, the integration of the society went through a range of processes, starting with obtaining citizenship [12]. The ethnic composition of the countries changed after the 1990s, with the percentage of ethnic Latvians and Estonians increasing moderately, while the share of the ethnic Russian population declined [13]. The ethnic composition of these countries has been the source of various issues related to language, identity, and citizenship. In the early 1990s, there were ethnic tensions, mostly centered around the status of the Russian language and the legal regulations concerning citizenship [13]. At that time, the Russian population viewed the implemented measures as discriminatory and believed that the government was attempting to suppress them. The Russian Federation was aware of these sentiments and supported ethnic Russians in the Baltic states for its own political purposes. It often pressured Latvia and Estonia by raising these issues in international forums and diplomatic discourse. Several international organizations, for example, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, expressed concern about the situation and recommended addressing issues related to language policy, citizenship laws, and the rights of ethnic minorities [14]. In response, the Estonian and Latvian governments reconsidered some of their measures – such as simplifying naturalization procedures and introducing minority language protections – and gradually adjusted their policies to align more closely with the values and legal standards of the European Union. The full integration of ethnic Russians into Estonian and Latvian societies is challenging, but over time it may become more achievable – especially as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has accelerated this process.

One of the challenges that both Estonia and Latvia faced was related to memory politics and interpretations of the past, particularly concerning the events of World War II. Specifically, the issue revolves around the Soviet occupation during the war. According to the Soviet and later the Russian Federation's narrative, World War II was won by the Red Army, whose soldiers are portrayed as heroes. The descendants of those soldiers are now dispersed across various regions, including the territories of Estonia and Latvia. The Soviet narrative presents the USSR as a liberator from the Nazi regime, a perspective that sparked conflict in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The process of historical re-evaluation was most notably followed by the rewriting of history textbooks, the renaming of streets, and the removal or relocation of monuments. The latter has been particularly controversial

within society, as monuments serve as “figures of memory” – they represent institutionalized memory and, therefore, become part of “a heritage of societies” [15]. Monuments, by their very nature, carry a societal significance that impacts both identity and society. As mentioned above, the controversial meaning of monuments, for example, led to riots in Estonia, particularly in response to the relocation of the “Bronze Soldier” [16]. The events related to the relocation of the monument and the so-called “War of Monuments” were the result of differing historical perspectives between the official state narrative and the Russian-speaking community [17]. The need for memory reconciliation and the importance of reaching a compromise through open discussions have been recommended [17, 18]. However, the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion have shifted the agenda related to this topic, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Estonia ordered the dismantling of 244 monuments [19]. At the same time, the Parliament of Latvia issued a list of 69 monuments and other objects related to Soviet and Nazi regimes that must be removed [20]. Following the invasion of Ukraine, the chances for reconciliation of the memory have significantly decreased—not only because of the firm stance taken by the state but also due to the declining willingness of the Russian-speaking community to engage in dialogue on the issue. For example, a recent survey conducted in Latvia and Estonia after the removal of “the Victory Monument” in Riga and the “T-34 tank” in Narva revealed that representatives of the Russian-speaking community are less willing to discuss World War II [21]. According to the survey, there are still people who celebrate “Victory Day,” although more as a tribute to the memory of fallen ancestors and in mourning rather than as a political statement. Before the invasion, the governments of both Estonia and Latvia had an opportunity to approach history objectively and reevaluate it in a way that would not favor one narrative over another. This could have allowed mutual tolerance between the official state perspective and the Russian-speaking community. Given the current situation, the historical narrative is likely to follow the official state perspective, which is also supported by the Russian-speaking community, except for a small number of individuals who disagree with it.

The language policy in the independent states of Latvia and Estonia excluded Russian from official status, designating Latvian and Estonian, respectively, as their sole official languages. The rise in the use of the titular nation’s language across various spheres is one of the features that characterizes the concept of the “nationalizing state,” according to Brubaker [22]. The law was intended to increase the use of the national language in everyday life and official communication [23]. In contrast, the popularity of the Russian language was expected to decline, particularly in the economic sector. According to the research, knowledge of the Latvian language reduces the unemployment rate among Russian speakers; however, proficiency in English provides even more significant benefits [24]. Interestingly, a similar situation is observed in Estonia, where salary levels among Russian speakers are more closely linked to English proficiency than to knowledge of Estonian [25]. The establishment of the official language policy affected the education system, which required a transition to instruction conducted entirely in one language. Although this process was not implemented immediately, it took some time, particularly in border regions such as Narva, and is still in progress [26, 27]. It is difficult to accurately assess the spread of the Russian language, as people may speak or understand it at a conversational level and use it only with family members. The statistics show that 84 percent of the population speaks Estonian in Estonia, which is 2 percent higher than in 2011. The highest proficiency is observed among people aged 15 to 29, indicating that the younger the population, the more likely they are to speak Estonian, and the number will grow [28]. As for Latvia, data show that among those whose native language is not Latvian, the level of Latvian language proficiency is very high—approximately 90 percent [29]. As can be seen, the level of proficiency in the official languages is very high among the population, yet the influence of the Russian language has persisted for a long time – for example, through the media. The TV channel “Pervyi Kanal” (“Channel One” in English) serves not only as a means of promoting the Russian language but also as a vehicle for disseminating the Russian political narrative. Interestingly, “Pervyi Kanal” operates separate regional branches for the Baltic states and Central Asia – namely, “Pervyi Baltiiskiy Kanal” and “Pervyi Kanal Evraziya”. Presumably, the goal is to maintain a sphere of influence by tailoring media content to best impact the region – not only by retransmitting existing content from “Pervyi Kanal,” but also by creating new media products featuring local people or journalists, which serves as a form of soft power. In Estonia, “Pervyi Baltiiskiy Kanal” was banned after the annexation of Crimea, and in response, Estonian Public Broadcasting launched its own Russian-language channel, “ETV+” [30]. In Latvia, the government banned Russian media and considered creating a Russian-language public broadcaster comparable to Estonia’s “ETV+”. However, a 2023 parliamentary decision stipulates that from 2026 onward, all state-financed media content must be solely in Latvian or a “European cultural space” language, effectively ending public Russian-language

broadcasting [31]. Proponents argue this fosters a more unified information sphere, while critics warn it could push Russian-speakers back toward Russian media, potentially deepening their exposure to Russia's disinformation. It is worth mentioning that the Russian-speaking media audience is not a coherent group, and the oversimplification that they are all loyal to the Russian Federation is inaccurate. An analysis of Russian-speaking media consumers identified five types of users and concluded that they do not form a unified group, nor are they all influenced by the Russian narrative [32]. This shows that implementing the Latvian language policy does not necessarily mean that the Russian-speaking population will consume only Russian media. Although for many years, the Russian Federation has attempted to exert influence in Latvia through another tool—namely, cultural means. For example, international music contests and concerts such as “KVN” (“Klub veselyh i nahodchibyh” or “The club of witty and creative”) and “Novaya Volna” (“New Wave”), both of which originated during the Soviet Union, were later held in Jūrmala, Latvia. These shows were conducted in Russian and maintained cultural ties among the nations of the former Soviet states. Many individuals from various countries traveled to Jūrmala, contributing to the local economy and exemplifying the Russian Federation's sustained cultural influence in the region [33]. Riga officials opposed “Novaya Volna,” viewing it as “a representation of the post-Soviet space they were trying to move away from” [34]. After the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, it was decided that these events should be relocated to Russia. In response, the Latvian government supported the creation of its music competition, “Laima Rendezvous Jūrmala”. By offering an alternative, the Latvian government attempted to create a new, authentic part of the culture, which serves as a good example of enhancing the cultural dimension and making Latvian music more popular.

Conclusion

More than 30 years after the restoration of independence, the achievements of the Baltic States cannot be denied. Their integration into the European Union, along with the adoption of democratic values and a market economy after nearly 50 years under a completely different system, should be seen as a major step forward. However, some of the most challenging aspects of becoming independent states again have been complicated by ethnic composition, the interpretation of the past, and the restoration of local languages, all while diminishing Russian influence. The separation process from the Soviet Union unfolded with varying degrees of complexity across different spheres, and some issues – such as the politics of memory – have remained the subject of long-standing debate. Nevertheless, it is clear that the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine accelerated this process. While some support for the Russian narrative still exists, it is minimal. Given that the Baltic States are not among the most powerful political or economic actors, their future will likely be shaped by external circumstances and the actions of global powers. Despite these challenges, the rise in cultural and national identity since the 1990s has, in my view, been more successful in the Baltic States than in several other former Soviet countries.

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Contribution of the authors:

G.K. Olchikenova – developed the research concept, formulated the objectives, and designed the methodology;

Zh.Zh. Kiyubek – collected and analysed the relevant academic literature, legal documents, statistical data, and policy reports.

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Г.К. Ольчикенова, Ж.Ж. Қиюбек

*Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразия ұлттық университеті, Астана, Қазақстан
(gulmira14k@gmail.com, kiyubek@gmail.com)*

Тәуелсіз Латвия мен Эстониядағы ұлттық саясаты және мемлекеттің бірегейлігі

Андатпа. Мақалада Латвия мен Эстонияның тәуелсіздік алғаннан кейін ұлттық бірегейлікті қалыптастыруға, өз мемлекеттерін нығайтуға және кеңестік мұрадан алшақтатуға байланысты бірқатар қиындықтарға қалай тап болғандығы қарастырылады. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты тіл саясатына, жады саясатына және орыс тілді қоғамдастықтың интеграциясына баса назар аудара отырып, екі елдегі мемлекеттік құрылысына әсер еткен негізгі факторларды талдау болып табылады. Зерттеу сапалы және ғылыми әдебиеттерге, құқықтық құжаттарға, статистикалық мәліметтерге және саяси құжаттарға негізделген. Мақалада дискурстық талдау, тарихи салыстыру элементтері, сондай-ақ нақты мысалдардағы саяси және мәдени өзгерістерді талдау қолданылған. Зерттеу нәтижелері Латвия мен Эстония мемлекеттілігін қалпына келтіру тек саяси және экономикалық қайта құруды ғана емес, сонымен қатар кеңес дәуірінде әлсіреген мәдени және тілдік негіздерді қайта бағалауды қажет ететіндігін көрсетеді. Талдау көрсеткендей, азаматтық туралы заңдар, ұлттық азшылықты интеграциялау тетіктері және тілдік реформалар ұлттық бірегейлікті қайта қарастыруда шешуші рөл атқарды. Сонымен қатар, жадты қайта құру саясаты шешуші рөл атқарды; Екінші дүниежүзілік соғыс оқиғаларын қайта қарау, кеңестік ескерткіштердің орнын ауыстыру не алып тастау және тарихи оқиғаларға қатысты даулар қоғамдық дискурс пен мемлекеттік саясатқа айтарлықтай әсер етті. Зерттеуде орыс тілді қоғамдастық бастапқыда оқшаулануға тап болғанымен, саясаттың біртіндеп өзгеруі және еуропалық интеграция шиеленісті жеңілдетуге көмектескені атап өтілді. Осыған қарамастан, Ресейдің геосаяси әрекеттері, Қырым және Украинадағы жағдай Балтық елдерінің Ресей

ықпалын әлсірету жөніндегі әсерін айтарлықтай жеделдетті. Бұл зерттеу күрделі этнолингвистикалық ландшафты бар шағын мемлекеттердің өз мемлекеттілігін қалай тиімді біріктіре алатынын көрсетеді. Латвия мен Эстонияның тәжірибесі посткеңестік мемлекеттік құрылысты, жады саясатын және еуропалық құрылымдарға интеграцияланған кезде тарихи мұраны басқару мәселелерін түсінудің құнды салыстырмалы моделін ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: ұлттық бірегейлік, ұлттық мемлекет, жады саясаты, Латвия, Эстония.

Г.К. Ольчикенова, Ж.Ж. Кийубек*

Евразийский национальный университет имени Л.Н. Гумилева, Астана, Казахстан

(gulmira14k@gmail.com, kiyubek@gmail.com)

Политика национальной идентичности и консолидация государства в Латвии и Эстонии после независимости

Аннотация. В этой статье рассматривается, как Латвия и Эстония после обретения независимости столкнулись с рядом вызовов, связанных с формированием национальной идентичности, укреплением своих государств и дистанцированием от советского наследия. Целью данного исследования является проанализировать ключевые факторы, повлиявшие на государственное строительство в обеих странах, с акцентом на языковую политику, политику памяти и интеграцию русскоязычного сообщества. Исследование носит качественный характер и основывается на научной литературе, юридических документах, статистических данных и на политических документах. В статье использованы элементы дискурс-анализа, исторического сравнения, а также анализ политических и культурных трансформаций на конкретных примерах. Результаты исследования показывают, что восстановление латвийской и эстонской государственности потребовало не только политической и экономической перестройки, но и переоценки культурных и языковых основ, которые были ослаблены в советское время. Анализ показывает, что законы о гражданстве, механизмы интеграции меньшинств и языковые реформы сыграли ключевую роль в переосмыслении национальной идентичности. Кроме того, политика реконструирования памяти сыграла решающую роль; интерпретации событий Второй мировой войны, демонтаж советских памятников и споры по поводу исторических трактовок существенно повлияли на общественный дискурс и государственную политику. В исследовании подчеркивается, что, хотя русскоязычные меньшинства изначально сталкивались с изоляцией, постепенное изменение политики и европейская интеграция помогли ослабить напряженность. Тем не менее, геополитические действия России, включая аннексию Крыма и ситуацию в Украине, заметно ускорили усилия стран Балтии по ослаблению российского влияния. В этом исследовании подчеркивается, как небольшие государства со сложным этнолингвистическим ландшафтом могут эффективно консолидировать свою государственность. Опыт Латвии и Эстонии предлагает ценную сравнительную модель для понимания постсоветского государственного строительства, политики памяти и проблем управления историческим наследием при интеграции в европейские структуры.

Ключевые слова: национальная идентичность, национальное государство, политика памяти, Латвия, Эстония.

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Information about authors:

Olchikenova G.K. – PhD student, Department of Regional Studies, Faculty of International Relations, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan.

Kiyubek Zh.Zh. – corresponding author, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan.

Ольчикенова Г.К. – PhD докторант, Аймақтану кафедрасы, Халықаралық қатынастар факультеті, Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразия ұлттық университеті, Астана, Қазақстан.

Қиюбек Ж.Ж. – хат-хабарға жауапты автор, Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразия ұлттық университеті, Астана, Қазақстан.

Ольчикенова Г.К. – PhD докторант, кафедра регионоведения, Факультет международных отношений, Евразийский национальный университет имени Л.Н. Гумилева, Астана, Казахстан.

Киубек Ж.Ж. – автор для корреспонденции, Евразийский национальный университет имени Л.Н. Гумилева, Астана, Казахстан.



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