



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

PONARS  
EURASIA

## THE IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE ON RUSSOPHONE MINORITIES IN THE BALTIC STATES

Zsuzsa Csergő, *Queen's University*  
and  
Kristina Kallas, *University of Tartu*

Policy Brief presented at the  
  
BEAR-PONARS Eurasia Conference  
“Between the EU and Russia: Domains of Diversity and Contestation”

April 29-30, 2022,  
Washington, DC



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 841524.

**Executive summary:** Russia's escalation of the war in Ukraine has raised the salience of questions about how real or assumed links with Russia as a kin-state affects the democratic agency of Russian-speaking minorities caught between the EU and Russia. We hypothesize that the brutality of the aggression by Russia will increase the distance between Putin's Russia and Russophones living in EU states, and that this growing distance might speed up democratic inclusion in their home-states. This policy memo cautions against exaggerated expectations based on that logic, however. Our comparative research in 2019-2021 revealed that the impact of Russia's 2014 invasion in Ukraine was shaped significantly by local environments and local actors. As security concerns reach new heights in the Baltic states, conditions for Russophone democratic agency are likely to deteriorate in the immediate future, unless political actors at all levels (European, state, and local politics) work actively toward the de-securitization of the "minority question."

### **How association with an aggressive kin-state shaped Russophone minority democratic agency after 2014**

Russian-speakers comprise similarly large segments of the small populations of Estonia and Latvia (approximately 24% of 1.3 million, and 25% of 1.9 million). They have lived in increasingly securitized state environments since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Putin's extensive use of the "Russian world" in justifying the aggression against Ukraine generates serious security concerns in these countries, although they are part of both NATO and the EU. Yet the securitization of the presence of Russophones unfolded differently in Estonia and Latvia, reflecting different juxtapositions of ethnic, political and social cleavages, as well as differences in ethnopolitical decisions over the last two decades.

Russophones in Latvia are socio-economically more integrated into mainstream society than their counterparts in Estonia. However, the high concentration of economically powerful Russophones in Latvia's capital city puts the issues of language, citizenship and economic rights at the center of political power battles. In Estonia, Russophones have less economic and political power, and are more concentrated in the poorer and more remote North-East part of Estonia. These differences played a role in shaping different trajectories toward political inclusion. In Estonia, non-citizen residents gained voting rights in local elections in 1993 (Smith, 2002), and their ability to vote but not run for office created incentives for a mainstream party with Estonian leadership (the Centre Party) to build a Russophone electorate. This, paradoxically, provided Russophones access to political agency. In Latvia, non-citizens gained no voting rights at any level, and the isolation of Russophones from political decision-making became deeper. The ratio of non-citizens remained higher, and naturalized Russophones pooled votes behind Harmony, a de facto Russian party with Russophone leadership, which remained isolated in parliament (Csörgő and Regelman, 2017; Cianetti 2019).

Against this backdrop, the securitization of Russophone presence unfolded differently in Estonia and Latvia after 2014. Estonians were more inclined to avoid further alienation among Russophones and moved toward accommodative minority policies. The leader of Centre Party

became Estonia's Prime Minister in 2016, forming a governing coalition with Estonian parties on the left and right after 14 years of parliamentary isolation. This coalition introduced policies to support the economic development of the Russian-populated Narva region and began adopting policies that recognized Russophone interest in maintaining bilingualism rather than compelling linguistic assimilation. The Latvian government, by contrast, reinforced the parliamentary isolation of Russophones, and adopted assimilationist policies to compel a language shift and stifle dissent. Granting Latvian citizenship to children born to non-citizen parents was justified as a strategy to deprive Russia of political influence. Several Russophone rights activists were directly targeted by the Latvian State Security (Schulze 2021). Our interviews in 2019-21 revealed a strong perception among minority actors that Latvian state agencies aimed to intimidate and silence them, although politicians in Harmony distanced themselves from Russia.

### **What to expect after Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in 2022?**

Russia's 2022 war against Ukraine raised security concerns to a new height in the Baltic states. The brutality of Putin's war, perpetrated on the pretense of "liberating" Russia's kin in the former Soviet space, prompted the overwhelming majority of Russophone minority leaders to strongly denounce the war. There have been no public expressions of support for Russia.

Expectations for the public condemnation of Russia have been higher in Latvia, however, and Russophone political actors performed accordingly. Only the controversial leader of the small Russian Union party in Latvia, [Tatjana Ždanoka](#), remained silent. Russian-speakers of Latvia published an [open letter](#) about the war on April 8, calling Russia an aggressor state, stating a clear stance on the war: "We are ashamed that orders to kill, rape and torture are given in our own language. The war in Ukraine has changed the meaning of what it means to belong to Russian culture." "We call on those who celebrate May 9th to realize that participating in the celebrations in Victory Park this year means supporting the war that is going on now. We ask you: do not arrange a celebration while innocent people are being tortured and killed every day in Ukraine. Remembering the loss of your family, respect the pain of others." On February 24, Harmony party leader [Jānis Urbanovičs](#) issued a [strong statement calling](#) upon Russia to stop "the arsonist of war." [Nils Ušakovs](#) (Harmony, former mayor of Riga) gave a speech at the EP's plenary session on March 1, 2022, condemning the Kremlin's "lowly and criminal war against Ukraine," and emphasizing that "We are against the Kremlin. We are not against the Russian people." As one of the main organizers of May 9<sup>th</sup> celebrations in Riga, he also sent a clear message in an interview in Latvian media that "there should be no public celebration of May 9<sup>th</sup>," stating "Russian and Ukrainian soldiers once fought against Nazism, now the Russians attacked the Ukrainians, so this year there can be no question of any celebration. We cannot allow Putin, the Kremlin to steal the memory of date." Ukraine-related legislation (e.g., support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and EU membership, authorization for Latvian citizens to volunteer in the Ukrainian army) was adopted unanimously by the Latvian parliament with the full backing of Harmony. The Orthodox Church of Latvia, which operates under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Moscow, has been more evasive. While [it strongly condemns the war](#), it

has consistently [avoided naming](#) Vladimir Putin as its instigator. (The Church's response was similar in Estonia.)

Meanwhile, [an opinion poll](#) commissioned by a Latvian television program showed that 25% of non-Latvians supported Ukraine in this war, 20% supported Russia, and nearly half (46%) did not want to take a side. Among ethnic Latvians, 87% supported Ukraine and only 1% supported Russia. Still, a leading researcher at the University of Latvia, [Mārtiņš Kaprāns](#), has pointed out that these results reveal a steady decrease in Russophone support for Putin's war since 2014 (from 65% in 2015 to 35% in 2019, and 20% in 2022). According to [Una Bergmane](#), researcher at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, "while a minority of Latvian Russian speakers do support Putin's war, the public space has been strongly dominated by those who condemn it."

In Estonia, too, public responses have reflected overwhelming support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia's aggression. Political performances have been more modest, however. No open letter emerged from the Russian-speaking community, but several high-profile politicians from Centre made public statements, including [Yana Toom](#) (MEP, one of Centre's top politicians), who signed all EP declarations that condemn Russian aggression, while emphasizing the need to distinguish between the Kremlin's politics and Russian society and culture. [Mihhail Kõlvart](#), the Russophone mayor of Tallinn, where Centre holds almost absolute power, strongly condemned the war, calling it unacceptable to deny people the right to decide their country's fate. Tallinn adopted a resolution condemning the Russian aggression and cancelled friendship agreements with Russian cities.

While the public space is dominated in both countries by condemnations of Russia's aggression, meso-level Russophone actors (school directors, local government officials) have been quieter about the war. Their silence speaks about the fragility of minority democratic agency in a hyper-securitized environment. Meso-level actors are closer to ordinary people. They understand that the simplified messaging required at this time of war does not mean that minority issues no longer matter. The question remains open about how Russophones can articulate interests after 2022. Three issues have generated heated political debates since 1991: political participation, language rights in education, and the right to a different narrative about World War II. The immediate impact of the war is visible in the politics of collective memory. Russophone parliamentarians in Latvia felt compelled to vote with ethnic Latvians to ban May 9<sup>th</sup> celebrations. The Estonian parliament has not adopted a ban on celebrations, but it banned symbols associated with Russian aggression. A backlash on Russophone political rights would become more divisive. On April 21, all Harmony MPs abstained when a majority in the Latvian Seima voted for [amendments to the Citizenship Law](#) that allow for revoking citizenship from those who "support war crimes or other internationally punishable crimes against another democratic state." Estonians have expressed less interest in revoking political rights. A resolution was submitted to Riigikogu by Isamaa Party to abolish residence permits for those Russian Federation citizens who support war in Ukraine, but no public debate has ensued over this proposal.

Russophones in both countries remained pro-EU and pro-democracy after 2014 (Cianetti and Nakai 2017). In 2022, public condemnations of Putin's war demonstrate continuing interest to participate constructively in democratic politics. It is, however, also important to listen to the silence of meso-level Russophone actors, who are closer to ordinary minority members in local settings. The shadow of war can stifle democratic debate, and minority members need active support to sustain interest in democratic participation and avoid alienation from state institutions.

**Disclaimer:** The European Commission's support in producing this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

## REFERENCES

- Cianetti, Licia. 2019. *The Quality of Divided Democracies: Minority Inclusion, Exclusion, and Representation in the New Europe*. University of Michigan Press.
- Cianetti, Licia and Ryo Nakai. 2017. "Critical Trust in European Institutions: The Case of the Russian-speaking Minorities in Estonia and Latvia." *Problems of Post-Communism* 64 (5): 276-290.
- Csergő, Zsuzsa and Ada Regelman. 2017. "Europeanization and Collective Rationality in Minority Voting." *Problems of Post-Communism* 64 (5): 291-310.
- Smith, David J. 2002. *Estonia. Independence and European Integration*. London: Routledge.
- Schulze, Jennie. 2021. "Re-framing Russia's Soft Power in Post-Accession Latvia: Education Reform and Naturalization for Stateless Children." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62 (3): 264-292.