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Inga Sarsune

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Coexistence International

Mailstop 086
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5017
781-736-5014 fax
www.coexistence.net
coexistenceintl@brandeis.edu

Background¹

In the ninth century, the territory of modern Latvia was settled by a Finno-Ugric tribe (the Livs) and four other major Baltic tribal cultures, as they began to fan out and establish specific tribal realms. In the 13th century armed Germanic crusaders invaded Latvia and established control over the indigenous Baltic peoples and territory. Over the next centuries, traders and invaders from Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Russia established a presence in the country, alongside the local Latvian inhabitants.

The Republic of Latvia was established as a parliamentary democracy in 1918, in the wake of World War I, with citizenship for all residents regardless of ethnicity. Between 1918 and 1939, ethnic Latvians composed about 75% of the population; Russians, Jews, Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, Estonians, and other minorities represented the remainder.

During the Second World War Latvia suffered three invasions and occupations, by Soviets, Germans, then Soviets again. A hundred and twenty thousand Latvians were deported to Soviet concentration camps in Siberia; a hundred and forty thousand fled to the West; and tens of thousands more disappeared or perished in the conflict. As a result of Hitler's policies, the majority of Baltic Germans who had been living in Latvia were resettled in Germany, and 90% of the Jewish population was annihilated. By the end of the conflict, nearly

Inga Sarsume is a MA student in the Coexistence and Conflict Program at Brandeis University. She also works for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, her native country. She presently holds the position of Third Secretary in the Security policy department where she deals with European Union civilian crisis management issues.

one-third of the ethnic Latvian population had been killed, deported, or relocated. Moreover, during Soviet rule between 1944 and 1991, hundreds of thousands of Soviets of various nationalities were brought into Latvia, reducing the indigenous ethnic Latvian population to only about 50%.

On May 4, 1990, the new Supreme Soviet (the legislative body of Latvia) voted to begin the political process of removing Soviet rule and restoring full independence to Latvia. Although the government in Moscow tried to suppress this pro-independence government with armed force, on March 3, 1991, 87% of all residents of Latvia participated in a referendum on independence, and 73% voted in favor. Since ethnic Latvians represented just 53% of the total population at the time, the high vote among all residents indicated that a large proportion of other ethnic groups had voted with a majority of Latvians to restore national independence.

Current State of Coexistence

Since Latvia regained independence in 1991, integration policy has been a key issue in its domestic affairs. Latvia re-established its original citizenship laws and policies, which enabled all former (pre-1940) citizens and their dependants to restore their citizenship, regardless of ethnicity (at that time, nearly 700,000 Soviet citizens resided in independent Latvia). At the beginning of the 1990s Latvia became a member of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the World Trade Organization, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and many other international organizations promoting democratic values. Since 1991, Latvia has established state-funded minority schools and new laws and institutions dealing specifically with social-integration issues.

Accession to the European Union in 2004 and membership in the Council of Europe has influenced Latvia's government to seek to establish a modern Latvian nation that is both civic and multicultural. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Latvia recognizes that the way the government sets about this task will inevitably affect both inter-ethnic relations and the status of minorities in Latvia.²

The population of Latvia by nationalities as of January 1, 2007 according to data of the Residents Register of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs³ is shown in Figure One, below. This figure shows the total population of Latvia (2,284,871); of that number Latvians make up 59% and Russians 28.3%. The percentages of other populations are in the single digits or lower, and they include Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Roma, Germans, and more.

FIGURE ONE

Statistics on Latvian residents & citizens by nationality, as of January 1, 2007

Nationality	Residents	%	Citizens	%
Latvians	1,348,344	59.0	1,345,363	99.8
Russians	646,567	28.3	362,902	56.1
Byelorussians	85,434	3.7	30,694	35.9
Ukrainians	57,794	2.5	16,575	28.7
Poles	54,831	2.4	40,807	74.4
Lithuanians	31,034	1.4	18,195	58.6
Jews	10,336	0.5	6,540	63.3
Roma	8,559	0.4	7,956	93.0
Germans	4,226	0.2	2,216	52.4
Tartar	2,898	0.1	762	26.3
Armenians	2,707	0.1	1,006	37.2
Estonians	2,508	0.1	1,514	60.4
Other	29,633	1.3	16,086	54.2
Total	2,284,871	100	1,850,616	81.0

Through the implementation of sound policies in the area of integration and national minority issues there is peaceful coexistence by all ethnic groups in Latvia; however, the long-term risks of social, cultural, political, and economic marginalization cannot be underestimated.

Policies and Initiatives

Integration policy

After 50 years of Soviet annexation, Latvia's ethnic makeup has been irrevocably changed. Thus, a key issue for Latvia after regaining independence has been to develop an integration policy. In addition, a desire to join the European

Union put some pressure on the government regarding protection of the minority communities.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,⁴ integration policy in Latvia has been approached in a multi-faceted way. Since Latvia is a distinctly multi-ethnic society, continuous integration of its various ethnic communities is an essential prerequisite for Latvia's continued stability and future prosperity. The Latvian state helps to preserve and maintain the cultures and identities of all these different ethnic communities.

What follows is a brief chronology of the development of integration policy:

- In 1994 the parliament adopted a law on citizenship providing the opportunity for those who had arrived during the Soviet occupation to acquire Latvian citizenship upon passing an elementary language and history examination.
- In 1995 the government created the National Program for Latvian Language Training to coordinate language training for adults and assist in curriculum reform in minority schools.
- In 1998 the law on citizenship was liberalized in a national referendum, by placing emphasis on individuals rather than ethnic quota groups.
- In 1998 the government created a working group to draft a new policy document – a framework entitled "Integration of Society in Latvia." In it, integration is defined as strengthening "mutual understanding and cooperation between individuals and groups" with the aim of creating a "cohesive civil society based on common values."
- In 2001, after a broad public debate, the government adopted a national program for the integration of society and created an agency responsible for supporting integration-related projects.
- In November 2002, the office of Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs was created,⁵ the leading governmental body accountable for the development and implementation of state policy in societal integration, minority rights, civil society development, and extermination of racial discrimination.⁶

Integration policy in Latvia is approached through ten major fields. These fields include: social integration, culture, language, regional integration, civic participation, non-governmental organizations, repatriation and migration, mass media, education, and scientific support. Thus far, a total of about 10 million Euro has been allocated to institutions and projects dealing with integration.⁷

International assistance, particularly funding from the European Union's PHARE program (which assists applicant countries in Central and Eastern Europe to prepare for EU accession), has contributed significantly to Latvia's integration policy.⁸

Minority policy

Article 114 of the Constitution of Latvia (adopted in 1922) determines that "Persons belonging to ethnic minorities have the right to preserve and develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity." There is also a specific law, adopted in 1991, which guarantees to all nationalities and ethnic groups in Latvia the rights to cultural autonomy and self-determination. Each ethnic group, of course, has its own priorities, but across the board the most important issues tend to be those relating to language and schooling.

As an example, it's worth taking a look at the government's action plan regarding one ethnic minority: the National Action Plan Roma in Latvia 2007–2009. Taking into consideration the Roma's current situation in Latvia and the historic development of the community, three main areas of improvement and development have been chosen as pillars of the action plan: combating discrimination of the Roma population in education; combating discrimination and securing equal opportunities for Roma in the labor market; and involvement of Latvian society in the promotion of tolerance towards Roma.⁹

Language policy

In 1999, a state language law was adopted to ensure the protection and promotion of Latvian as the official state language, and giving specific minimal protections to the Liv language. All other languages are regarded as unofficial "foreign" languages. The law sets very strict limits on state involvement in the private sector, where language use is regulated only in cases where legitimate public interests are affected.¹⁰ The law, which came into force in 2000, was developed in close co-operation with international experts from the OSCE and the Council of Europe, thus ensuring compliance with international human-rights standards. However, only when translation into Latvian is ensured can minority languages be used in state and local government institutions or undertakings, in the judicial system, or in companies that are predominantly government owned.¹¹ One of the important factors influencing the adoption of restrictive language policy in Latvia is the demographic legacy of Soviet immigration.

With the restoration of independence, the strengthening of Latvian as an official language in all spheres of social life became a priority. In order to prevent exclusion, great emphasis has been put on the teaching of Latvian to minorities. In 1995, the government initiated the National Program for Latvian Language Training (since 2004 the

National Agency for Latvian Language Training). The agency offers free language courses for professionals who need Latvian language skills in their jobs (e.g. police). Since 2004 the agency has devoted special attention to parents of the children attending national minority schools, thus promoting understanding of the educational reform being carried out in the country. Since its establishment the agency has overseen the Latvian-language training of nearly 82,000 people.¹²

Education policy

One of the Soviet legacies was a segregated school system that divided ethnic Latvians from Russians.¹³ Bilingual education, in particular for the Russian-speaking minority, still plays a crucial role in coexistence. Apart from Russian, instruction in languages of ethnic minorities includes Polish, Ukrainian, Yiddish and Hebrew, Lithuanian, Estonian, Roma, and Byelorussian.¹⁴

The education law (adopted in 1998) serves as the foundation for the national minority education system; it stipulates that minority education programs shall include the content necessary for members of national minority groups to develop an awareness of their respective ethnic structure, while also integrating into Latvian society.¹⁵

The Ministry of Education and Science has developed four model programs, which differ in terms of the proportion of classes taught in the national minority language. Since 1999, each educational institution has had the chance to choose one of the four models offered by the state. According to the information on the Ministry of Education and Science Web site:

- Ethnic minorities who are at the age of compulsory schooling should have the opportunity to acquire basic education and to learn their native language at the same time;
- The bilingual approach used in the implementation of general basic and general secondary education programs for the acquisition of curriculum enhances competitiveness in the labor market, ensuring not only the knowledge, but also skills to use both languages in different situations;
- The implementation of education policy for ethnic minorities facilitates the integration of the society of Latvia, providing guarantees for the rights of ethnic minorities and ensuring the requirements set by international documents.¹⁶

State contributions to the education of ethnic minorities manifests in teacher motivation, purchase of textbooks, regular monitoring of the process, provision of the National Program for Latvian Language Training, development of

teacher in-service training system, and municipal support. With some countries, Latvia has specific agreements on co-operation in culture, education and science (e.g. agreement between Latvia and Ukraine, 1995).

Immigration policy

With Europe's lowest birth rate, Latvia's population is dropping.¹⁷ Over the long term, this may make it difficult to preserve the social welfare model and sustain economic growth; a possible solution is immigration. Currently Latvia does not have a large number of immigrants; foreigners represent approximately 33,000, or 1.56%, of the total population.¹⁸

Yet increasing immigration will clearly raise questions of national identity and security. The government has to reassure its citizens that it will address those questions, while working to keep the country economically viable.¹⁹ Three approaches to Latvian immigration policy are being studied: conservative, liberal, and incremental liberal.²⁰ Respectively each model has some advantages and disadvantages in terms of considering long-term and short-term economic interests as well as the development of the EU policies towards immigration.

Citizenship policy

On October 15, 1991, the Supreme Council of Latvia passed a resolution restoring citizenship to people who had been citizens of Latvia as of June 17, 1940, and their descendents.²¹ Children born in Latvia after the renewal of Latvia's independence are automatically entitled to Latvian citizenship. Statistical data for the start of 2006 indicates that 81% of Latvia's population are Latvian citizens, and practically all of Latvia's permanent residents are able to become citizens. Applicants for citizenship in terms of nationality are mainly Russians (68.2%), as well as Byelorussians, Poles, and Ukrainians. In the near future, this could noticeably alter the coexistence landscape through shifting demographics.

Cultural policy

The most important national cultural policy document is the "National Programme for Culture" 2000-2010. Its overall goal is coexistence between different cultures based on mutual respect and tolerance. As a means to that end, the country's cultural policy protects religious freedoms and supports the forming and working of national culture communities, associations, and schools. All ethnic minority groups have equal rights to participate in cultural life and to apply for grants from a state fund that supports ethnic integration and cultural projects.²² The Law on Free Development and Rights for Cultural Autonomy of National and Ethnographic Groups (1991) aims to ensure rights pursuant to international norms for

cultural autonomy and cultural self-governance for national and ethnic minority groups.

Other policies

Another important policy document, adopted by the government in 2004, is the National Program for the Promotion of Tolerance. This document was drafted in view of the recommendations of the World Conference Against Racism and similar gatherings, and its drafters took into account the experience of other countries with similar action plans (such as Ireland, Sweden and Norway).²³ The program addresses not only existing forms of intolerance but also seeks to prevent the emergence and entrenchment of new forms by facilitating activities in public awareness, research, and monitoring by both NGOs and the media. Latvia, which lost approximately 70,000 Jews during the Holocaust, has also recently become more active in Holocaust education and research issues, and has increased support for the Jewish community.

Complementary Approach

The Latvian government cooperates with non-governmental organizations and mass media in order to address integration issues and to promote democracy and the development of civil society. Various institutions took part in a 2001 national program called "The Integration of Society in Latvia" including the State President Chancellery, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Naturalization Board, the National Program for Latvian Language Learning, the National Radio and TV Board, the Soros Foundation Latvia, the United Nations Development Programme, and other institutions.²⁴

One of the fundamental values in society integration is the participation of civic society in the process. Such participation is essential in order to diminish the gap between the state and society, various society groups, and individuals. One example of this effort was the implementation of the project "Latvia – Equal in Diversity," an anti-discrimination project which was supported by the European Community Action Program from 2001-2006. Although the institution responsible for the implementation of the project was the Ministry of Social Integration, two other ministries, one state agency, two universities, and seven NGOs representing ethnic minorities and human rights experts were all involved as well, with support from the national and local media.²⁵

Klubs "Māja" (or Club "The House") is a well known youth NGO which has been active for more than 10 years. As they say on their Web site, "Club is an organization for

young people, who care about other people and other nations, who are interested in World happenings and are willing to take part in building better society in Latvia. Society which would be more tolerant and open, better informed and well educated."²⁶ Through seminars, training, public-awareness campaigns, and summer camps they try to address coexistence issues at the youth level.

Other initiatives from non-governmental organizations range from media campaigns to meetings with politicians in order to discuss civic society role. An event on May 28, 2007, was the first forum for NGOs and the Parliament that addressed evaluation of current collaboration and future cooperation options in Latvia. It was organized by the Latvia's Civic Alliance.

Conclusion

As part of the process of becoming an independent democratic state and joining the EU, Latvia has overcome a number of political and legal challenges in order to fulfill all the criteria in the field of society integration and peaceful coexistence. Now the necessary laws, institutions, and mechanisms are in place, but their effectiveness has yet to be really tested.

The work of the government on these issues can only take the country so far; in order to maintain peaceful coexistence in Latvia civil society needs to become more involved, both in collaboration with government bodies and independently. Civic participation is what will bring coexistence issues home to people on a more personal level, helping the country to address the issue of inter-ethnic relations in a sensitive and positive way.

Endnotes

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- 5 "Article 1 of Regulations on the Secretariat of Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs," by the Cabinet of Ministers (Nr. 612, Riga protocol N.60,75) (December 27, 2002)

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 - 20 Ibid.
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 - 22 "Latvia: Cultural Policies and Instruments." This profile was first prepared by Ritva Mitchell, FINN-EKVIT, Helsinki, in co-operation with the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA) and updated by Solvita Krese (2001, 2002) and by the Compendium-Team of the LCCA in 2003, 2005 (Dace Akmene, Una Sedleniece, Agnese Treija-Hermane). Last profile update: October 2005. (Council of Europe/ERICarts, "Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe, 8th edition", 2007.)
 - 23 Address by Nils Muiznieks, Special Tasks Minister for Social Integration, Republic of Latvia to the OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fights against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination Brussels, September 13-14, 2004. www.integracija.gov.lv/index.php?id=524&sadala=25
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About Coexistence International

Based at Brandeis University since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the resources available to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations, and networks promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI advocates a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas.

What is Coexistence?

Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. Coexistence work covers the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together.

About the Series

In 2006, more than ninety percent of countries have populations made up of multiple identity groups. This rich diversity, full of promise and possibilities, also presents some of the most common and difficult challenges facing states today. Governments continue to wrestle with coexistence issues such as the dimensions of citizenship, constitutional and political designs that reflect the diversity within state borders, language and minority rights, land management, equality and cultural issues, and democratic participation. Understanding how diverse communities get along peacefully and equitably within a State is critical. If we can understand how some societies address issues of difference in constructive ways, then we might develop a repertoire of policy and programmatic options for countries experiencing inter-group violence or growing tensions.

With this publication series, CI seeks to describe the state of coexistence within different countries, and compare diversity and coexistence policies from countries around the world. CI has made no attempt to assess the implementation or success of such processes, or to endorse any of the initiatives mentioned in the report. We believe, however, that the documentation of the existence and scope of such efforts can contribute to a wider understanding of the variety of approaches for addressing issues of coexistence and intergroup conflict.

Other CI Publications

Complementary Approaches to Coexistence Work

What is Coexistence and Why a Complementary Approach?

Focus on Coexistence and the Arts

Focus on Coexistence and Democracy-building

Focus on Coexistence and Natural Resources

Focus on Coexistence and Security

With this publication series, CI examines where and how certain fields intersect with coexistence work. What challenges and opportunities exist when disciplines work together toward the common goal of a more peaceful, just world? This series illustrates the possibilities of effecting positive coexistence through cooperation among related fields.

Country Studies

Belize	Myanmar
Czech Republic	The Netherlands
Ecuador	Poland
Latvia	South Africa
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Mailstop 086

Brandeis University

Waltham, Massachusetts

02454-9110