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Nation-States into Nationalising States: The Impact of Transformation on Minority Participation in the Baltic States

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Abstract

The widely shared perception in the Baltic societies about these countries being national homelands of respective ethno-nations is indispensable for understanding recent political developments in the region. Arguably, the outcomes of the transition from Soviet to European Union member-states have been by far and large positive, forging functioning state institutions and creating polities that are on the forefront of upholding European standards in a range of areas. Much of the debate on the region, my own past contributions included, has emphasised the importance of nation-state-building agendas that have facilitated the transformation of the Russian-speaking population of the region from a formerly dominant nationality of the Soviet Union (SU) into a group that is today a minority in nation-states of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. Although there are plenty of assessments of how the change in minority members' opportunities has impacted their social, economic and political mobilisation strategies over the decades since the Soviet demise, this article looks at the framework for these groups' participation in public life.

Keywords: Nation-state building, Nationalising states, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russian speakers, Polish minority, minority rights in the EU.

The widely shared perception in the Baltic societies about these countries being national homelands of respective ethno-nations is indispensable for understanding recent political developments in the region. Arguably, the outcomes of the transition from Soviet to European Union member-states have been by far and large positive, forging functioning state institutions and creating polities that are at the forefront of upholding European standards in a range of areas: from economic discipline, to installing (and, in light of more recent challenges in Hungary and Poland, maintaining) independent political and judicial institutions, as well as supporting domestic minority communities' cultural needs. The above suggests that despite initial concerns over the viability of state institutions, in the long run, the Baltic states did become 'normal' members of the EU. Though some concerns remain in different policy areas, the overall design of these states and their political institutions are sufficiently aligned with expectations from member-states of the Union today.

It is with this in mind that the article examines the foundations of the successful story of transition from Soviet to European Union membership of three countries in the region: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Critical assessments of regional dynamics of state-society relations have repeatedly underlined the circumscribed responsibility of the three states toward their minority communities. However, as this article puts forward, the alleged deficits of minorities' involvement in nation-states' political processes and their limited visibility in the public space are, in fact, the norm across the EU member-states. Furthermore, minority marginalisation in the process of nation-state-building has been central to attaining EU membership status for the Baltic countries.

Much of the debate on the region has emphasised the importance of nation-state-building agendas that have facilitated transformation of the Russian-speaking populations from formerly dominant nationality of the Soviet Union (SU) into a group that is today a minority in nation-states of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. There are plenty of assessments of how the change in minority members' opportunities has impacted their social, economic and political mobilisation strategies since the Soviet collapse. This article looks at the framework for these groups' participation in public life.

I begin with a brief observation of how past relationships of Baltic nation-states with their resident minorities have been presented in the dominant political discourse as a zero-sum game of two nationalisms, that of a majority versus the one of the minority. I move on to discuss how, far from being an independent arbiter during and after the accession process, European actors have been supportive of state institutional design which upheld the interests of the majority, thus implicitly siding against the interests of minority groups. In other words, European actors have been guided by the logic of the 'zero-sum game' and behaved based on the assumption that they ought to take the sides of nation-state builders in this imagined dichotomy of interests. Finally, I outline that resultant from the stance of the European institutions and actors, the opportunities for members of minority communities to participate in public life have been predicated upon the degree of their assimilation into majority public life. Those minority actors who did not blend into the public, majority-dominated landscape have shied away from participation in public life, turning instead to other types of social participation, either via civil society groups or through private engagements, e.g. in

religious organisations, community support groups, etc. Located outside of the public sphere, these groups remain ‘invisible’ for the public eye. Thus, they are negligible in their contribution to public discussions and political dialogue, and they do not foster interactions between the minority and the state’s political institutions. These hardly form the kind of ‘civil society’ that advocates of ‘democratic consolidation from below’ have in mind when discussing the importance of state-society linkages for fostering more democratic publics overall (I have discussed this previously in: Agarin, 2013; Agarin and Cordell, 2016). I conclude with a discussion of what de facto options there are for minorities’ participation and where the challenges lie for managing ethnic diversity in this region in the future.

1. The Baltic States as National Homelands of Majorities

After the demise of the SU in 1991, the Baltic states emerged in the international arena as sovereign countries, reasserting the political and cultural rights of their majority nations to have a state of their own (Misiunas and Taagepera, 1993). Five decades of Soviet domination in the region provided a controversial demographic legacy with hundreds of thousands of Soviet-era migrants. These communities, however, were not to play any significant role in meeting the expectations of joining Western Europe, nor in assisting members of the majority nations in the state-building process. During the transition, the national governments sought to address the changed demographic situation by introducing legislation to secure the status and increase the use of the state (i.e. titular) languages (Järve, 2002). This aspect of policy-making is usually assessed as ‘redress’ to the titular communities for ‘the discriminatory measures endured under Soviet hegemony’ (Dreifelds, 1988). Thus, the official narrative of statehood across the Baltic states emphasizes the principle of state continuity from the original, pre-Soviet republics to the present, entrusting states to protect their ethnic core nations. This effectively entrenched inequality between the majority titular ethnics, the small groups of ‘historical minorities’, and those who settled in the country during the latter half of the twentieth century. Political elites in the Baltic states have consistently emphasized that their states did not join the Soviet Union voluntarily but were unjustly occupied in 1940 and again in 1944, after the German retreat. All three states, therefore, followed the principle of *ex injuria ius non oritur* (‘law does not arise from injustice’) when creating their legal citizenship frameworks as independent states. This principle substantially affected the political rights of minority, non-titular residents in Estonia and Latvia.

In post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia, only citizens of the pre-war republics and their descendants were entitled to automatic citizenship. In Estonia, only citizens were allowed to vote in the first post-Soviet elections in 1992. As 99.6 per cent of the citizenry declared themselves to be ethnic Estonians, minorities were not represented in the parliament. Since the 1995 general elections, minority representatives have been running on minority party lists or for other parties. Minority parties (including the Constitutional Democratic Party, and the Russian Party of Estonia) were represented in two consecutive parliaments from 1995 to 2003, but since then have failed to collect sufficient votes to enter parliament. Non-citizens can elect, but cannot be elected in municipal and regional elections after a five-year residency period.

Owing to their concentrated settlement patterns, minorities have been continuously represented in regional and municipal administrations across northeast Estonia and areas of Tallinn with large Russian-speaking populations. To some extent, this regional dominance of Russian speaking populations has allowed them to send political representatives into municipal councils and administrations to better look after their interests. However, as the overall political process is geared toward and dominated by Estonian speakers, none of the qualified observers of Estonia's politics have been able to identify a shift toward greater minority accommodation even in these regions dominated by Russian-speaking electorates.

In Latvia, non-citizens are not allowed to vote in either national or municipal elections. Only citizens of the pre-Soviet Latvian state were allowed to vote in the first post-Soviet elections in 1993; unlike in Estonia, these included small numbers of minority citizens. Although over the years naturalization of Russian-speakers has considerably increased their share among the electorate, there was only a slight rise in numbers of Russian-speaking political actors in Latvia, most running on a minority party list (For Human Rights in United Latvia) or an interethnic party (Harmony Centre). The share of Russian-speakers among political elites is significantly lower than their share among the national electorate. This is due to the fact that all individuals running in national, regional and municipal elections in Latvia must demonstrate the highest level of Latvian language skills. Nevertheless, because minorities reside predominantly in urban areas, Russian-speaking political representatives have been elected to municipal bodies and administrations in towns and cities across Latvia (e.g. the mayor of the Latvian capital Riga, Nils Ušakovs, is a Russian-speaker). Administrations across rural Latvia have had negligible numbers of Russian-speakers elected.

In preparation for independence, in 1989 Lithuania's Soviet government passed citizenship legislation allowing all those who resided in the republic's territory to apply for Lithuanian citizenship within two years. When that period expired in November 1991, Lithuania was *de facto* and *de jure* independent from the Soviet Union, and nearly all residents had chosen to become Lithuanian citizens with full political rights. As of 2000, only 0.4 per cent of the country's residents still had no citizenship, divided equally between around 0.2 per cent of those carrying passports of the Russian Federation and residents without citizenship, who did not seek registration for citizenship between 1989 and 1991 (overwhelmingly Roma). Throughout the 1990s, non-Lithuanian citizens were granted the right to elect and be elected at a national level, until changes to Lithuanian electoral legislation in 1999 allowed all residents of the republic (citizens, those without citizenship, and citizens of other states) to vote and be elected in national as well as regional and municipal elections. This has encouraged minority representatives to run for elections regularly in local, national, presidential and European elections on both minority party lists (Polish Electoral Action, Lithuania's Russian Union) and for other parties.

It is crucial to review the political steps undertaken by members of the titular nations in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to consolidate their dominance in politics at large, and impose the view that nation-state-building is inevitable as well as necessary to transition from a communist to a European social order. This will allow us to

consider the options that were available for the minority communities to participate in public life and political process in the Baltics during the transition.

The principle of continuity of statehood – the legal view shared by the Baltic, European and most international organisations and their member-states (Van Elsuwege, 2008) – had allowed the Baltic states to resurrect political institutions of the past, and crucially, to consolidate the view that the states as such were to serve only the citizenry of these countries. While the states were defined as accountable to and serving all of their citizens, the state-citizenry was defined in cultural-linguistic terms as individuals of the ethnic majority community, and members of titular ethnic groups in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania could engage in (re-) building ‘their’ states without considering the preferences of and critical input from any other ethnic communities resident in the Baltics (see particularly: Pettai, 2005).

In this process, a zero-sum game logic came to dominate the political discourses justifying state reconstruction in the region. Within these discourses lay the root of a fundamental conflict dividing public perceptions of the state, its role and its legitimacy until this day: The ‘legitimate national interests’ of the three titular majority nations (i.e., Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians) and the interests of minority populations (e.g., Russian speakers and Polish minorities) have been placed at a loggerhead. The zero-sum logic dominates more than public perceptions, and this is particularly visible in the fact that even some scholarly analyses of the region take it for granted (Jubulis, 2001): Many of these have contributed to the consolidation of perceptions of majority-minority interests as dichotomous, mutually exclusive, and not equally justifiable.

The centrality of the state-bearing nation has been set into stone in Baltic Constitutions. The Estonian case is a penultimate example, where the constitution is ‘established on the inextinguishable right of the people of Estonia to national self-determination [...], which shall guarantee the preservation of the [ethnic] Estonian nation and culture through the ages’ by all the residents of the Estonian state, regardless of their ethnicity.¹ What is more, a constitutional amendment of 2007 had additionally mandated the state with the protection of the Estonian language, *de facto* obliging every diligent citizen of the state to speak it on all public occasions. Yet, the Estonian case is no exception; in the Baltic and more generally post-communist context, constitutions are frequently used to project perceptions of a glorious national past into the future. The state functions as a natural protector of an ethnic nation, which is seen as eternal and contiguous with the state boundaries. The Lithuanian Constitution is a case in point, where the Lithuanian ethnic nation is depicted as having created the state many centuries ago, staunchly defended its freedom and independence, preserved its spirit, native language, writing and customs, fostered national concord across the land, etc.² Latvia similarly has aligned the implicit claim of the Latvian (ethno-) nation to tutelage over state institutions as late as 2014 when the Preamble was tacked onto the document. It refers to the Latvian ethno-cultural identity three times: ‘The state of Latvia, which was proclaimed on 18 November 1918, has been established by uniting historical Latvian territories based on the unwavering will of the Latvian nation for its own State and on the inalienable right to

¹ Estonian Government, n.d.

² Lithuanian Government, 1992.

self-determination in order to guarantee the existence and development of the Latvian nation, its language and culture for over centuries, to provide freedom and promote prosperity for the people of Latvia and for each individual.'

The assumption that minority interests presented a fundamental threat to the viability of the reconstructed Baltic states was corroborated by the newly sponsored national historiographies. These presented majority nations as collective victims of Great Power politics, and defined them as 'European' in a sense that delegitimised connections with their Eurasian past and their immediate neighbours. On the one hand, the traumatic experiences of the past have been central to ensuring the Baltic states' concerted efforts to seek, build, and maintain alliances in international forums. With the help of international organisations, Baltic states as 'small states' could countenance 'revisionist ambitions' of the former 'patron power', the Russian Federation and states' vulnerabilities to the geopolitical interests of regional powers, building alliances with other countries and avoid the fate of the past (Lasas, 2004).

On the other hand, the centrality of state restoration in public perceptions of the status of Baltic nation-states has facilitated the return to nation-state-building projects aborted by the Soviet inclusion (Galbreath, 2005). Although this experience of interwar statehood was significantly different in all three countries, they were all marked by the successful establishment of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian states as homelands for the local ethnic majority that asserted its crucial say in domestic politics by out-maneuvring – if not marginalising – minority interests and presenting the cultural, social, economic and political claims of minorities as covert anti-state agendas (Poleshchuk and Tsilevich, 2004). These two aspects of past experiences of the Baltics – the sense of vulnerability to challenges of neighbouring states, as well as the challenge of domestic residents who are not members of the ethnic majority – have influenced decisions about the development of post-Soviet Baltic statehoods in a specific direction.

Perceptions of geopolitical insecurity as well as perceptions of uncertain loyalty of domestic minority groups to their nation-states of residence have often been conflated in practice and in analyses. Despite the extensive examination of the Baltic polities, the effects of guaranteeing privileged access to state institutions for the titular (majority) groups and the long-term impact on the prospects of minority groups' integration have often been left unexplored (Cheskin, 2015). The analyses have tended to reproduce the logic inherent to the statehood restoration argument, suggesting that a state requires a core nation and as such, legitimising the newly (re-) established cultural and linguistic privileges of members of the titular majority (Rupp, 2007). It has been repeatedly underlined by political elites that interests of non-titular groups, and particularly those of communities who found themselves on the territory of the nation-state of the majority as a result of (what was presented in public debate as) 'illegal occupation by the Soviet Union' should not be taken into account at best; and should be dismissed, at worst. This choice of a frame of 'illegality of minorities' presence' has further been used as the tool for justifying the punitive political measures targeting the minority groups. The link established between the 'illegal occupation' and 'legal exclusion of minorities from nation-state-building' has often been criticised by minority representatives, the scholarship and by the European Union as an unsustainable way of ensuring stability of the cultural and linguistic

environment for the majority (Jubulis, 2001; Lauristin and Heidmets, 2002; Popovski, 2000). To this effect, the ‘policies of titularisation’ implemented in all three Baltic states have ensured ethnic dominance during the period of transition. Because these policies of nation-state builders were innocuous for the majorities, titular publics came to accept these as efforts to ensure the functionality and viability of the post-communist Baltic states’ political institutions in the face of existing domestic and international challenges.

Yet, unlike the uncritical rendering of Brubaker’s core argument (1996), building nation-states did not automatically mean the creation of nationalising states across Central Eastern Europe. The Baltic states expressed their wish to join international security organisations from the very start of their regained *de facto* independence from the Soviet Union in 1991; they did so to ensure external guarantees for their preference of nation-state building. Throughout the 1990s, all three states made significant efforts to conform to the standards required for joining the Council of Europe, and later the EU and NATO (Kramer, 2002). It is mainly the sense of geopolitical insecurity versus their assertive Eastern neighbour (Clemens, 2001), the questionable loyalty of their large Soviet migrant communities (Herd, 2001), and the perception of economic vulnerability (Dellebrant and Norgaard, 1994) that have left Baltic political elites to engage multiple tools in order to push for greater ethno-national cohesion of their resident populations. The explicit desire of the Baltic titular majorities for Westward geopolitical orientation has determined the nationalising policies of three states to consolidate the polities as national homelands for Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians since early 1990s. The dominance of ethno-political majorities ensured their tutelage over their ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse populations until this day.

Clearly one could question whether the goals of ‘developing tolerance and political culture’ stand in conflict with the otherwise declared aims of preserving non-titulars’ ethnic identity and integration into Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian society, as stated in the respective societal integration policies. The clear deficit in the development of relations between the titular majorities and the non-titular, mainly Russian-speaking and Polish minorities has been represented in principle as underlying National Integration Programmes: These reproduce the bias in favour of the state-bearing nations, their cultures, values, and ultimately, their languages as a golden standard which minorities ought to accept in order to become part of Baltic (ethno-) nationally defined societies. Controversies surrounding the programmes aside, the fact that in their large numbers minorities in the Baltics see these as political steps to assimilate non-core nationalities into the titular society (Cianetti, 2015; Nakai, 2014) indicate that the process of nation-state-building was far from complete at the point when Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined the EU in 2004.

2. The Shadow of the EU's Nation-state-building Model

The context of the EU accession offered an opportunity for the Baltic nation-states to tap the particularly sensitive aspect of policy-making that would offer ethno-national majorities a head start for participation in political, economic and social processes. On the one hand, these policy decisions addressed increasing fears of titular majorities about the survival of their languages and cultures; at the same time, these decisions ensured that local non-titulars were aware that their input into state-building would not count for much. While seeking to strike a balance between the two options, the steps in regulating language use sought to co-opt the greatest possible number of members from the non-core groups in order to achieve socio-economic and cultural-linguistic stability in the region. Not only was this perceived by the national majorities as essential for political security, it also ensured the domination of majority cultures and the growing prestige of majority languages, seen as central for social advancement in the context of nation-states of the Baltic peoples.

Overall, nation-state-building in the Baltic states took place under the guidance of European actors prescribing the establishment of institutions that could serve the nationals of these countries effectively. This mandate has left the definition of 'the citizenry' open, as much as it left the definition of how 'national' citizenship was to be defined up to the nation-states themselves. For the Baltic states, this provided an opportunity to return to the nation-building projects which were left incomplete as a result of incorporation into the Soviet Union. This involved a return to the pre-Soviet ethno-linguistic status quo and has determined policy steps which, although not explicitly aiming to disadvantage non-titular residents, declared the vision of the state as belonging to the majority – a vision which minorities were expected to accept, if not endorse.

The debates on the transformative effect that EU membership has had (or not) on the Baltic states have been taking place since the beginning of the EU accession process. In hindsight, the assessments of EU impact on minority issues in the region went through a period of contented optimism during the accession negotiations in the second half of the 1990s, moving onto that of realism after each of the Baltic states was slotted to join the EU in 2004, and – following EU accession – the period of frustration about the impact of the EU on minority issues in the region.

The reasons for optimism and pessimism have varied with regard to each state and for both minority and majority groups, respectively. The period prior to accession saw both majorities and minorities anticipating the EU taking their 'side' on domestic issues such as minority participation in public life, with minorities themselves, their kin-states and representatives of NGOs lobbying for minority rights. They hoped that the EU track record in safeguarding and protecting human rights would translate into a minority protection agenda. At the same time, majority communities as well as their political representatives in the Baltic states were hopeful that the EU track record in state-building and the EU's interest in security would focus on the positive achievements these states had in harmonising their legislation with that of the EU's *acquis*. Moreover, majorities were hopeful that the EU would support state-building processes and tacitly accept the nation-state-building ideology instead.

Indeed, the sequencing of invitations to join the EU (first Estonia, later Latvia and Lithuania) has caused a sombre reassessment of the EU's interest in minority issues: Despite being invited to join the EU first, Estonia boasted a large number of non-citizens among its residents, had considerable difficulty in formulating its approach to ethnic diversity at home, and was still developing the society integration programme. Lithuania, with virtually no human or minority rights issues to worry about, was put into the second-tier accession group due to its failure to reform the economy, together with Latvia, which did not have a society integration programme, nor had it developed a sustainable approach to the reduction of non-citizen numbers, nor was it introducing school reforms (e.g. to improve minority education). Both sides of the ideological spectrum – those in favour of greater state concessions regarding policies of minority inclusion, and those maintaining that minority inclusion would/should be resolved by means of generational replacement – could now see that the EU was unlikely to intervene in domestic decision-making where it was not of vital interest for the Union. This included concerns about the design and effectiveness of state institutions, which the EU was to monitor.

With the EU disinterested in confronting the states' watered down approach to minority issues (where these were not explicitly infringing upon human rights concerns), minority issues were pushed back to where they have historically belonged in the Union: into the remit of responsibility by the nation-state. The EU's failure to engage greater leverage against the nation-state approach to resident minorities has significantly decreased the span of its reach into the domestic affairs of the Baltic states, and invited other European security organisations to oversee democratic consolidation in the region (Kelley, 2004). Thus, other international organisations were mandated to engage with and vocalise the concerns of minority groups: the OSCE and specifically the offices of HCNM and ODIHR have become the frontline monitors of political decision-making in the region (Galbreath and McEvoy, 2013). Scholars to date, however positive about how vocal these two institutions have been in identifying the shortcomings of minority protection, have been unable to identify instances where one or another form of nationalism across the region was 'tamed' as a result (Budryte and Pilinkaite-Sotirovic, 2009; Pettai and Kallas, 2009; Kochenov, Poleshchuk, and Dimitrovs, 2013).

During the negotiation of EU membership, Estonian and Latvian elites have – despite their regular accommodation of European suggestions on the issues of citizenship and language legislation – demonstrated little preparedness to compromise their states' favoured trajectory of nation-state-building. Although this led to particularly close international monitoring of Estonia and Latvia on the issue of statelessness, as well as on the state language and education of minorities in Lithuania, European organisations had no instruments left to steer institutional change after the Baltic states' accession.

In this context, Lithuania's social integration was the focus of a more limited interest and enjoyed far less criticism, as it was said to have embarked on a more 'liberal version' of a nation-building project, whatever that might mean (Barrington, 1995; and more critically, Budryte and Pilinkaite-Sotirovic, 2009). Compared to its Northern neighbours, Lithuania enjoyed far less attention, despite persisting issues with the visibility of minorities in public, and the lack of opportunities available for

Russian and Polish speakers to be accepted as representatives of the state if elected. Very few analyses have evaluated the political processes in Lithuania as an ethnicised social integration process serving the political goal of curtailing options for minorities, in order to protect the majority's decisions, similar to the situation in Latvia and Estonia (Kasatkina and Leončikas, 2003). This ambiguous result of Lithuania's original decision to offer a 'zero-option citizenship' was only one step on the path of nation-building and, as my own fieldwork suggests, has not prevented the kind of ethnically-based exclusion which is more clearly visible in the cases of Estonia and Latvia.

The positive value allotted to the national culture and language has been continuous and central for post-communist Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The exaltation of the (ethno-) national culture by the state, its (ethnic) majority nation and international observers. Muižnieks, Rozenvalds, and Birka conclude that the 'emphasis on the majority language and culture as a prerequisite to citizenship and formal membership has enhanced the threat-perceptions of minorities and led to their alienation or identification with the external homeland of Russia' (Muižnieks, Rozenvalds, and Birka, 2013: 288). This tacit acknowledgement of the central role one ethno-cultural community should have when designing political institutions of the state, however, has been instrumental for members of the majorities to gain greater say in domestic decision-making as well as for estranging the multiple speakers of other languages among the citizenry and body of residents. Stringent language regulations, too, have estranged speakers of non-titular languages from participation in public life, and excluded them from social and political engagement.

This is important in the light of the discussion about the EU's influence on, and the resulting recognition of minority languages and cultures: The EU's recognition of the form of Baltic states as 'nation-states' *of*, if not explicitly *for* majorities, has been the cause of both additional guarantees and legal protection for minority languages and cultures, and the fact that nation-states do not belong to minority groups. Therefore, minorities should not expect much state support for culture and language promotion from states where they are residents. Regardless of opportunities in the context of the EU, i.e. outside the Baltic states, and unconstrained in effect by the language regulation, social and cultural challenges faced by the members of minority communities, the currency of state languages has increased. This has created a considerable pressure on groups of minority residents to acquire language proficiency at the appropriate level in order to ensure *individual* rather than *group*-centred participation in public life.

In Lithuania, the visibility of the Polish speaking community has been a thorny issue for over two decades. Polish-speakers reside mainly in and around Vilnius; the Polish Electoral Action party has a strong voter base in the region and its candidates have been successfully contesting municipal, national as well as European elections. Polish-speakers sit in the national and municipal legislatures and the party's leader, Valdemar Tomaševski, was running for the country's presidency in 2014. Despite formal representation, Polish-speakers point out that the state does not commit to the principle of non-discrimination in geographic areas where Poles are in the majority or plurality: bilingual street signs are being removed repeatedly; there is no progress on adjudicating regulations on the proper spelling of Polish names in official documents;

and access to official information in Polish (and other minority languages) is sparse. On the other hand, the Russian-speakers are widely perceived to have successfully integrated into Lithuanian society; though stereotypically represented as advocates of closer links with the Russian Federation, Russian-speakers' political representatives show strong ties with the Lithuanian state, are widely represented in administrations of towns (the overwhelming majority of Russian-speakers reside in cities) and occupy favourable positions on party lists in elections.

In Estonia and Latvia, besides the issue of statelessness, the status and visibility of 'foreign languages' - *de facto* all except the Estonian and Latvian languages, respectively - has caused outrage among Russian-speakers and is central to contemporary ethnopolitical tensions. Governments of both states initiated state language teaching programmes for Russian-speakers as a gateway to citizenship in late the 1990s, largely in response to pressures from the HCNM prior to the states' NATO and EU accession in 2004. Yet, insufficient funding and the lack of qualified personnel, as well as the institutionalised dominance of the state languages and the requirement of language proficiency for naturalization, have combined to leave many Russian-speakers in a socially marginal position even after EU accession. In addition, many international initiatives were naturalised by tightened legislation concerning state language use ahead of Latvia's and Estonia's accession to the EU in May 2004. In Latvia, tensions around the use of the Russian language culminated in a referendum to grant Russian the status of second state language in 2012. While Latvian-speakers have interpreted the referendum as a challenge to their country's sovereignty, Russian-speakers rallied around greater political representation of Russian-speakers and inclusion into dialogue about political and social issues at the national level. Overall, the lack of political representation of Russian-speakers continues to undermine their capacity to communicate specific expectations in political forums and be considered viable contributors to developing social institutions of the state.

Overall, we ought to see the regulation of language use in the Baltic states for what it is: merely a tool of the majority to build a nation-state which serves primarily the needs of, and is accountable mainly to the members of the majority (Agarin, 2010). It is therefore unrealistic to expect that the trajectory for political change, social and economic priorities, and not least cultural and language issues would deviate from the overall nation-state-building paradigm.

Had the representatives of the minority communities interpreted policy-steps not as half-hearted concessions of the local politicians to international pressure but as domestic decisions, one could legitimately speak of the resident non-titular communities being viewed as 'national minorities' who are part of the Baltic nation-states. However, the top-down and prescriptive approach to society integration, and foremost the requirement to identify with the nation-state - owned by another ethnic group - has failed to convey the impression that the state of residence treats (ethno-) national minority groups as a legitimate part of their societies. In the first instance, however, Baltic policy-makers demonstrated repeatedly that they do not see themselves responsible to a segment of society with its cultural and linguistic needs distinct from those of the (ethnic) majority population. More often than not, this exclusion of minority interests has been used as a political tool to ensure majorities' upper hand in political economic competition. If both the titular and non-titular

communities had seen integration into the dominant society as a complementary – albeit personal – decision to retain their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness, one could conclude that concerns about the survival and security of the national majority might have been assuaged. Yet state-sponsored integration as linguistic assimilation into the majority-centred political community has been the focal point of public policy even after the EU accession of the Baltic states.

3. Nationalising States and their Minorities

A range of comparative studies on minority inclusion and minority participation in the decade since EU enlargement began, have underlined that opportunities for input from members of minorities to address the challenge of accommodation in the framework of nation-states are limited (see: e.g. Csörgő and Deegan-Krause, 2011). Research on other EU member states equally corroborates that local minorities faced the choice of either adapting to the new situation of bilingualism transitional into assimilation, or social marginalisation if they chose to preserve their culture and language without acquiring skills in the state language (Shafir, 1995).

Some argue that minority groups in the Baltic states have pursued an assimilation strategy as a rational response to a set of pressures exercised particularly during the period of state-building *on the road to* EU membership from the late 1990s to early 2004 (Laitin, 1998). During this time, nation-state-building was already acknowledged as being a successful tool to prepare states for membership in international organisations. It was acknowledged as such by external observers (the CoE and the EU) (Galbreath, 2005), as a step on the trajectory toward consolidating nation-state institutions and defining the politics in ethno-linguistic terms (Druviete, 2000). This sent a clear signal to minorities that the terms of state-building must be acknowledged, and not reckoned with (Poleshchuk, 2010).

The comparative advantage of Baltic majorities in the early 1990s made it clear that for members of non-titular communities to participate in public life and political processes, they had to adapt not only to a new political, but also to a new social, cultural and linguistic situation on the ground. The issues of political membership have drawn the attention of research on the region, together with some criticism of political marginalisation – and also, at times, political disenfranchisement – of the non-core ethnic groups. I believe, however, that a more fundamental mismatch existed between the building of nation-states and the ever-present mosaic of sociocultural allegiances that did not map neatly upon the idealised language politics view of an ideal matchup between the (ethno-)national and linguistic communities in the region. If any criticism of nation-state-building – if not outright nationalising – public policies could be made in relation to the Baltic states' assessment of their 'nationalities question' during the post-communist and EU accession phases, there is only one aspect of these policies that appears to be genuinely driven by a concern for ethno-national identity: It is that of state titularisation at the expense of, and disregard for the internal diversity of local populations in linguistic, cultural, and ethno-national terms. This, again, has been driven by a radical reframing of societal relationships as having to serve exclusively the titular groups.

The fact that the political elite became dominated by representatives of the core ethnic group signalled to members of non-titular ethnic communities that their choices were indeed limited to either assimilation or marginalisation. The binary choice makes it clear that the nation-state-centred view of statehood has been and remains the norm of the day across 'Europe' which the Baltic states sought to join. This view has been increasingly normalised in the process of EU accession also in relation to other candidate states, such as Romania and Slovakia, which have significant and organised minority communities (Csergő, 2007). Yet, it was also increasingly obvious that the commitment to nation-state-building in the post-communist era was a red herring during the accession phase: it covered up the insufficiently democratic nature of integration processes targeting the minority groups. Minorities were to become citizens in nation-states that were designed as ethno-national homelands for majorities, whereas the populations of these states were always multi-ethnic and multilingual.

Additionally, the process of EU involvement has signalled to members of minorities that it is the state which is the homeland of the minority language that could, and perhaps should assume a more active role in maintaining the language and culture of minority groups - even from the territory of another state (Skulte, 2005; Van Elsuwege, 2015). Herein lies the peculiar contradiction of the EU's impact on the Baltic states' tackling of minority issues as such: if the state of residence is reluctant to support its ethnic minorities, these minorities as well as their resident state come to expect that it is the external kin-state that should be involved in supporting the minority culture and language. However, geopolitical tensions - particularly the fact that the largest kin-state of Baltic minorities has not sought to join the EU and is routinely presented as a threat to domestic security and social peace - suggest that no opportunity has become available for lobbying for minority protection from outside the national arenas in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This lack of opportunity for kin-states to support their own kin abroad, whether we are talking about a non-EU country such as the Russian Federation vis-à-vis Russians in Estonia and Latvia, or a country within the EU, such as Poland vis-à-vis Poles in Lithuania, has shown the EU's commitment to delegate minority protection to states who are effectively their hosts, regardless of these states' nationalising aspirations.

While implicit in state policies, the nationalising logic of the state also penetrates the choices of non-titular groups, who increasingly start to look like traditional minorities in other EU states (Duina and Miani, 2015; Adrey, 2005). In this process, members of the non-titular communities have adopted pragmatic forms of response to the policies initiated by the titular community in order to preserve their ethno-cultural identity. This was particularly easily done in cases where states pursued nationalising policies which made it clear to minority communities that they were to develop or relinquish markers of ethno-national identity of their own. In so doing, however, members of non-titular communities have put themselves into the position of double dependency from members of the majority in countries where they have lived: First, by reaffirming the guiding role of the titular, state-baring ethnic groups in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to envisage political processes in the region, minorities either accepted or declined these as reference framework for their own ethno-national identity projects. Second - and this is indicative in the increasing prestige of the titular language among the minorities - residence in, acceptance of, and in part also

citizenship of the Baltic states have become central assets for (upward) social mobility and competition in the labour market (Kiilo and Kutsar, 2012; Kruk, 2011).

The ethno-cultural bias of new polities affected the status of minority communities in a range of aspects: from political representation and participation, to complications for upward social mobility and labour market competition, to privatisation and economic security. It has also been argued that the regulation of language use in the public sphere has divided the Baltic societies not into titular/non-titular members, but rather it has created an ethnically specific social structure, the so-called 'ethnoclass' (Agarin, 2013). Some researchers indicated that the risk of social exclusion was endemic for all non-titular residents; those who were non-conversant in the state language were excluded outright from access, not to mention participation in public life (Aasland and Fløtten, 2001). Others suggest that legislation on language use passed in early 1990s has effectively formed a group of people who were pushed away from 'political society' and have since not recovered their affinity for political institutions, political elites and state ideology that treated their residence as expedient (Golubeva, 2010). The change in attitudes of minorities toward the state, titular ethnic group, state language and a view of (multicultural) society have all been in the focus of scholarly investigation (Agarin and Regelmann, 2011). Most suggest that non-titulars have adapted different strategies to deal with the fact of their exclusion, while members of titular ethnic groups have gained not inconsiderable advantages from the shrinking pool of competitors for the same set of scarce resources. All in all, during the EU accession phase it was members of ethnic minority groups who found themselves in need of catching up linguistically with majorities in order to be on par with them in social, economic, and political spheres.

Most obviously, some members of non-titular linguistic communities were better equipped for competition for the same set of scarce state resources than members of majority groups. Others have chosen to adapt to the linguistic regulations of the independent Baltic states, as the scholarship over the past two decades has demonstrated. Unsurprisingly, the social integration programmes in all three states envisage the knowledge of the state language as the *sine qua non* for successful political, social, geographical and cultural mobility. None of these issues are explicitly political, yet their effect has been rather divisive in the context of increasingly important linguistic proficiency. An entire range of secondary factors such as educational attainment, employment structure, socio-economic status, and mobility were made dependent on the adaptation strategies of non-titular groups to the linguistic realities of the post-Soviet Baltic states. In this context, the state-sponsored titular-centred position on the link between the language, state-bearing nation and (ethno-)national sovereignty is explicit in its ultimatum to minority members to either accept and comply with titular dominance, or perish. Thus, Baltic minorities have risked socioeconomic and political marginalisation, if they were unable to cope with requirements imposed by language laws. Those who have avoided marginalisation have done so by adjusting themselves within the political and other processes envisaged and dominated by titulars. In the course of adaptation, improvement in language proficiency played a central role for non-core groups. This fact has been acknowledged by analyses of regional, sectoral and generational differences in adaptation throughout the Baltic states.

4. *Conditions for Minority Participation in Public Life*

To identify the factors which determine minority members' opportunities to participate, one ought to define the limits for their input into democratic dialogue in their state of residence. The scholarship to date has often placed the responsibility for insufficient engagement in political processes on minorities themselves, as agents who have decided not to engage with and within the political institutions in the Baltic states (Schulze, 2014). However, established by the titular group in order to advantage their own in-group, politics themselves have determined the institutionalised disadvantages for ethnic minorities in the Baltic context (Cf. Csergő and Regelmann, 2017). Tove Malloy (2005) suggested that European states whose constituent nation finds itself in a precarious position of majority often opt for nationalising policies vis-à-vis their resident minorities and in doing so invite minority resistance, the involvement of external kin states, and frequently also international organisations' keen interest in preventing ethnically based conflicts.

As can be observed over the past two and a half decades in the Baltic states, indeed, the minorities bring forward their own concerns to challenge the state-driven decision-making because representation in ethnically divided societies has been successful for titular nationals as members of majority groups, and has translated into decisive advantages for political participation. This type of mobilisation was widely replicated by members of minorities, *de jure* (as in Estonia and Latvia), and *de facto* (as in Lithuania) excluded from equal participation in state and institution building during EU accession. It also makes clear that they mobilise *as groups* along the ethnic lines in the first instance to achieve representation of their interest in the public domain *as groups* different from the majority and their vision of the state, but merely to have an access to and be able to participate in state-wide political process as individuals on their own agendas (Agarin, 2013).

This, however, is particularly challenging to the dominant mode of decision-making in contemporary European, and specifically post-communist liberal democracies which not only question the minority benevolence in challenging policies and institutions of the state as such, but furthermore invite minority representatives into the ranks of the majority-dominated political elites. These succinct and subtle process of minority co-optation (Agarin, 2009), assimilation presented as functional integration (Malloy, 2009) and asserting equality in the public domain as citizens rather than (the excluded) minority ethnics (Purs, 2012). And it is precisely because the minority representatives find no space for their ethnic identities in the context of political institutions of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian statehood, they seek participation in politics in areas that have been previously parcelled out for the majority and are not yet reclaimed.

The lack of progress on accommodation of the cultural, social, economic and political rights of minority, non-titular communities in Estonia and Latvia should be alarming to NATO and EU member-states. Arrangements to recognise the connection of minority groups to post-Soviet states should move onto political agendas, particularly following the recent developments in Ukraine and Crimea. However, when discussing the central role played by state institutions in negotiating conflicts between groups over access to scarce resources of the state, it is central to see

minorities as being in both the inferior numerical position as well as in a symbolically more disadvantageous place. If we see democratic politics for what they are as majoritarian politics, and if we see these as taking place in the context of state institutions that are designed to uphold the ethnic majority's dominance, while implicitly marginalising minority communities in their participation and representations, then any kind of democratic politics would need to be referred to as an ethno-nationalist project.

Clearly, all states are driven to establish linguistic and cultural criteria to be able to serve their citizens effectively. The shift of the optics from 'serving the residents' to 'serving the citizens' did, in fact, take place across the post-communist area when state-building began in earnest and found support from European organisations in the 1990s. However, in the Baltic context an additional marker of difference played a pivotal role when reshaping states into nation-states and marginalising (ethnic) minority alternative visions of statehood by establishing the language of the majority as the sole 'pivot' language of the state. The interests of the ethno-national majority have been put into the centre during the process of preparing states for EU membership. The approach of granting state languages centrality in nation-state-building has played an instrumental role during the accession and has not been revised since. Similar processes have also been witnessed across all countries in the region with any significant ethnic minority populations. Thus, one needs to determine, first, whether minority groups participate in public affairs; and if they do - what issues they raise in public, and whether (and how) their voice(s) have been heard.

The marginalisation of Russian-speaking and Polish minorities from political processes in their states of residence has persisted well into the phase of the EU membership (Agarin, 2013). Until this day, ethnic minority populations have rather limited opportunities for participation in political processes domestically or at the European level. Thus, as has been previously observed in a range of studies of minority participation in Latvia and Estonia, but also in Lithuania, the original exclusion of ethnic minority challengers from input into the design of political institutions has boosted the perception of state legitimacy with members of the majority, but has had an inverse effect in minority communities. By solving the legitimacy problem of state ownership in majority communities, therefore, Baltic states have solidified the view of their states' illegitimacy in the eyes of domestic minority groups (Cianetti and Nakai, 2016; Rūse, 2016; Ijabs, 2016). This supports the argument of the article that majority-minority relations - or at the very least, perceptions of these relations - were originally viewed as dichotomous, mutually exclusive, zero-sum game claims or political rights during the initial nation-state-building, and have remained as such until this day.

This has had a double impact on strategies of minority engagement with the Baltic states. On the one hand, domestic political contexts have created opportunities for Russian-speakers and Polish minorities to use the already-established political tools - largely developed as ethno-political tools of the majority - to critically engage with the policy agendas of majorities. On the other hand, members of minority communities in the region have reached out to and developed links with those who could lobby for their interest representation outside the domestic political context. Also in this regard, ethnic minority representatives - from among the political elites,

members of civil society and sociocultural activists – have tapped resources allied to their ethnic resource networks and mobilized identity-building strategies, copying (what were perceived as) successful past endeavours of majority ethnic groups (Agarin, 2011).

Both of these minority mobilisation strategies have been directly affected by the temporal context of EU accession and later, EU membership of the Baltic states. While on the one hand, appeals for the involvement of minorities' kin-states (the Russian Federation and Poland, respectively) have been essential for keeping the issue of minority rights and minority protection on the table during the accession phase, Baltic states' membership in the EU offered arenas to extend claims and raise awareness of the ethnic bias of domestic political institutions, policies and politics at the international level. Crucially, the final say of domestic political institutions designed to – and acknowledged by the EU at the point of accession – serve the members of majority over all other groups, have been explicitly acknowledged. As Waterbury has shown, minority activism across the new members states has gone hand-in-hand with disappointment about the effectiveness of the EU's own engagement with minority issues (Waterbury, 2006).

In contrast to leveraging European support, however, the reluctance of Baltic nation-builders to recognise language and cultural rights and support minority communities' segmental autonomy in education, employment and not least political representation even after EU accession, has facilitated kin-state engagements directly with the populace thus alienated from public life in their states of residence (Waterbury, 2010; Palermo and Sabanadze, 2011). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the lack of progress made by (particularly) Estonia and Latvia regarding the granting of automatic citizenship to Soviet-era migrants has fostered ethnic identity-building on the part of minority communities, who have come to see their kin-states rather than their resident states as supporters and promoters of their particularistic, ethnically-defined interests (Birka, 2016). The reference to the kin-state of Russian-speaking minorities has been particularly divisive: Primarily, it has called into question the success of securing majority-led projects of nation-state-building in the face of assertive domestic minorities; as a result of possible assertiveness of the resident and marginalised minority groups, it had not dealt away with the spectre of geopolitical uncertainty coming from Russia for the Baltic states.

The titular groups in the Baltic states were able to build, consolidate and ensure the legitimacy of nation-state-building projects in the eyes of their own target audiences (i.e. national majorities and the EU) (Duina and Miani, 2015). At the same time, they have been successful, to a degree, in co-opting parts of domestic minority groups into accepting these projects, forcing them to either withdraw from participation or play by the rules of the game dictated by the majority (Kulu and Tammaru, 2004). However, nation-state-building for the majority has had a divisive effect on minority communities and has gradually led to the emergence of fractions who have accepted not only the notion at the heart of Baltic nation-state-building (i.e. that states ought to 'belong' to majorities), but also the agendas of the EU which has supported this vision, namely that it is the nation-states of minorities who ought to engage with and protect the interests of their non-resident kin abroad.

The above discussion shows that different perspectives of state-building in the Eastern Baltic region have focused on the effects of designing state institutions able to maintain state sovereignty in the face of external and internal challengers of *national* statehood. Over the past two and a half decades, the process has gone through three phases: state-building, consolidation of state institutions, and fine-tuning these institutions' performance to European normative standards in order to guarantee sovereignty of the state-nation in political processes, outcomes of political decisions, and design of political institutions. At the same time, however, minority communities – originally viewed as a challenge to national statehood and a liability for states' international image – have been co-opted into this vision, and have come to accept the view of the state as 'belonging' to the Baltic majorities.

From this vantage point, we are now able to see that nation-state-building is done *by and for* the majority; the result is a normalisation of the view that all ethnic groups ought to act and make choices in a nation-state-bound manner (Karolewski, 2009). Thus, while the minorities have been restricted, limited, controlled, etc. in their opportunities for participation in nation-state-building politics in the Baltic states, they have sought politics where their 'voice' could be heard. Whether and to what extent this mode of political, social, economic and cultural interaction should be referred to as 'nationalism' would require a separate engagement. What is clear from the discussion of the Baltic experience is that building a homeland for majorities in the region has allowed minorities to tap into the rationale of 'state ownership' by and for ethnic groups to channel their actions and appease an external lobby, whether it is a kin-state or the European Union, in a way that taps into exactly the same rationale of state-ownership and state-sponsored protection (Arias and Gurses, 2012; Atıkan, 2010). The view that nation-states should include in the citizenry those residents who agree on the principle of state-majorities' privileged role in political decision-making, and accept titular groups' dominance in the public sphere have been normalised over the past decade.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that a decade after the accession, vast segments of minority communities in the region have come to accept little from the EU as regards the protection of their rights. In cases where individual rights were not forthcoming and the EU was meagrely interested in the exercise of pressure on states over issues such as mass statelessness, access to education in the native language, and rampant socioeconomic inequality between ethnic groups, minority members sought to frame their kin-state as the last defender of their ethnic, cultural and language interests. Ultimately, this is what Baltic majorities have been claiming for themselves, and they have been supported in this endeavour by their EU partners since the Soviet Union's demise.

Remarkably, gauging external support for one's own domestic and narrowly-defined nation-state-building project has only rudimentarily addressed the security concerns underpinning majorities' desire to join the CoE, EU, and NATO: whereas the Russian-speakers and Polish minorities were both framed as second-order partners in state-building with rather few opportunities to contribute to the direction and dynamics of political change, these groups have in their majority come to see themselves as genuine minority populations in nation-states of other ethnic groups. On the positive side, this facilitated pragmatic accommodation within the majority-

dominated society and a degree of societal integration by means of language acquisition to facilitate their social and political integration. However, as these policy steps rarely reflected the requirements of the minority communities and encouraged minorities to assume the burden of accommodation on a relatively short term, minorities in the region came to see their interests as being un-representable by their states of residence. They turned to external actors instead, the EU as well as their kin-states. Inevitably, after the accession the EU lost much of its disciplinary power over nation-states, inviting them to determine for themselves how deeply nationalising they were to be as well as which policies were to be put forward to rule over these states' minority groups.

5. Conclusion

The Baltic states do not present an anomaly either in the context of the EU as such, nor specifically among the post-communist member-states. Though much of the focus in the past has been on the early policy decisions which sought to strengthen the status of the state-bearing nation, most of these policy steps were determined by the drive of the Baltic nation-states to join the EU and other European security organisations. Originally, this geopolitical focus was to ensure the Baltic nations' own unfettered control over the institutions of their nation-states in a regional environment which the titular majorities perceived as hostile. Majorities' limited interest in co-opting resident minority groups as active contributors to the nation-state-building project, therefore, was quickly reframed as the perceived adversarial position of resident minorities and their failure to support the objective of nation-state-building, inviting titular groups to favour nationalising state policies as a remedy. Strengthening the state language and the status of the state-bearing nation had the effect of weakening Baltic minority populations in the region – not only in their social and economic capacity, but also in respect to their own cultural and linguistic self-perception as active political agents.

One could see that the Baltic states have but tacitly accepted their responsibility for their resident non-titular populations. The provisions made for minorities to compete in the labour market, some (and however belated) concern for interethnic society integration in the situation of constant bidding for ethnic majority votes, and the focus on language (as in the cases of Latvia and Estonia) or on ethnic traditions (as in the case of Lithuania) seem to support this point of view. However, seen by the titular nation as a *sine qua non* of future dialogue across ethnic lines, the opportunities offered to minority groups have had little appeal to them. In all three states, the linguistic integration of non-titular communities into the titular society finds considerable support with members of minorities, even despite the opposition to consolidating the role of the state language in public life. This view finds support in Baltic minorities' grudging acceptance of their status as minority in the nation-state of another group. Regulating language use as part of the nation-building process can be justified for different reasons. Yet in the Baltic context, these are hard to separate from the resulting restriction for minority groups' participation in public life and political process.

Some observers suggest that in the Baltic states, the strategies of strengthening the status of the titular language and building nation-states as homelands for the majority were undertaken to secure the sovereignty of the core nation. Yet, it appears that soft security issues, such as social and political stability, and the uni-directional and irreversible transition from a minority status in the Soviet Union to majority in one's own 'homeland' after 1991, were central in this respect. Whether one explains regional dynamics in terms of ethnopolitics, or as an expression of post-communist nationalism, as ethnic democracy or as tutelary transition – all of these explanations underline the rational-choice model of political development in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Applied to Baltic democratic institutional settings, one should analyse the behaviour of political elites in the region as responding to the claims of their increasingly nation-centred electorate to limit access to political decision-making for all those who are not seen as a part of the core (ethno-) nation. These responses involved the public policy framing of minorities as unreliable residents, barely fit to be citizens of the state, and they have imposed linguistic constraints on participation in order to guarantee minorities' participation in public life only alongside the ideological lines favoured by the majority.

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