The Problem of Alienated Russophone Minorities Caught between the EU and Russia

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Executive summary: *The securitization of the presence of Russophone minorities in EU states is a persistent problem. Distrust between majorities and Russophones in the Baltic countries has increased since 2014, undermining the interethnic solidarity necessary for sustainable democracy. This policy memo makes recommendations for an integrated network of domestic and international support that centers on the welfare of minorities in their home-states, enabling currently alienated minorities to become democratic actors and constructive participants in EU-Russia relations.*

Among the most consequential legacies of the political history of Central and Eastern Europe is that the appeal of the centralized unitary nation-state model remains powerful, but – despite several major waves of state-designed population "mixing and unmixing" during the last century (Brubaker, 1996; Tesser, 2013) – political and cultural boundaries coincide only in exceptional cases. Sizable ethnic minority populations were left in many states, and most have kin-states across the border (Waterbury, 2020).[1] Cultural kinship is typically centered around a common language and the narratives of common past and present told in that language. Consequently, conflicts over ethnic boundary-making also center on minority language use, specifically in those institutional domains that are directly relevant for reproducing the culture and empowering or disempowering its speakers: the education system, the institutions of government, and public spaces where minorities live (for instance, bilingual signs of settlements or institutions) (Csergo, 2007).

For populations affected by these tensions, a benefit of post-1990 democratization and European integration was that ordinary actors could engage in social and cultural interactions across state borders. Although nationalism remained powerful as both a state-building ideology and popular sentiment, the common European framework offered a transnational space in which different forms of nationalism could coexist across the continent. This included nationalisms that are inherently conflictual: traditional nation-state projects (which motivated

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[1] I understand ethnicity in a broad sense, as process of cultural reproduction that creates kinship through a set of cultural markers (such as language, religion, race) associated with a shared repertoire of historical narrative, music, literature, and so on.

the collapse of the three federations and creation or reconstitution of independent states) and transsovereign nationalisms (which sought to normalize cross-border linkages in cases of divided nationhood). The tension between these competing nationalisms remained in place, but conflicts around them were moderated by membership in the same European framework (Csergo and Goldgeier, 2004; McGarry and O'Leary, 2013; Pogonyi, 2017; Waterbury, 2020).

However, minority populations whose kin-states are outside of the EU are facing a different set of challenges, and Russophones in the Baltic states represent "special" cases in this category. The Russian kin-state is not only outside the EU but positions itself as its geopolitical challenger. The model that Russia advances undermines the pluralist values of democratic government for which Central and Eastern Europeans fought for decades under Soviet control. Russian support for autocratic and anti-EU leaders and parties outside its borders is a source of major concern for those committed to pluralist democracy. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and support for secessionists in eastern Ukraine demonstrated that Russia is ready to combine hard and soft power in pursuit of its larger regional agenda. These actions increased security concerns in the Baltic states about the presence of Russophone minorities.

The reason why the securitization of Russophone minority politics is a persistent problem is that these populations are alienated minorities caught between states.[2] After becoming political minorities in the 1990s, their status loss resulted in a tangible deterioration of their welfare in all three countries. Regions most densely populated by Russophones were the most harshly hit by economic restructuring. In Estonia and Latvia, their direct alienation (literally, through disenfranchisement) sent a strong message that Russophones were not welcome. Although not disenfranchised, Russophones in Lithuania were also excluded from the design of the new post-1991 social contracts. The prospects for future improvements were also uncertain, as Russophone interest representation in state centers, where key laws are adopted and resources allocated, remained inadequate in all three states. In other words, the possibility for

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[2] A minority is "alienated" when a significant number of its members perceive to be unwelcome or unprotected in the state.

Russophones to envision a future for their culture in these states became significantly constrained.

Notions of threat and victimhood are entrenched in identity narratives throughout this region, and the events of 2014 made it more difficult to find common ground. Titular majorities in the Baltics feel both entitled to "their" nation-states and justified in institutionalizing official narratives of Baltic victimhood during the Soviet times. They are afraid of what an expansionist Russia might do to their countries in the future and how it might use the presence of Russophones as a "fifth column" to justify potential aggression. The current Russian military buildup around Ukraine heightens the demand to contain the Russian threat. Russophones, on the other side, feel entitled to respect for their cultures and threatened by majority nationalism. From their angle, those who chose Russia have already moved to Russia, and those who remained in the Baltic states are looking for accommodation. Russia is their cultural reference point as the country where Russian culture is valued and supported. There is, however, no agreement among Russophones about whether Russia's involvement is helpful (Kallas, 2016). Intra-minority divisions over the question deepened after 2014, but Russophones remained overwhelmingly pro-EU (Cianetti and Nakai, 2017). Yet the increased securitization they experience generates growing frustration with the expectation that they constantly prove their loyalty to their home-states and disloyalty to Russia.[3]

Since 1991, governments in the Baltic states have balanced domestic political interests against external pressure by European institutions and the specter of Russian influence (Schulze, 2018). The evolution of policies toward Russophones can be summarized in terms of (a) an initial strategy of exclusion-toleration (roughly from 1991 to the mid-2000s) and (b) a subsequent strategy of acceptance-integration (from the mid-2000s until 2014). Since 2014, the tension between official integration projects and the realities of distrust became more apparent. This

distrust is hardly conducive to the development of the interethnic solidarity necessary for sustainable democracy.

European institutions have been actively involved in minority policy design in these states. Initially, they focused on the naturalization of Russophones in Estonia and Latvia. They also encouraged the shift from exclusion to integration strategies. As "integration as a two-way street" became a fashionable idea, governments seemed competent in working out the details, and integration appeared to be simply a question of time. From a critical Russophone perspective, however, integration policies looked more like efforts to compel Russophone kids to shift to majority languages without regard to their welfare along the way. Instead of a complete language shift in schools, most Russophones have been interested in bilingualism that would enable them to cultivate their language while becoming competent in the state language. Inadequate policies made them suspicious of the integration strategy.

Since the mid-2010s, European institutions have supported Baltic states in their efforts to contain Russia's influence. This makes sense, for the reasons discussed above. The high degree of securitization generated by containment, however, alienates Russophones and works against integration – undermining earlier efforts. There is an urgent need for an approach that prioritizes the welfare of Russophone minorities and provides them more credible and active support for developing their cultures in their home-states. For this, Russophones need increased democratic agency where they live and a better coordinated minority-friendly environment that involves domestic and international actors.

The need for an integrated network of domestic and international support that centers on minority welfare

Once people make a commitment to a political community, they need access to decision-making over the rules by which they live and the distribution of resources that enable them to develop

their culture. In other words, members of minority populations need *democratic agency* in their home-states. This requires credible and effective political representation and reliable institutional support. Institutions lengthen people's time horizons under times of uncertainty, and they can also provide social resilience (the possibility of resistance to authoritarianism) (O'Donnell 1994). Not all social institutions work for democracy (Berman 1997). Persistent minorities need a combination of *bonding institutions* (which help them to develop their ethnic culture) and *bridging institutions* (which help them to develop inter-ethnic solidarity). In principle, home-states can provide most of this support, but majoritarian nationalism remains a major hindrance, especially where majorities feel vulnerable.

1. Europe should actively support minority *democratic* agency

The European democratic framework provides models and building blocs for a safe environment of "nested security" (Jenne, 2015; Smith et al, 2019), but they need to be actively reinforced in substantive ways to support European minorities caught between competing state- and nation-building projects pursued by home-states and kin-states.

(a) Reliable knowledge about the welfare of minorities

Good policymaking starts with adequate knowledge and understanding about the relevant issues. The scarcity of comparative research about the welfare of minority populations is striking especially in the domain of socioeconomic welfare and institutional capital. State centers collect official statistics about bits and pieces of the necessary data, but comprehensive data and understanding are lacking. Minority scholars need to be actively involved and supported in collecting and analyzing knowledge about the conditions of minorities, and European actors can provide active support in creating a network of minority research institutes. Russophone research institutions in the Baltics would be part of this network.

(b) Continued European level monitoring of minority welfare

Before EU accession, the OSCE HCNM and other European actors played a key role in this domain (OSCE HCNM 2008). Since accession, European level monitoring decreased significantly, because laws in most countries look more minority-friendly than they did in the early 1990s. Laws are not necessarily implemented in minority-friendly ways, however; and from the minority perspective, the inadequacy of implementation is easily experienced as disrespect or indifference, which reinforces alienation. Continued European level monitoring would include Russophone minorities in the Baltics.

(c) European funding for minority institutions

Minority institutions need extra support in this region. European funding can help to fill in gaps that home-state governments cannot fill due to lack of interest or resources. Minority actors also need access to decision-making about the distribution of funding. Those affected by it can be consulted through the processes described above (a and b); and a transnational body of European minority representatives can make decisions in a transparent way. Funding for Russophone institutions would be part of this network.

2. Russian kin-state involvement should prioritize the welfare of Russophone minorities over geopolitics

Kin-state involvement is a double-edged sword: some forms of it are helpful and some are detrimental to the welfare of minorities in their home-states. Certain aspects of cultural reinforcement are difficult to provide without help from kin-state actors even at the best of times, simply because minority populations are small. In a condition of scarcity, it is harder to achieve the kind of cultural pluralism and quality in arts, literature, etc., that many minority members are seeking, including Russophones in the Baltics. Cross-border cultural exchanges (including access to higher education, theatres and other cultural institutions in Russia) are valuable resources. Some forms of kin-state engagement can be damaging to democratic agency, however (Schulze, 2010, Pogonyi 2017). Anti-democratic and manipulative messaging through Russian kin-state media makes Russophones vulnerable to majoritarian nationalism in their home-states, increasing tensions between "Europe and Russia."

3. Russophone minority actors can help to soften the conflict between the EU and Russia

Minority actors are constant negotiators and balancers: that is the only way they can achieve anything in a persistent minority condition in majoritarian democracies. Minority political experiences can also position minority actors to take on roles as regional "bridge-makers" between the EU and external actors. Russophone minority actors, too, can play such a role between the EU and Russia – but only in an environment in which Russophone minorities (a) are not securitized in their home-states as fifth-columns of Russia but seen as ordinary people who are interested in cultivating and developing Russian culture, (b) gain democratic agency in their home-states, and (c) are supported in maintaining both bonding and bridging institutions, including institutions that can help with dialogue between the EU and Russia. Under such conditions, they have the potential for becoming constructive participants in (currently tense) EU-Russia relations.

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