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ILMARS ZNOTINS / AFP

Latvia struggles with restive Russian minority amid regional tensions

One country, two different worlds: Marginalized community looks east to Moscow as Riga sticks with West

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by **Matthew Luxmoore (/profiles//matthew-luxmoore.html)**

This is part 1 in an occasional series about tensions between Moscow and the West in key flashpoints along Russia's borders and in the territories of the former Soviet Union.

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RIGA, Latvia — The yellowing pages of the thick guestbook at the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia (<http://okupacijasmuzejs.lv/en>) read like a song of praise for Latvian self-determination and express a narrative of condemnation directed at the two regimes — Nazi and Soviet — to which this country fell during World War II.

But hidden among the expressions of admiration for Latvia's struggle are entries written in Russian attesting to a different interpretation of the country's recent past.

"It's not peoples that occupy but political regimes," a visitor wrote on May 2. "Russians and Latvians achieved so much together. [Thanks to this] Latvia remains a prospering country with a national culture," wrote another. He proposed that the museum should be renamed.

Such sentiments are reminders of a legacy that continues to trouble Latvia, a small Baltic state of 2 million people bordering Russia. Controversial policies introduced in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and the country's re-emergence as an independent state — coupled with official ambivalence about integrating its large Russian-speaking minority — has left many inhabitants living in different cultural and information spaces.

The crisis in Ukraine has focused attention on Russian speakers, who make up about a third of Latvia's population. Growing evidence of Moscow's hand (<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/hiding-in-plain-sight-putin-s-war-in-ukraine-and-boris-nemtsov-s-putin-war>) in Kiev's fight with its breakaway Russian regions has provoked concerns over similar dividing lines in Latvia (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/25/us-latvia-defence-idUSBREA301Q420140425>), and fears that the opposing sources from which its two communities derive their information could further fuel tensions.

Kremlin-owned TV channels enjoy a monopoly on Russian-language coverage in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, each with a sizable Russian-speaking community, filling television screens with slickly produced talk shows and news reports from Moscow.

"From Russia we receive high-quality entertainment, spiced with state propaganda. Before, we just laughed at it, but now we've realized that a third of our population is basically being poisoned on a daily basis," said Olga Dragileva, a Russian-speaking journalist at Latvian state-owned broadcaster LTV.

She is a co-writer of "In the Kremlin's Fog (<http://ltv.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/20.05.2015-kremla-migla.id49713/>)," a documentary that aired on LTV last month. The hourlong investigation, broadcast in Latvian, alleges that Russia has been working to deliberately destabilize NATO members on its borders, stoking discontent through economic, military and diplomatic means.

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Heavily featured in Dragileva's report is Aleksandr Gaponenko, the director of Riga's Institute of European Studies (<http://www.esinstitute.org/>), whose May 26 detainment by Latvian police on charges of inciting discord was heavily covered by Russian state media. In an interview with Al Jazeera, Gaponenko denied taking orders from the Kremlin, though he admitted receiving 7,000 euros (\$7,890) per year from Russia's Fund for the Support and Defense of Compatriots Abroad (http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/D0EBAF7E4102908743257E54004A4F7B), one of several Russian nongovernmental organizations named in the documentary as fronts for Kremlin policy in the Baltics.

Russian TV channels and state-funded organizations like the Compatriots' Fund have long been active in Latvia, supporting local initiatives like a failed 2012 referendum to make Russian the country's second official language. Such issues are important for a minority that sees itself as discriminated against and holds often different views of Latvia's place in the world and global politics. Recent surveys in Latvia show major differences in opinion (<https://ivarsijabs.wordpress.com/2015/05/02/critical-but-not-serious-latvian-russophones-in-the-shadow-of-ukraine/>) among Latvians on the situation in Ukraine, with most Russian speakers opposed to sanctions against Moscow and supportive of Russia's annexation of Crimea last year.



Veterans in Riga on Victory Day, May 9. Ilmars Znotins / AFP

Since assuming the EU's rotating presidency in January, Latvia has begun championing the idea of a coordinated international strategy toward Moscow's soft power offensive. Proposals for a Russian-language TV service to counter Kremlin propaganda received overarching support from members of the 28-member bloc at summits last month in Riga, Latvia's capital. The discussions have generated lively coverage in Western media, although Latvian officials dismiss the reports as exaggerated and insist that no specific plans for a pan-European Russian-language channel (<http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/243667.html>) have been made.

"We're dealing with national publics, not some pan-European Russian audience. That does not exist. Latvian Russians are fundamentally different, in terms of their perceptions, to those living elsewhere," said Viktors Makarovs, an adviser to Latvia's Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics.

"The key to ensuring that [Russian] media and other policies coming from [Russia] do not impact our security is to make clear to all who live here that this is their country and they're welcome to participate. We need to focus on how we can effectively engage the Russian-speaking society and help them make their voices heard," he added.

Full participation is something many Russian speakers in Latvia say they have been denied. Makarovs acknowledges that the narrative advanced by Moscow often taps into real emotions and serious problems that Russian speakers face in the country. A decision to deny Russian speakers automatic citizenship rights in the 1990s has left some 300,000 people in Latvia with noncitizen status (<http://www.euroviews.eu/2014/2014/04/29/aliens-in-their-own-country/>), rendering them unable to vote or hold public office. The education system is still split into Latvian-language schools and those for national minorities, whose classes are predominantly in Russian. And with the Soviet period branded an occupation in official discourse, those whose relatives came from other parts of the USSR feel uneasy about how they're perceived today.



The travel document used by noncitizens in Latvia, most of them Russian speakers who have voluntarily refused citizenship or been denied it. Matthew Luxmoore

"As a Russian in Latvia, you're able to see both sides, but it's wrong to refer to Russians as occupants. The government has never said to us, 'You're one of us.' I think that's the reason for the problems it's having today," said Danuta Dembovska, a political analyst at the Riga City Council who recently wrote an article for a popular Baltic news portal about the problems faced by Latvia's Russian speakers (<http://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/25-let-nezavisimosti-russkoyazychnye-v-latvii-svoi-ilschuzhie.d?id=45896>)



While few in the Baltics perceive President Vladimir Putin's Russia as an immediate security threat, precautionary measures are being taken. A number of people living in Latvia have joined the pro-Moscow separatist uprising in eastern Ukraine, and the Latvian government is targeting anyone suspected of involvement.

Vladimir Linderman, 56, a Riga-based noncitizen who leads the Latvian branch of Russia's National Bolshevik Party, said he's facing 10 years in prison for recruiting volunteers to fight. He said a number of his friends from Russia and Latvia have died fighting in Ukraine. He would go himself, he said, if he didn't think his age would hold him back.

For him, the Latvian government's stance toward Russia is a pretense intended to strengthen the country's position in NATO, which Latvia joined in 2004. But he doesn't expect much from the Russian government. "I don't think the Russian government really cares about the rights of compatriots abroad. I wish they did," he said.

In the meantime, regular reports of Russian fighter jets entering Baltic airspace (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/11/europe/russia-u-s-plane-intercept/>) have coincided with an increased presence of NATO forces in the region. Citing "the current geopolitical environment," Lithuania reintroduced conscription in February (<http://europe.newsweek.com/lithuania-votes-reintroduce-military-conscription-315287>), making Latvia the only Baltic nation where military service remains voluntary. While few in Latvia pay heed to such developments in their everyday lives, many, like Dragileva, are conscious of attempts to exploit the country's troubled past and current deep divisions.

"Russia offers an identity to those not included in the official narrative of Latvia's history. If our politics were not so nationalistic, then we would not be playing into Putin's hands," she said.

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