

# The situation in Ukraine highlights the need for Estonia and Latvia to promote greater integration among their ethnic Russian populations

**LSE** [blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurompblog/2014/03/06/the-situation-in-ukraine-highlights-the-need-for-estonia-and-latvia-to-promote-greater-integration-among-their-ethnic-russian-populations/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurompblog/2014/03/06/the-situation-in-ukraine-highlights-the-need-for-estonia-and-latvia-to-promote-greater-integration-among-their-ethnic-russian-populations/)

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*One of the key factors in the Ukraine crisis has been the role of the sizeable ethnic Russian population in the country. **David Smith** writes on the implications the crisis might have for two other countries with significant Russian populations: Estonia and Latvia. He notes that while citizenship policies in both countries have been unpopular among ethnic Russian communities, the focus has largely been on increasing the rights of Russian speakers rather than questioning the existence of the Estonian or Latvian state. Nevertheless, he argues that nationalist forces on both sides of the debate may seek to exploit the situation in Ukraine in pursuit of their respective agendas.*



Ukraine remains in a state of high tension, following the occupation of key installations in Crimea by Russian troops. Russia's President Vladimir Putin claims that the despatch of military units was justified by the need to protect the interests and physical welfare of Russian citizens and so-called compatriots (ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers) living in Crimea and other southern and eastern parts of the country. The deepening of the Ukrainian crisis has prompted reflection on its potential wider implications, not least for Estonia and Latvia, where Russian-speakers make up around a third of the population.

While many Russian-speakers living in these countries can trace descent back to the period of inter-war Baltic independence and beyond, the majority are Soviet-era migrants and their descendants. Following the restoration of their statehood in 1991, Estonia and Latvia did not extend automatic citizenship to people in this category, arguing that they had arrived as a result of an illegal annexation and subsequent fifty-year occupation by the USSR. While many have since undergone naturalisation as citizens, more than half of Soviet migrants and their descendants still hold either local 'alien's passports' or passports issued by the Russian Federation.

These citizenship policies have been unpopular amongst local Russian-speakers, and have been loudly condemned by Russia, which denies that the 1940 Soviet takeover of the Baltic States amounted to an occupation and accuses Estonia and Latvia of engaging in systematic ethnic discrimination. Domestic and international frictions have also arisen over language and education policy, as both states have sought to break with the bi-national Soviet legacy and give greater prominence to majority language and culture. Divergent interpretations of the Second World War, too, have come into play, as witnessed by the unrest that occurred in Estonia following the relocation of a Soviet-era war memorial in 2007. Ethnic divisions arising from the Soviet past thus continue to pose a challenge to social and



War memorial in Tallinn which was at the centre of protests in 2007, Credit: Terker (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

political cohesion in both countries.

### **Estonia and Latvia: the next Ukraine?**

Against this background, is there a danger that the current crisis in Ukraine might have a destabilising impact in the Baltic? Before addressing this question, some further observations are in order with regard to the situation in Ukraine. Firstly, developments prior to the Russian intervention suggest no credible basis for the claim that lives of local Russians were under threat. Rather, it would appear that – here, as elsewhere – the Russian government has simply instrumentalised the Russian minority issue in pursuit of broader geostrategic and domestic political objectives.

Secondly, much of the academic and media coverage of the Ukrainian crisis has resorted to use of over-simplified ethnic and geopolitical binaries that depict recent events as a conflict between a nationalist ethnic Ukrainian west and an east that leans naturally towards Russia. While there are undeniably strong regional divisions within Ukraine, such a portrayal vastly underestimates the country's sociological 'stateness', while downplaying the growing disaffection felt by all segments of society in the face of Yanukovich's corrupt and increasingly authoritarian rule. It also assumes that southern and eastern regions harbour a separatist agenda, rather than aspiring to greater autonomy as part of a reformed Ukrainian state.

A similarly complex reality exists in Estonia and Latvia, even though ethnic boundaries have – at least in the political sphere – often been more visible and state policies more 'nationalising' than in Ukraine. While the large migrant communities established under Soviet rule are often simplistically labelled as a diaspora of Russia, they have in fact developed a distinct Baltic Russian identity rooted in a strong territorially-based attachment to Estonia and Latvia.

In elections and referenda held during the collapse of the USSR in 1990-91, around a third of local Russian-speakers in both states voted for independence, helping to deliver strong overall majorities in favour. Of the remainder, only a minority lent active support to pro-Soviet [Intermovements](#) established in the Baltic at that time. Provisions on citizenship and other policies subsequently adopted in the 1990s came as a profound disappointment to most, though in terms of economic development and political stability, independent Estonia and Latvia were still seen as delivering far more than Russia and other former Soviet republics.

Political disaffection has been clearly apparent, but, with the exception of a small minority of radical nationalists, this has translated into demands for a greater voice and cultural recognition within the state rather than a challenge to the existence of the state *per se*. Moreover, in so far as Russian-speakers have sought external support for change, they have looked not to Russia but westwards to the European Union, with EU membership attracting broad cross-ethnic support during the run-up to Estonia and Latvia's accession in 2004.

Pre-accession EU conditionality did indeed entail significant amendments to legislation previously adopted during the 1990s: while the Union did not question the legal continuity principle underlying Estonian and Latvian citizenship policy, it nevertheless insisted that citizenship be made freely available to anyone born in the two countries after 1992, regardless of the parents' own citizenship status. This change means that access to citizenship will become increasingly moot with each new post-independence generation. At the same time, the EU advocated the long-term retention of Russian as a language of education alongside Estonian and Latvian, through continued state support for primary and secondary schools teaching either wholly or partly in the language.

For all of these reasons, there still remains much to be done in terms of building a more integrated political community. In Latvia, the 2008 economic crisis appeared in the short term to have brought about an attenuation of ethno-political cleavages, reducing the standing of ruling right-of-centre parties amongst ethnic Latvians and bolstering efforts by Harmony Centre (HC), the largest political grouping amongst Russian-speakers, to market itself as a Social Democratic Party and reach out to Latvian voters. Harmony Centre has held power in the capital Riga since 2009, and emerged as the largest party in the parliamentary elections of 2011 and 2012, a performance which thus far it has appeared on course to repeat in the next elections scheduled for 2015.

It has not, however, been admitted to the current ruling coalition of parties, which continue to portray Harmony as an overtly pro-Russian party that would open the door to greater external influence from an increasingly assertive Putin regime. Faced with new challenges to their power, more nationalistic elements within Latvia's ruling coalition have intensified their efforts to securitise issues around ethnicity, tabling amongst other things revived proposals for a complete Latvianisation of education. Such moves have been mirrored by their counterparts within the Russian-speaking community, as seen for instance in the organisation of a politically divisive 2012 referendum on the question of whether Russian should be given a status of second official state language.

There are no signs of an imminent ethnic crisis in either Latvia or Estonia. Nor is there any suggestion that Russia would attempt a Ukraine-style intervention against states that are full members of both the EU and NATO. However, the lingering ethno-political divide in Estonia and Latvia means that nationalist forces on both sides will likely seek to exploit the current international situation in pursuit of their respective agendas. This underlines the need for renewed initiatives to promote greater societal integration, at a time when both countries face a range of other pressing social and economic challenges within the ongoing process of consolidating democratic nation-statehood.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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