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The Politics of the Past and Marginalization of Russophone Minorities in Post-Soviet Baltic States

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ABSTRACT

The historical trajectory of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania has been characterized by multiple shifts in population composition, political and cultural dominance, as well as the continuous struggle for national independence and preservation of national identity. The collapse of communist regimes in the 1990s brought rapid and peaceful changes to economic and political institution building, as well as a transition from centralized communist rule to sovereign democratic governments, planned economies to open market systems, and Soviet era legacies to integrating with European values. Historical complexities and memories imbue the evolving socio-political landscape in the post-Soviet Baltic states, positioning them in contrast to Soviet legacies. Moreover, the economic and political transitions in the post-Soviet Baltic states have faced challenges arising from various factors, including limited economic and political options, harsh memories of the Soviet past, restricted access to citizenship, and insufficient socio-economic conditions. Consequently, nation-building in the Baltic states was predominantly characterized by narratives aimed at reducing the economic and political influence of national minorities; this notion served as a catalyst in formulating citizenship and language policies designed to exclude and denationalize these groups, particularly in Estonia and Latvia. This paper is set to provides a concise overview of the development of the state and society, examining the connections between history and memory and their role in marginalization of national minorities. The study also examines the significance of history and memory in the formation of identity, as well as the emergence of historical concerns regarding antagonistic relations between the majority and minority in the post-Soviet Baltic states.

Keywords: Memory politics, Marginalization, Nation building, Russophone minorities, Identity formation

INTRODUCTION

The historical memories and shared collective experiences of the people are crucial to construction of identities of individuals as well as different socio-political groups in any given society. The narratives of past and collective memories of individuals influence the psychology of identity formation, which constructs the belief of who they were, who they are, and to whom they belong. Memories of the past, cultural practices and traditions, and ethnic values help individuals to construct the idea of "who we are" and to whom we are different. Raw historical narratives, whether in the form of individual or group memories, fabricate the notion of shared nationality, which in turn shapes the identity of a nation. In the case of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the post-Soviet process of nation-building and national identity construction has a strong connection to their historical past and collective memories of Soviet rule.

Historically, the three Baltic nations represented a convergence of diverse ethnic and cultural identities that shaped a complex and heterogeneous socio-political landscape. Kasekamp (Baltic Times, 2011) made an interesting statement: "The three Baltic States tend to be viewed as one from the outside," but from the period of their origin, the three nations had been under the influence of different foreign powers. The socio-cultural and political disruptions caused by the Soviet era had a lasting

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impact on post-Soviet identity formation discourses in the Baltic states (Budryte, 2005). During nearly five decades of Soviet rule, Russification policies intensified fears that the unique languages and cultures of the Baltic nations would erode, potentially vanishing within a generation. In response, the Baltic states enacted policies post-independence aimed at revitalizing their national languages and cultural traditions. Political elites in the Baltic countries actively reinforce a historical narrative that condemns the Soviet occupation of 1940 as unlawful and commemorates the suffering endured by their populations, especially during periods of repression and deportations from 1940–1941 and 1945–1953 (Rutland, 2021).

The historical legacies and harsh experiences under the Soviet regime articulated the entire debate between 'self' and 'others', which served as a foundational dichotomy to define their socio-political identities. Moreover, historical incidences and bitter experiences serve as the foundation for contemporary debates on nation-building (Pettai, 2019: 42). In the post-Soviet Baltic states, identity formation has been highly important to determining the dichotomy of who are the 'natives' and who are 'outsiders. The Baltic nations present a fascinating example of the transition from transient, grassroots social memory to enduring, institutionalized political memory. Various methods, including stories and covert codes, preserved these individual experiences throughout the Soviet era, serving as a direct or indirect source of fear for the ruling elites (Berg and Ehin, 2009). The political changes that occurred from 1985 to 1991 led to the organization and translation of hidden historical memories into mass-scale opposition to Soviet regime and rise of ethnic nationalism.

Harsh Memories Under Soviet Regime (1939-1990s)

With the onset of the Soviet occupation in 1939, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania witnessed the vigorous enforcement of Sovietization and Russification programs. The Soviet Union employed two distinct methods to initiate russification: repressing the Baltic culture and implementing a significant shift in population makeup (Huttenbach, 1990: 3). For the purpose of integrating the Baltic countries into the centralized social, economic, and political system, the Soviet Union implemented various measures, such as mass deportations, significant ethnic immigration, political exiles, and mass executions of dissident groups. The change in ethnic structure assisted this process by reducing opposition and increasing support for Russian history, culture, and language (O'connor, 2003: 127). Soviet authorities strongly drove the migration of Russians to the Baltic republics, which significantly aided economic and political interests of Russia.

The policies of Sovietization, Russification, and mass deportations completely distorted the socio-economic structure of the Baltic people. The Baltic economy and polity underwent complete centralization. Moreover, the postwar Soviet era saw the 'collectivization'[1] of agriculture, the repression of religion, and the deaths or deportations of thousands of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. There was also a huge influx of migrant workers from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, causing many Balts to fear that they would become minorities in their countries. The Estonian parliament established a special commission in 2006, which compiled the "White Paper" and revealed that the Soviet Government and Communist Party Central Committee approved the mass deportation decree on Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania on 14 May 1941. The committee also analysed the human and economic losses to the three nations. The planned target number for Estonia was 14,471 people, but the actual number of victims of the 14 June operation, according to the most up-to-date information, was 9267 (Estonian Parliament Commission Report 2006: 14). Russia's prisons, Siberia's prison camps, or the harsh conditions of exile were the final destinations for the majority of those suppressed.

The propagation of communist ideology undermines the indigenous attempts to preserve language, culture, and other socio-political traditions. Russian language centres have been established to enhance the dominance of Russian over native languages. In fact, nationalists remained committed to preserving their national heritage and addressing environmental issues even during the communist regime. In other words, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were very reluctant to support the Soviet russification policies. However, the policies of Russification, or the forced imposition of the Russian

1. The Soviet government aggressively pushed the collectivization strategy between 1929 and 1933, which aimed to modernize traditional agriculture in the Soviet Union and lessen the kulaks' economic clout. For more detail visit, URL: https://www.britannica.com/money/collectivization.

language over the Baltic masses, resulted in significant losses to the development of their literature and language.

Those who opposed the Soviet movement of russification and Sovietization faced an extremely brutal fate. The Red Army brutally ended the resistance of soldiers, dissidents, civil society activists, and individual land farmers. The Soviet Union, however, used the policy of collectivization as a means of ending partisan resistance in the Baltic countryside. "From 1945 to 1951, the Soviet Union deported not less than 60,0000 natives, accounting for about 9 per cent of the total native population, from the Baltic area to Siberia and other inhospitable places of the USSR" (Smith, 1996: 93). The Siberian camps claimed the lives of thousands of Baltic people, and many more also perished. The mass deportations were a prelude to the heinous crimes committed against the innocent Baltic masses by the Soviet regime.

Ironically, to fully understand the impact of Sovietization, Russification, and collectivization in the Baltic states, it is essential to look beyond economic measures. These policies deeply affected all aspects of life, leaving a lasting psychological impact on the general public. Many Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians endured intense stigma and psychological trauma under communist rule, creating a lasting "fear psychosis" that was challenging to overcome. The forced demographic shifts were particularly damaging: native populations in each Baltic country saw a significant decline as Soviet migration policies reshaped the region's demographics, making ethnic Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians minorities in their own homelands. Migration patterns were complex and diverse, defying simple categorization due to the variety of forced relocations, incentivized migrations, and population transfers implemented by the Soviet authorities.

Multi-cultural Perspectives of National Identity Formation

Many countries have highly diverse social structures, such as caste, race, ethnicity, religion, and so on. Due to the fast process of globalization, different social and cultural groups are coming closer, and their interdependency is increasing. In liberal democracies, these social attributes remained very dominant political forces. Parekh (2008: 80) stated that "To say that almost every modern society is culturally diverse or multicultural is to say that its members subscribe to and live by different, though overlapping systems of meaning and significance." The multiculturalism came out with adequate ideas to deal with this rapidly changing scenario of multicultural societies. Multiculturalism, as Watson (2002: 110) stated that in its principle and praxis, requires from mankind receptivity to difference, openness to change, passion for equality and ability to recognize the familiar selves in the strangeness of others.

In the process of giving respect and recognition to different marginalized identities, multiculturalism challenges the persistent patterns of political representation and power sharing. Therefore, the politics of identity or the politics of recognition have a close relationship with multiculturalism. The institutionalization of contemporary identity politics occurred within liberal democratic setups. Groups that faced disunity and discrimination through various means united themselves

Table 1 : Types of crimes and oppressive actions carried out under Soviet regimes in the Baltic states

Type of Crime	Description	Targeted Groups	Examples
Mass Deportations	Forced relocation of civilians to Siberian labor camps.	Anti-Soviet nationalists, intellectuals	June Deportation (1941), March Deportation (1949)
Political Executions	Arrest and execution of "enemies of the state," often without fair trial.	Political dissidents, former government officials,	Mass arrests in 1940–1941, executions of activists
Forced Collectivization	Forced consolidation into collective farms.	Farmers, landowners	collectivization campaign in the late 1940s
Suppression of National Identity	Suppression of local languages, traditions, and symbols.	Educators, cultural figures, youth	Ban on national symbols; rewriting of history
Control over Media and Censorship	Strict censorship of press, literature, and the arts.	Journalists, artists, writers	Censorship of newspapers, publishing houses.
Forced Russification	assimilating Baltic populations into Soviet culture,	General population, especially youth	Education in Russian, promotion of Russian cultural events
Economic Exploitation	Exploitation of local resources for Soviet needs.	General population, industrial workers	extraction of raw materials, restrictions industries

to demand the expansion of equal rights, including both material and symbolic equality. Liberal democracy and multiculturalism theories have recognized the rights of different peoples with different identities. Malloy (2006: 7) outlined that democratic institutions that include national minorities in the political process provide them with the opportunity for individual and collective self-determination.

However, to achieve the realized goals, the collective identities, *i.e.,* gender, caste, ethnicity, and religion, assert for collective identity politics. The Group rights or multiculturalism approaches emerge in response to how to manage different kinds of diversity in liberal democracies. proponents of multicultural approaches emphasized that balance demands group-differenced rights. Bhikhu Parekh (2008: 2) advocates that to manage these postmodern challenges it required to consolidate "our human identity". Individuals carry on the universal identity as a part of larger humanity, as well as specific individual identities embedded in their socio-cultural groups. Their social and cultural affiliations foster a sense of self that allows them to compare themselves to others. Bhargava (2002: 81-82) termed it the "identity constituting beliefs and desires." The cultural values create some strong desires of attachment that are very essential to their individual identity. A prevailing body of values and practices distinguishes every society, dictating how its members should manage their individual and shared lives.

Multiculturalism seeks ways of socio-political negotiations to balance conflicting situations and promote the coexistence of different cultural groups. Multiculturalism proposed affirmative action and social protection measures to mitigate the injustices caused by the ethnic, racial, or minority status of specific identity groups. The theory of multiculturalism acknowledged the unique rights of groups that have been economically and socially marginalized due to their status. The prominent scholar of multiculturalism Will Kymlicka (2002: 328) argued that "even citizens of same states have cultural identities that need institutional recognition." This institutional recognition of various identity groups could be manifested in the form of political participation and cultural tolerance towards the minority groups. However, the theorists of multiculturalism do not argue that minorities are disadvantaged because of their numerical size but as Sheth and Mahajan (1999: 2) argued that the cultural practices and orientation of the nation-state is the source of discrimination and cultural marginalization.

In conclusion, multiculturalism advocates for the coexistence of diverse cultures, values, and traditions, tolerance, minority rights, and specific rights for marginalized groups. They believe that maintaining social or human solidarity is essential for the advancement of liberal economies. We should respect differences and strive to strengthen the concept of human identity. Multiculturalism recognizes that eradicating cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences is impossible, and we must provide preferences and recognition to marginalized groups based on their identity status through various affirmative actions. Contrary to universal rights, multiculturalism advocates for a special minority rights legal framework, which can assist particular minority groups in maintaining their cultural identities and different ways of life. The ideas of multiculturalism are very closely associated with identity politics, which recognizes cultural assertion as a significant tool to achieve group differentiated rights.

The large number of Russian-speaking minority groups who had settled there during the Soviet regime caused great fear in the minds of nationalist leaders. Anton Steen (200: 687) argued that "memories of the harsh experiences of the Soviet period led many indigenous citizens to equate universal political rights with providing the large Russian-speaking minority with the opportunity to challenge the political control of a narrow majority". Images of minority groups as occupiers or illegal settlers prevailed in Latvia and Estonia. Lithuania remained less sceptical due to the very low number of Russian-speaking minorities and granted citizenship rights to all residents at the time of national independence. In Latvia and Estonia, it was difficult to construct a stable identity for indigenous people in the presence of a large number of minority groups. At the same time, it was also very difficult to build the Western type of democratic institutions by excluding the fundamental rights of minority groups.

Post-Soviet Nation Building Exercise in the Baltics

Following the restoration of independence, the nationalist leaders and indigenous majority exhibited a strong sense of nationalism to build a political community. Nevertheless, as a result of the Soviet occupation, the Baltic nation had to undergo several transformations and confront with several obstacles in the way of going through the nation building. One of them was a reorganization of national characteristics and restore the lost cultural and

linguistic pride. Since independence, there have been significant economic, political, and demographic transformations occurring in the three countries in order to build a stable democratic order. During that period, social and cultural transformations dominated most disputes and interpretations. The primary question confronting the leaders of Baltic states was the nature of the nations they aimed to establish and the means by which to delineate their social and cultural identities.

Consequently, during early period of nation-building, one of the most serious challenges was to deal with this large number of Russophone minority population, especially the 'Russian minority'. The Russophone people had migrated during the Soviet era in search of better life conditions in the Baltic states; to whom nationalist leaders perceived as a substantial treat to the national sovereignty. David Galbreath has argued that these settler communities continuously impacted the nationalist policies of state-building, as 'ethno-nationalism'[2] played a primary role in the collapse of the Soviet Union (Galbreath, 2014: 22). Another vital challenge was to construct the national identity within extremely heterogeneous social structures that comprised several other ethnic identities such as Russians, Poles, Belarussians, Ukrainians, Jews, Finns, and Gipsies (Roma). Due to these minorities, the native ethnic groups were full of becoming minorities in their homelands in near future.

Civil society and international organizations may have confronted with this emerging scenario in the post-Soviet context, resulting in the pressure on the nationalist elites to initiate the national programs of integrating national minorities. Although Estonia and Latvia offered non-citizens the chance to become naturalized citizens, the qualifying criteria for naturalization were so stringent that many individuals were unable to fulfil them. Slova (2006: 86) contended that the refusal to grant citizenship status to many minority groups plainly demonstrated the psychological and political lack of preparedness of the majority political elites to include a significant number of Russian minorities in social and political institutions. During the nation-building process, the primary concern of nationalist leaders was grounded in the rhetorics of security dilemma; the Baltic perception towards Russophone minorities as a threat to their national integration.

Therefore, the process of nation-building and the construction of national identity persisted despite the challenges that nationalist leaders had faced since independence. The enormous task of replacing the legacies of authoritarian communist regimes and establishing the liberal democratic form of populist governments loomed large. The sustainable functioning of democracy necessitates satisfying the demands of various ethnic groups. The people who were citizens of the Soviet Union have suddenly become foreigners in their homes. Their loyalties were at stake for nationalist leaders; the question of to whom these non-indigenous minorities would be accountable remained unanswered.

Marginalization and Socio-Political Exclusion of Russophone Minorities

In all the collective identity formations, a clear dichotomy is required to decide who belongs to 'us' and who is 'other' in the social and cultural environment. Although the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states lacks proper organization, they share the same language and adhere to distinct traditions as the native ethnic groups. Galbreath (2014: 22) stated that "Those within this group use Russian as their first language and tend to have assimilated into Russian culture. Second, Russophone communities were not only organized around ethnicity, but they were also part of the Soviet structure. Third, the concentration of cultural features like language enhances the complexity of the Russian community." People perceive these collective features of ethnic Russian minorities as distinct from those of other native ethnic groups. This perception serves as the fundamental foundation for the identity construction. The Russophone minorities were viewed as 'others', and efforts were made to exclude them from socio-political inclusion. om the socio-political inclusion.

The Baltic nationalist elites regarded the prejudice and social isolation faced by Russophones, which Russian authorities often expressed worries about, as a result of harsh recollections of the Soviet experience. The Baltic people's recollections of Soviet history persisted in their many and varied experiences. In their efforts to shed the weight of the Soviet legacy and embrace European democratic standards, Baltic nationalists deliberately sought to weaken the rights of minority groups. As noted,

2. Ethnic nationalism defines a nation and its citizens based on cultural characteristics like language, religion, heritage, or customs. Assimilation frequently jeopardised the survival of indigenous groups, resulting in the rise of ethnic nationalism.

critics by Karen Smith (2001: 13–14), the focus on democratization and minority rights has not always been the main objective in relation to EU expansion. Various accounts from the Baltic side suggest that driven by concerns about Russia's use of human rights language for political advantage, the Baltic nations sought a security alliance to fight what they saw as a distinct Russian menace.

After independence, the nationalist elites restored their statehood as they were before the Soviet occupation in 1940, which ultimately led to the restoration of citizenship, language, and education policies to speed up the plan of nation-building based on ethnicity. James Hughes (2005: 572) argued that sentiments of nationalism and experiences of Soviet rule heavily influenced the entire post-Soviet nation building in Latvia and Estonia. Therefore, nationalist leaders deliberately minimized the influence of Russophone minorities, their language, and culture by adopting unitary laws in favour of their own language and culture. Moreover, the restrictive citizenship and language laws for national minorities in Estonia and Latvia demonstrated a biased, divergent path for inter-ethnic relations, especially between minority-majority political elites.

Conclusion

The ethnic divisions have significantly influenced the identity construction and nation-building process in post-Soviet spaces. The ethnic divisions have caused socio-political dichotomy of 'Baltic self' and 'others' as Russophone minorities. This dichotomy primarily driven by historical legacies and harsh memories of nationalist political elites under Soviet-regime. The memories of mass deportation to Siberian labour camps, killings of nationalist dissident groups, stigmas of forced russification and Sovietization persisted in the minds Baltic people and ignited the narratives of Baltic security dilemma. The political leaders of the Baltic nations have consistently upheld the historical narrative, denouncing the Soviet occupation of 1940 as unlawful and acknowledging the suffering of ordinary people, particularly during the periods of repression and deportations from 1940 to 1941 and 1945 to 1953.

Subsequently, the comparable trend of nationalism grappled with memories of inflicted crimes of Soviet regime had a significant role in the development of national identity formation discourse and also significantly contributed to the evolution of fragmented political parties in Latvia and Estonia, as ethnicity became politicized. In search of an identity as distinct to Russia, Baltic nations desperately sought the security alliance from Western institutions and relentlessly attempted to reintegrate their national identities to European values. The inclination of Baltic political leaders towards west was portrayed as 'return to Europe' and have been playing a key role in Identity formation discourse in Baltic states. However, upon entering the European Union in 2004, national elites faced pressure to embrace extensive minority integration and develop mechanism to protect minority rights initiatives for state stability and social cohesion. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the fear of Russian intervention in the name of minority protection has arisen in three Baltic states; the so-called security dilemma, a fear of resurgent power of Russian federation.

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