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The 2012 Latvia language referendum



David Lublin

American University, Department of Government, 4400 Massachusetts Ave., N.W. Washington, DC 20016, United States

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This referendum on constitutional amendments to add Russian as an official language in Latvia is the latest skirmish over the status of ethnic non-Latvians, primarily ethnic Russians, and the Russian language since Latvia's resumption of independence at the end of the Soviet occupation in 1991. Although peaceful and with a decisive negative result, the referendum highlighted and exacerbated the political divisions that remain between the Latvian majority and Russian-speaking minority over ethnic and linguistic issues.

The proposed constitutional amendments would have altered Sections 4, 18, 21, 101, and 104 of the Constitution of Latvia. The changes would have made Russian a second official language in addition to Latvian. The amendments would further have explicitly made Russian a second working language of state and local governments and an acceptable, legal means of communication between citizens and the government. Finally, the amendments would have altered the oath for members of the Saeima so that they promise to strengthen “the Latvian language and the Russian language as the only official languages” instead of solely the Latvian language. In short, the amendments would have given Russian equal legal status to Latvian and ended the constitutional mandate for the promotion of Latvian as the single state language in the public sphere.

1. Background

Fluctuations in the ethnic Latvian share of the population and the loss of Latvia's independence at the onset of World War II until the collapse of the Soviet Union have rendered language debates highly sensitive and salient in Latvia. Both the Soviet and Nazi German occupations had severe impacts on the ethnic composition of Latvia. Prior to World War II, the 1935 Census indicated that ethnic Latvians comprised 77 per cent of the population. The

Soviets murdered or deported roughly 35,000 people in 1941; an additional 50,000 died fighting against the Soviets in the Nazi-organized Latvian Legion with another 80,000 captured members of the Legion deported to Siberia after the War. Despite these losses, the share of ethnic Latvians rose to 83 per cent by 1945. The Nazis exterminated most of Latvian Jewry, close to 5 per cent of the prewar population, during the Holocaust. Most Baltic Germans, over 3 per cent of the prewar population, resettled in Germany during the War or fled in advance of the return of Soviet forces.

Actions taken by the Soviets after the War dramatically reduced the ethnic Latvian share of the population. The Soviets deported or killed an additional 119,000 people in 1949. Immigration by ethnic non-Latvians, mainly ethnic Russians, during the Soviet occupation further reduced the ethnic Latvian population share from 62 per cent in 1959 to 52 per cent in 1989. Though Russian speakers have a long history of settlement in Latvia, most current Russian speakers arrived relatively recently. Even by 1989, after decades of immigration, only a slight majority of ethnic Russians claimed Latvian birth with the share much smaller for Belarussians and Ukrainians (Dreifelds, 1996).

Migration since the resumption of Latvian independence has begun to reverse these trends. Ethnic Latvians formed just under 60 per cent of the population in 2011. Ethnic Russians comprise the largest ethnic minority at 27 per cent of the population. The next two largest ethnic minorities, ethnic Belarussians and ethnic Ukrainians, together form an additional 6 per cent of the population. Politically, both smaller minorities have close ties to ethnic Russians as most arrived during the Soviet period and prefer Russian, heavily promoted as the interethnic *lingua franca* by the Soviets, to Latvian.

The status of the Russian language and citizenship for ethnic non-Latvian immigrants from elsewhere in the Soviet Union have been matters of contention both domestically and for Latvia's relations with Russia and the EU. The Baltic country in which the state nationality formed the

E-mail address: Konitzer@pitt.edu.

smallest share of the population, Latvia adopted the strictest citizenship law. Citizens seeking naturalization must demonstrate competence in the state language, as in Estonia. Latvia's initial citizenship law limited the number of immigrants—defined as Latvian residents who were not descendants of citizens of the interwar republic—who could seek citizenship in any single year. Latvia eliminated these requirements when it liberalized its citizenship law under pressure from the EU in 1998. These changes were put to a referendum but ultimately upheld when 54 per cent of voters voted against repeal of the changes to the citizenship law. The number of non-citizens has declined substantially since naturalization began in 1995. But significant shares of ethnic non-Latvians remain non-citizens. As of January 2011, 40 per cent of ethnic Russians, 60 per cent of ethnic Belarussians, and 76 per cent of ethnic Ukrainians were non-citizen residents of Latvia.

Language has been similarly controversial, particularly due to the strong Russian presence in urban areas, including the capital of Riga. Upon the resumption of its independence, Latvia moved quickly to eliminate the linguistic dominance of Russian and to make Latvian the sole state language. Latvian became the visible face of the country as Latvia mandated the replacement of Russian signs and enshrined Latvian as the language of public administration. The language of education has remained a controversial. The 2004 implementation of requirements that at least 60 per cent of the curricula be taught in Latvian in minority secondary schools engendered strong protests by Russian speakers.

Disputes over the status of ethnic non-Latvians and the Russian language have been reflected in the Latvian party system. While the party system has been highly volatile over the past two decades, ethnicity has consistently been an important cleavage with voters casting ballots on an ethnolinguistic basis for parties linked to the positions preferred by Latvian or Russian speakers. In 2011, Harmony Center, a political alliance of pro-Russian parties that receives support overwhelmingly from Russian speakers, won 31 of the 100 parliamentary seats—the most for any party and the first time any party with primarily ethnic Russian support has gained a plurality of votes or seats. Like past Russian-oriented parties, Harmony Center was excluded from government. Parties supported by ethnic Latvians view Harmony Center's links to Russia and views on ethnic issues as incompatible with their goals and Latvia's national interests.

2. Referendum rules

Prior to the constitutional referendum, proponents had to surmount a two-stage signature gathering process to get their proposal on the ballot. All signatures must be from citizens over age 18 who possess the right to vote. On 9 September 2011, supporters submitted 12,353 signatures, more than the 10,000 required, that initiated the second stage at collection stations at state-supported locations around Latvia. The proposal needed to receive signatures from at least 154,379 voters—one-tenth of the number eligible at the time of the previous parliamentary elections—during the month of November. Since 187,378

voters signed the petitions, the Central Election Commission moved forward with the referendum.

Among the total signatures received in the second stage, 49 per cent came from Riga alone. Seventy-one per cent of signatories lived in just four cities: Riga, Daugavpils, Jūrmala, and Rēzekne, and 79 per cent were received in these four cities or the Latgale region, which has the highest concentration of ethnic Russians outside of Riga. The correlation between the estimated percentage of ethnic non-Latvian citizens and the percentage of citizens who signed the petition is .72.

In order to pass, referenda on proposed constitutional amendments need support from more than a majority of voters who cast valid ballots. Instead, success requires support from a majority of eligible voters at the time of the last parliamentary election. Unless relatively few ethnic Latvians voted, this threshold was expected to be virtually impossible for proponents to achieve as Russian speakers form a clear minority of Latvian voters.

3. Campaign

The language referendum campaign serves as an example of how pressure from more extreme parties can help polarize more moderate ethnic parties and leaders, among both the majority and the minority. Pro-Russian organizations United Latvia and Mother Tongue began their campaign for a referendum to make Russian a second official language in March 2011. Around the same time, the All for Latvia!-For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Independence Movement (All for Latvia!-TB/LNNK), an ethnic Latvian right-wing national conservative political alliance, initiated a parallel drive for a referendum to require the use solely of Latvian in state educational institutions. Though this latter proposal failed to get on the ballot, it stimulated greater support among ordinary Russian speakers and their political leaders for the proposed constitutional amendments to give Russian equal constitutional status to Latvian.

Harmony Center, the main party supported by Russian speakers, opposed the proposed constitutional amendments to make Russian an official language alongside Latvian. In November 2011, however, the party's leader and Mayor of Riga, Nils Usakovs, reversed his position. Mayor Usakovs cited the support for the proposed referendum to ban Russian and allow only Latvian in schools by All for Latvia!-TB/LNNK Cabinet ministers as showing "a lack of respect" for Russophones and the reason for his change of heart (*Baltic Times*, 2011).

In contrast, ethnic Latvian leaders expressed strong opposition to the proposed constitutional amendments. Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis advocated a vote against the referendum, stating that "The Latvian language is at the foundation of statehood in Latvia." He further pointed out that his party, Unity, had also opposed All for Latvia!-TB/LNNK's proposed referendum to permit teaching only in Latvian in schools and attacked extremists on both sides of the language question. Saeima Speaker Solvita Aboltina said the addition of Russian as a second official language would cause ethnic Latvians to become an "endangered species." All-for Latvia!-TB/LNNK Leader Raivis

Dzintars called the referendum campaign “a declaration of war against Latvian statehood” and attacked it as having been financed from outside the country (Baltic Times, 2012a). President Andris Berzins also announced his opposition to a second state language, labeling the proposed amendments “a real threat to the foundation of our constitution—our language.” Both Unity and All for Latvia!-TB/LNNK, two leading parties in the government coalition, organized media campaigns against the proposal.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the results of the referendum on 18 February 2012. As anticipated, the proposed constitutional amendments fell far short of the required support from a majority of eligible voters. In favor were just 17.7 per cent of eligible voters or 25.0 per cent of valid votes. Estimates of voting behavior produced with EI, an ecological inference program, indicate extremely high ethnic polarization. Among voters, the estimates indicate that only 2.3 per cent of ethnic Latvians supported the amendments and just 4.0 per cent of ethnic non-Latvians opposed them. These figures may actually underestimate polarization between speakers of Latvian and Russian, as the category of ethnic non-Latvians includes ethnic Lithuanians who comprise 1 per cent of the citizenry and speak a language much closer to Latvian than to Russian.

Valid votes constituted 70.9 per cent of eligible voters as against 59.5 per cent in the Saeima elections of 2011. Turnout was somewhat negatively correlated with the estimated share of ethnic non-Latvian citizens ($r = -.31$).¹ While turnout was below average at 64.1 per cent in Daugavpils where ethnic non-Latvians form just over three-quarters of citizens, it was above average at 73.7 per cent in Rēzekne where ethnic non-Latvians are a narrow majority of citizens. In Riga, where ethnic non-Latvians are slightly more than 40 per cent of citizens, turnout was even further above average at 76.8 per cent. Latgale, the region with the highest proportion of ethnic Russians, had the lowest share of valid votes cast at 59.8 per cent.

Referendum proponents argued that they wanted to highlight the presence of the Russian speaking minority and the need to treat them fairly. But the referendum appears only to have strengthened ethnic political divisions, even though day-to-day relations remain calm and peaceful. Harmony Center's support for the referendum makes it less likely that ethnic Latvian parties will be willing to accommodate the party in government in the future. Beyond the clear policy differences on ethnic and linguistic questions, ethnic Latvian parties fear that association with

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Table 1
2012 referendum results and estimated votes by ethnicity.

	Votes	% of		Estimated % of	
		Valid votes	Eligible voters	Ethnic Latvians	Ethnic non-Latvians
For	273,347	25.0	17.7	2.3	96.0
Against	821,722	75.0	53.2	97.7	4.0
Invalid	3524		.2		
Non-voters	446,411		28.9		
Eligible	1,545,004				

Note: The official report of the total number of ballots cast is 328 higher than the sum of valid and invalid votes. Estimates of voting behavior by ethnicity were derived using EI, an ecological inference program. While ballot secrecy renders the true share of ethnic Latvians or non-Latvians who supported the referendum unknowable, EI leverages the information contained in the relationship between the ethnic composition of municipalities and the election results across and within individual municipalities to estimate voting behavior by ethnicity (King, 1997). The latter refers to the bounds of possible outcomes in an individual municipality (e.g. in a municipality in which 96% of voters were ethnic Latvian and 97% voted against the referendum, the share of ethnic Latvians who voted against must range between 96% and 100%).

Source: Latvia Central Election Commission for official election results.

the party could alienate ethnic Latvian voters due to its position on the language referendum. The organizers of the referendum may find a more hardline pro-Russian party than Harmony Center (Baltic Times, 2012b). Such a party would find it even harder to bridge the ethnic political divide and the political pressure it created would make it more difficult for a more moderate party like Harmony Center to undertake the compromises undoubtedly required to enter into government.

The referendum battle has further led the Saeima to examine the possibility of making it less easy to initiate future referenda. During the referendum, opponents criticized its cost at a time of deep economic recession and austerity. The Saeima is currently considering alterations to the second-stage of signature collection so that it would no longer be paid for by the state (Baltic Times, 2012c; Streips, 2012).

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¹ Turnout and ethnicity were similarly, though somewhat more weakly, correlated in the 2011 Saeima elections.