

RUSSIAN SPEAKERS FROM LATVIA IN SWEDEN: BETWEEN IDENTITIES AND MEMORIES*

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Abstract

This ethnographic research looks into Russian speakers from Latvia, who now live in Sweden. Russian speakers from Latvia have been adapting to the new life situation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, being challenged by requirements to adjust rapidly. It has not been an easy path, as well for those Russian speakers who were born or grew up already in the independent Latvia. They have been carrying along stories and memories from their families, which did not always fit in the newly rebuilt Latvia. The research investigates how they adjusted and remade themselves to adjust to the new life situation. It looks into their identity and belonging issues and their interpretations of the sensitive historical events.

Keywords: *Russian speakers, Latvia, identity, collective memory.*

Introduction

History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth, was noted by the famous French sociologist Jean Baudrillard [Baudrillard 1994: 43]. Indeed, history in some regards can become a myth, when told from the perspective of different groups of people, who are carriers of their group's collective memory. There can be different stories and narratives about the same event. Both are fitting the reality, but being told from different perspectives, and carrying the frame of the subjectivity along with them.

* The article was researched and written before the current war in Ukraine.

History and collective memory stories of post-soviet countries have been shifting shapes and are not seldom leaving different groups of people alienated one from each other. This is the case of Latvia with a large Russian-speaking community. According to public information on the website of the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia [Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia no date given], 42% of the total population of Latvia around year 2020 are other nationalities than Latvian. Approximately 30% are Russians and other 12% for the most part are Russian speakers; therefore, this group is addressed as Russian speakers, not solely as Russians.

Russian speakers in Latvia have been living in the separate information space and in a separate community since the renewal of Latvia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 [Golubovs 2003]. It has happened mostly due to the slow integration process, which involves issues with citizenship and problems to acquire the good command of the sole official language, which is Latvian [Kehris-Brands no date given].

The article aims to investigate how different Russian speakers from Latvia, who now reside in Sweden, formulate their identity and belonging, and what kind of shifts has happened in their perception, related to some questions which are tied together with the collective memory of their group. The research question therefore is posed: how are identity and belonging being negotiated by Russian speakers from Latvia who now live in Sweden?

The first section looks into the formation of the Russian speaking identity in Latvia. The second section reveals the ways how collective memory is being formed and transferred. Methodology section describes how the data was gathered and analysed. A collection of interviews is used to illuminate the navigation of Russian speakers' identity and collective memory, followed by a summary that is offered in the sub-section Discussion, which is followed by the Conclusion.

Russian-speaking identity

Even though Russian speakers in Latvia came from different territories with their own culture, ethnic Latvians often call all Russian speakers 'Russians' [Jurkane-Hobein, Kļave 2019: 165]. Language has been one of the identity markers to build Russian speakers' identity in Latvia, but it is not the only one. After collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Latvia gained back its independence. Latvia's official language became Latvian, leaving many Russian speakers in a limbo as they were demanded to know the language, which they could manage to live without in Soviet Latvia. Official state policy regarding the learning process was not always supportive. There were other factors as well which influenced the division between the Latvian and Russian speaking communities, like the citizenship issue and educational system

[Cheskin 2016; Much 2014]. No matter of those different obstacles many Russian speakers nowadays have found their ways to adjust. Ammon Cheskin writes that *“on the one hand the policies and discourses associated with the Latvian state make it difficult for Russian speakers to associate and identify with Latvia. On the other hand, Latvia is their home, not even the Soviet Union. There is therefore a natural desire to identify with Latvia on some level”* [Cheskin 2016: 3]. Jurkane-Hobein and Kļave argue though that one can't deny the influence of the Soviet Union's space in forming the identity of Russian speakers in Latvia, especially when it comes to the older generation [Jurkane-Hobein, Kļave 2019: 165].

It is not suggested that Russian speakers are simply becoming 'Latvianised', or that they are slowly assimilating into Latvian culture. Instead, analysis of Russian-speaking discourse demonstrates how certain groups of Russian speakers are increasingly integrating into Latvian society while maintaining/developing, a heightened sense of group identity that is defined both in opposition to, and in synthesis with, Russian and Latvian identities [Cheskin 2016: 4]. David Laitin [1998] outlines the emergence of a specific 'Russian-speaking nationality', distinct from Russian identity. Neil Melvin [1995] suggests that it is the result of the 'Balticisation' of Russian speakers.

Nowadays many Russian speakers have adjusted and have been integrated linguistically, but as pointed out by Cheskin, many of them have maintained a form of separation from the main – Latvian-speaking community [Cheskin 2016: 11]. One of the reasons of this separation might be the Citizenship Law. Many Russian speakers were ineligible for citizenship initially as they could not trace their ancestry to the pre-Soviet Latvia of 1940 [Cheskin 2016]. The Citizenship Law was partially changed and allowed to become a citizen based on linguistic proficiency in Latvian and knowledge of Latvian history [Cheskin 2016: 13], which still has been considered as offensive by some Russian speakers who were born in Latvia and speak Latvian. Another reason for Russian speakers in Latvia for not being able to identify as Latvians might be ethnic Latvians themselves, who, as pointed out by Jurkane-Hobein and Kļave [2019: 174], consider them 'less legitimate' Latvians. It correlates with the research done by Ehala [2018], who writes that one can have strong attachment to the particular identity, but it does not automatically mean that the person can perform authentically in it and be fully accepted as a group member by others in the group. At the same time, the linguistic identity can become more ethnic over time *“when community experiences a common fate, and develops common cultural practices that can become core values”* [Ehala 2015: 186]. That is seen in Russian speakers in Latvia and Estonia, especially when it comes to the younger generation Russian speakers.

Collective memory in post-soviet Latvia

French sociologist, and the ‘founding father’ of memory studies [Gensburger 2016], Maurice Halbwachs says that *individual memory* is shaped by the *collective memory*, and the *collective memory is composed of individual memory*. There are also groups that hold collective memories across generations [Cordeiro 2021: 766].

Veridiana Domingos Cordeiro [2021] argues that memory is neither a thing that we grasp and convey nor a cognitive skill that retrieves past images and establishes random connections among them. According to him the memory is relational and processual. It is relational because although it is a mental traveling, it hinges upon the interaction with others. Others trigger, change, and influence our memories and vice-versa. It is processual because it lies in the temporal flow. Also, memory likely acquires a material representation through written narratives or other artefacts [Cordeiro 2021: 770].

Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley [2013: 128] point out that “*the transmission of memory is not a straightforward transfer of experiential cargo from one generation to another or between contemporaries; it is the process through which the pasts of others are heard*”. There is another aspect of the memory, mentioned by Marianne Hirsch [Hirsch 2008: 114], who talks about the children of Holocaust survivors, calling them as ‘generation of post memory’. It can be applied in other contexts as well such as post-soviet experience and the transference of the family memory in both Russian-speaking and Latvian community. Pickering and Keightley are on the same page about it, saying that through our embeddedness in the family the experience of the previous generation is integrated into our own way of being in the world [Pickering, Keightley 2013: 119].

There can be colliding narratives that are related to the same historical event but told differently by different groups of people. Problems can arise if one particular minority community is in conflict with other mnemonic communities in the same society [Nugin 2021: 199]. That is the case of the Russian-speaking community versus Latvian when it comes to the issue of the collective memory, specially related to the events just before and after the Second World War. Besides collision there is a risk to marginalize the memory of the opposite side [Nugin 2021: 200].

The Second World War and the consequences of it is one of those events, which brings along a lot of tension between official Latvia’s state narrative and the narrative of Russia. Russian speakers in Latvia have been affected to a large extent by the last one. The victory in the Second World War for most of the Russian speakers in Latvia brings along a positive charge but it has a different emotional charge for many Latvians. Cheskin [2016: 10] puts it in this way: “*from Russia’s perspective the Red Army heroically liberated Europe from the grip of Nazism. Within the official Russian narrative, the Baltic States were not occupied, and the Soviet Union was able to bring*

many positive achievements to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. On the other hand, the Latvian historical narrative casts Stalinism in the same evil light as Nazism. The Soviet era is portrayed as brutal, and emphasis is placed on the Soviet Union's illegal occupation of a previously independent nation state."

It is possible to observe that different traces of the collective memory which are transferred via family and affected by the official state narrative and usage of the particular information space, is difficult to reconcile in order to overcome the gap between two communities when it comes to the question about the Second World War.

Methodological principles of research

Phenomenology as a form of qualitative research was used to analyse lived experience by the prism of the Russian speakers from Latvia in Sweden. Jennifer Fereday and Eimear Muir-Cochrane [2006: 81] state that phenomenology "*is a descriptive and interpretive theory of social action that explores subjective experience within the taken-for-granted, "common sense" world of the daily life of individuals.*" Furthermore, Alfred Schulz [1967] talks about two distinct senses of comprehending interpretive understanding. The first sense is related to the situation where people interpret or make sense of the phenomena of the everyday world. In the second sense of understanding it by generating 'ideal' types that form the basis to interpret or describe the phenomenon being investigated.

Empirical data consist of 13 qualitative, deep, semi-structured interviews with Russian speakers from Latvia, conducted in Sweden in the end of 2020 and until the beginning of 2022. Ethnographical approach has been used in this research, which is defined as *being highly descriptive writing about particular groups of people* [Silverman 2020: 492]. The practice of ethnographic research involves "*the relationship between researcher and researched is typically even more intimate, long-term and multi-stranded, and the complexities introduced by the self-consciousness of the objects of research have even greater scope*" [Davies 2008: 3–4]. All of the interviewees, except one, were born either in Soviet Latvia or independent Latvia. One of them emigrated to Latvia from Russia just after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Interviews were conducted mostly in Latvian, with some exceptions where Russian or English language were used partly. To maintain the anonymity, their names have been changed.

Interviews and discussion

Identity issues: between Russianness and Latvianness

It has not been easy for Russian speakers in Latvia to define themselves. The paradox of being a Russian speaker but being born in Latvia, has been influencing

their identity formation. It has been even more confusing for those Russian speakers, who are not Russians but carriers of other nationalities. Confusion in this case might be even more present. At the same time Russian speakers, even though sometimes coming from only Russian-speaking environment around them, at some point usually get exposed to the Latvian-speaking community, which might bring along new discoveries and dilemmas. Some of the interviewees have been exposed to Latvians and the language in their daily life only when going to the University. That is the case for Jaroslava, 36 years old, who has been living in Sweden for 16 years. She admits that she lacked communication with Latvians, which made it difficult when she started her studies only in Latvian at the University. That was her first contact with the same age peers coming from Latvian speaking community. Oksana, 45 years old, has been living in Sweden for 23 years, similar to Jaroslava, established contacts with Latvians while studying at the University: *I found myself in another world. I got the feeling that I belong.*

Yelena, 38 years old, has lived in Sweden for two years, defines herself as Russian from Latvia. She comes from a mostly Russian-speaking city Daugavpils, and studied in Russian in the secondary school. She had to pass the naturalization process to gain the citizenship. The exam and the oath given after that made her sort out different inner questions about belonging and identity. As the result of it and after getting to know more Latvians and finding out more about their culture, she developed a strong tie to Latvia:

I have strong feeling of love towards Latvia. That became even more clear when I moved to Sweden. I feel proud that I am from Latvia.

Yelena's husband is a Russian speaker too. In order to transfer a bit of a Latvian culture and the language to their kids, they take them to the Latvian Saturday school in Stockholm.

Another situation is observed with those interviewees who studied in Latvian secondary schools before the University. In those cases, it is possible to see that acquiring a good command of Latvian early on has helped to get to know Latvian community from inside so to say but it has come at the cost of either feeling that native Russian has become weaker or with other types of confusion and dilemmas regarding identity issues. Yekaterina, 34 years old Russian from Latvia, has been in Sweden for four years, says, she was happy to be studying in Latvian already in the primary school, even though nobody in her family could speak Latvian fluently. Her Mum thought it would be best for her to know the language to have it easier later on in her life. Yekaterina remembers that there were occasions that even though her command of Latvian was as a native speaker's, Latvian colleagues sometimes could be hostile towards her based on her nationality. Yekaterina was working in the Latvian

kindergarten and some colleagues said that she should be better working in the Russian day-care as her mentality was not fitting for the workplace.

I do not have Russian mentality as I am Latvianised. I know Latvian traditions and celebrate Latvian holidays, says Yekaterina, who considers her to be more Latvian than Russian at this point. She mentions that earlier on she even considered to change her name to sound more Latvian. Asked if she sees any losses as Russian to be Latvianised, Yekaterina says that she does not, even though her Russian might have been weakened, but she can still use it and communicate on satisfactory level.

Marianna, 32 years old, living eight years in Sweden, unlike her siblings, went to Latvian school. She like Yekaterina admits that her Russian has suffered as she cannot write so well in Russian. Marianna has a Ukrainian and Polish heritage but the language spoken in the family was Russian. Even though her Latvian friends never treated her differently than other kids, Marianna admits that she felt different as it was somewhat emphasized in the family that they all were different from Latvians. She says that it was not stressed in a positive or a negative way; it was just feeling while growing up. Marianna reveals that she felt as Latvian for the first time when moving to Sweden. She is married to a Latvian and speaks only Latvian to her young kids as it feels more natural for her but wishes that they learned Russian too.

On the sensitive questions of history

The Second World War and events around it have been a *hot potato* in Latvian society. It is possible to observe the effect of the sensitivity of those issues in interviews with Russian speakers from Latvia. *I was influenced by parents, who watched Russian news,* admits Marianna:

I could not analyse myself. I had arguments with Latvian friends sometimes about the occupation issue, for example, because my version of what happened was different from them.

Marianna tells that she started to analyse and think for herself when in the university and understood that it is not just *black or white*, when it comes to the issues of the history. She says that the feeling of the confusions is still there and the truth is somewhere in the middle between both official versions of Latvian or Russian state. At the same time Marianna admits that she feels ashamed that her older brother, who went to the Russian-speaking school, is going to the Monument of Victory in Riga on May 9. Asked why she would feel ashamed, she explains that brother is holding Russian flag while doing that, even though he has nothing to do with Russia.

Yelena admits she realized that there are two different information spaces only when moving from Daugavpils to Riga. She understood then that things which were

clear and obvious for her at that point, were not the same for Latvians. Yelena admits though that she tries not to be involved in deeper conversations about anything related to conflicts with Latvia and Russia:

I try to distance myself from it. The same about the interpretations regarding history. I do not want to formulate or to decide what I think. I do not know if Latvia was occupied or not. Maybe it was. It is history and we need to move on.

She does not want to take one or another position, when it comes to the different interpretations of the history by Latvians or Russian speakers. She thinks that truth is somewhere in between. The same approach is used by Kristina, 37 years old Russian speaker from Daugavpils, who has resided now in Sweden for two years. She tries to avoid taking sides after being exposed to narratives of both sides.

Alona, 35 years old Ukrainian Russian speaker from Latvia, has been in Sweden for two years, on the other hand, says firmly that she knows that there was an occupation of Latvia. She was exposed to another interpretation until 9th grade when she studied in Russian school and in the family.

One can conclude that the 9th of May is an issue for majority interviewees to avoid taking sides. It is possible to observe that interviewees have been exposed to the narrative of the Latvian side at some point in their lives and that is causing an inner dissonance between the narrative which was accepted in their families.

Discussion

Nowadays identity and memory issues are highly topical. We are allowed to be fluid and become whoever we want to be. Homi Bhabha [2004] talks about a *third space*, a somewhat hybrid and borderline state of being. It is not the identity itself, but the continuous and fluid process of identification, as Bhabha stated when being interviewed in 1990 [Rutherford 2018]. He speaks as well about *unhomely* experience and being *beyond*, which is neither a new horizon, nor leaving behind of the past. This state of being is resonating well with Russian speakers from Latvia, carrying along with them the baggage of Soviet Latvia and trying to adjust to the current state of existence in the present-day Latvia. As it comes through in interviews done in this ethnographical research, there is this feeling of the *third space* present in the way interviewees define their identity. Sometimes the identification with *Latvianness* is clearer and more defined when leaving Latvia as in the case of Marianna. Yelena's case is also interesting as she comes from Daugavpils where majority language is Russian. Growing up in the Russian environment, she managed to develop her attachment to the Latvian culture. All interviewees associate themselves with Latvia and do not

want to be somehow mistaken for Russians from Russia. They are proud to come from Latvia and one can also talk about a Russian-speaking identity in those cases, which, as mentioned by Cheskin [2016: 4], is defined both in opposition to, and in synthesis with, Russian and Latvian identities. Fluidity of transferring from one to another appears as well in answers about the interpretation of the history, for example, occupation of Latvia and the meaning of the 9th of May. Most of the interviewees are well aware of the emotional charge that those questions carry in Latvia. They have been exposed to both sides of the story or two different narratives and in most of the cases they do not want to clearly define their own opinion. One can conclude that it puts one in the difficult situation when you are supposed to choose between your birth country, which is close to you and between the important attributes of the collective memory carried along through the generations in Russian-speaking community in Latvia.

Conclusion

It has been discovered that Russian speakers from Latvia form a somewhat *in-between* identity, which can be called as Russian-speaking identity. It can be defined, as well, as the *third space* [Bhabha 2004], the state of being in a fluid situation when it comes to the identity. They develop attachment to Latvia and want to be associated with it. Feeling of not always belonging or being accepted might linger there. At the same time some younger generation Russian speakers have reached border of blurring the linguistic and the ethnic identity [Ehala 2015], when one can be *one of them* (Latvians) instead of being *other*. But even then, when one is receiving the acceptance of the same age peers, there still might be an inner feeling of being different, *not like them* – Latvians.

When it comes to the collective memory, it has been discovered that it has been transferred and received via family and educational system. Alona mentioned that she was exposed to another version of the history until the 9th grade when she still studied in the Russian-speaking school. It changed when she continued in a Latvian school, working somewhat in the opposition to her family regarding some issues of the interpretation of the history. Cheskin [2016] mentions that younger generation of Russian speakers from Latvia have developed a more flexible view on history as they have been exposed to both competing sets of discourses. That is visible in a few stories told by younger interviewees, when they acknowledge existence of another narrative, for example, regarding Latvia's occupation. It is still majority of interviewees who do not want to choose to be part of one narrative or another one. It is due to their understanding about the high sensitivity of the issue between Russian speakers and Latvians.

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