

The East Baltic States: Language and Identity in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania

Soviet and Post-Soviet Language Policies

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Preface

A common historical feature of the "Three Baltic sister-states" (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) is that for most of the modern time instead of state independence there were decades of foreign administrations imposed by several European powers. Such historical experience exposed the people living in this part of the Baltic region to several foreign political regimes, and different cultural and linguistic influences. A short period of independence between the two world wars was followed again by the losing of formal political independence.

*It was not until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s by the decision of one man - **Mikhail Gorbachev**, that these three East-Baltic States regained their formal political independent status (the question of real political, economic, and financial "independence" of the post-Soviet Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania is not the subject or/and object of this article).*

Now, all three of them had not only to rebuild their national institutional structure but also to create a space for the emergence of a common (national) identity, which stands in contrast to the alleged and massively propagated bad memories attached to the Soviet period. As one of the measures after 1990, they instituted language laws which were to become one of the key features of separation from the Soviet past, but also a key point of controversy and conflicts, which reached international attention (to be clear, many of ex-communist party members continued to occupy the key political positions in their countries after 1990, like the "Lithuanian Patriarch" - Vytautas Landsbergis, or Algirdas Brazauskas - the first

President of the post-Soviet “independent” Lithuania). Nevertheless, these laws were partly a continuation of those introduced during the period of M. Gorbachev’s Perestroika but did not realize their full potential until the mid-1990s (Hogan-Brun et al. 2008: 31–35).

State, Language, Nation

A state can be considered to be an institution built by a community of people to secure its territory against external threats. The *community* of the state as a social construct is characterized by more than the mere rational will to belong to something larger. Consolidating one’s own beliefs and attitudes in common values, historical memory, faith, cultural habits, and language enhances the identification of the individual with the group. Such internalization ties a community together on an emotional basis (Spiering 1996: 110). Strong group identity is a vital asset to ethnolinguistic nations since it enables its members to accept and follow its rules but also to make sure that other citizens do the same.

Due to its fundamental necessity to *all* communities, the aspect of language in this context will be further elaborated. Regardless of the type of community, the language remains a fundamental asset for at least two crucial reasons:

1. First of all, it is a medium of communication and therefore serves equally as a prerequisite for coordinating communities, and
2. Secondly, language is a very complex and well-ingrained social system; one language, therefore, cannot simply be replaced by another.

The adoption (implementation) of new languages takes many years of effort, and, even if other languages are successfully acquired, the status of the mother tongue remains unique. The special relevance of the mother tongue acts as a strong binding agent within the community as well as an obstacle to the interference or intentional influence of the other languages. Even if we tried, we could not simply “delete” the ability to understand our mother tongue. Our mother tongue remains within us and connects us to all individuals with the same knowledge whether we want it to or not. We usually do not realize the importance of the language to our identity unless we leave the familiar environment of the language community or the “outsiders” enter it.

Unless it comes to confrontation with other languages within the same territory, the linkage with national identity, however, has not always been equally strong. The standardization of language through dictionaries, orthography manuals, and grammar manuals is surely making a stronger ethnolinguistic framework for the nation. Nonetheless, despite the important status and unifying factor that language has for a community, it can easily become a tool of separation and exclusion. As soon as different languages clash within the same territory, the question of status immediately arises (Paulston 1997: 73–74).

The East-Baltic States (1721–1944)

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been constantly facing exactly such a situation throughout history with an intensity that remains internationally outstanding (Hogan-Brun et. al 2008: 33–34). The Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian languages have been under constant threat of being forced into a minority position in their region due to different political and other reasons. A significant decline in sociolinguistic status was furthered additionally through explicit policies.



In Estonia, for example, the German language remained for a long time the language of the elites (like the Polish in Lithuania), despite intense Russification policies during the Tsarist times and the imposition of the Russian language as an administrative one in 1880 (Tomusk 2002) similarly to the case of France after 1795 when the French language of Paris and the region of Ille de France was imposed to the rest of the country or the case of the USA after 1787 when the English language was practically considered (but never administratively proclaimed) as an administrative one and the language in the public use within the whole country [about Lithuania within Tsarist Russia from 1795 to 1915, see in (Aleksandravičius, Kulakauskas 1996)].



Concerning Estonian and Latvian cases in the Russian Empire, we have to keep in mind that after the Great Nordic War of 1700–1721, which started when the Kingdom of Sweden proclaimed war on Russia and lost it, no kind of Estonia or Latvia became included into the Russian Empire but there were **Swedish East Baltic provinces ceded to Russia as the war reparations**. Estonia and Latvia as such for the first time, differently from Lithuania, in Europe, and world history appeared only in 1918. Before the first independence in 1918, both the Estonians and the Latvians were unknown in Europe as nations and, therefore, the imposition of the Russian language in the Tsarist time, likewise before the German or the Swedish, have been, in fact, for both of them rather a great step towards both Europeanization and globalization than a kind of civilizational degradation.

The first period of independence between the two world wars (1918–1940) was central to the awakening of the national movements and a lingua-centric self-identity (Kaplan and Baldauf 2007: 57). In the attempt to support a state community on the grounds of the common language and ethnicity, however, similar problems to those we face today arose. Around 12% of Estonian passport holders were not ethnically Estonian. In Latvia and Lithuania, this was the case for 27% (Knowles 1989: 146).

The period of the interwar political independence and the linguistic self-determination of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was, however, abruptly terminated as the preparations for the Second World War led the way to the foreign rule imposed by the Bolshevik internationalists who firstly occupied Russia and Russians between the years of 1917 and 1921 and then started to spread around their ideology and political-economic system based on the West European Judeo-German Marxism by the bayonets (likewise traditionally the Vatican was spreading Roman Catholicism by arms either in Europe or in the New World). The return of Russification tendencies (Kaplan and Baldauf 2008:7) during the first period of the Bolshevik administration (1940–1941) led by the Georgian Joseph Visarionovich Dzugashvili Stalin was followed by the imposition of the German language during the Nazi occupation (1941–1944), led by the Austro-German Adolf Hitler, until the return of Russification together with gasification and industrialization during the integration into the Soviet Union (1944–1991).

In the Soviet Union (1944–1991)

At first glance, maybe it is strange that a linguistic Russification of the East Baltic and the other parts of the ex-Soviet Union (like Central Asia) is committed by non-ethnic Russian Bolsheviks sitting in Moscow (V. I. Lenin, J. V. Dz. Stalin, N. Khrushchev, L. Brezhnev) and running for almost 70 years anti-Russian national politics but we have to keep in mind that such kind of linguistic practices is done for the very practical every-day purposes and reasons taking the West European patterns and experience of the Englishization of Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the biggest part of Canada and the USA, the Spanishization of the biggest portion of Latin America or the Frenchization of France and Quebec, as for the examples.

The period of the Bolshevik rule over the lands of former Tsarist Russia is marked by a policy to fully integrate the Baltic republics, like other Soviet provinces, into its ideological construct of West European Marxism. The Bolshevik-Soviet policy aimed to create a multi-ethnic society in which the individual should identify himself/herself as “homo Sovieticus” before anything else (likewise today in the European Union to be firstly the “European” and then something else).

Although the Soviet Constitution guaranteed equality of all languages within the Soviet Union, the reality reflected a contrary image. Since there were around 100 other languages throughout its huge territory from Vladivostok to Ryga, the party and army officials were aiming to install the Russian language (Knowles 1989: 149-51) as the “lingua Franca” among its citizens for the same reason as, for instance, the English language is imposed in the USA as practically the only official one like in Australia.

However, in the Bolshevik case, at least nominally all languages have been treated equally on the paper but in the French, or many other cases even such paper-equality is never offered to their citizens. The consequences of such different language policies are very visible today: during the Bolshevik rule over Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania no one ethnolinguistic Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian forgot to speak her/his native tongue but today in France, for instance, one can count on the fingers how many Provansals, Normandians, Bretons, etc. can speak their native languages instead of foreign French. In the case of Ireland, for instance, we know today that only around 5% of the citizens of the Republic of Ireland can speak the Irish tongue nevertheless the fact that the Irish language is the Constitution official one in the Republic of Ireland (Ireland was for several centuries under the English/British occupation and severe oppression).

After 1991

Robert L. Cooper (1989) distinguishes three types of language planning policy; 1) Status, 2) Corpus, and 3) Acquisition planning. The next part of the article will analyze these three aspects concerning the post-Soviet language policies in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

These three East-Baltic states, in line with all the other non-Russian Soviet Republics, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachev, instituted language laws that aimed to “maintain, protect, and develop” the sociolinguistic status of their titular languages. This policy was to become one of the key features of separation from the communist past and can be seen as a continuation of the language policies during the inter-war independence (Hogan-Brun et al. 2008: 83).

The first step was to re-establish the national language as the sole official one. Language laws have been introduced in Estonia in 1989 and Latvia and Lithuania in 1995. The question of the state language is also regulated by the national Constitutions. Any other language was thus automatically regarded as a “foreign language” except for the recognition of the Liv as the language of the indigenous (autochthonous) population in Latvia (Latvian Language Law, Section 4 and 5). With the official status all three national languages of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became automatically also and only languages of administration, higher (university) education, and public communication.



It is further settled by the language regulations that all state officials are required to be fluent in the respective language. Furthermore, official events have to be conducted in the national languages unless it is explicitly addressing an international audience in which case professional translation has to be ensured. Finally, it is the state’s responsibility to ensure

that all state services are provided in the national languages [see more in (Sanita and Heiko 2019)].

However, for the matter of comparison, in Balkan Serbia after 1945 alongside the language of the ethnic majority (Serbian), there is equal use in the educational and public administration system by both the law and in the practice of an additional 5 languages: the Hungarian, Croatian, Albanian, Ruthenian, Romanian, and Slovak. A university education in the Hungarian and Albanian languages was and is a regular practice in Serbia from 1945 onward. However, neighboring Central European/Mediterranean Croatia during the last 30+ years has been following the language policy of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Nevertheless, we have to conclude that after the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian national state independence restoration in 1990/1991 and the official proclamation of their national languages as the only official no one ethnic Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian needed to start to learn her/his native language but in the case of the establishment of the independent state of Breton nation, for instance, and proclamation of the Breton language as the only administrative one the overwhelming majority of Bretons will need to attend regular language courses for many years to learn their native tongue.

An active way to reinforce the importance of language for group identity is a higher degree of language standardization [(Oakes 2001:51). See more in (Smith, et al. 1998)]. This came to special importance due to the high degree of lexical influence from the Russian language, but also Polish and German, which had to be countered. Since the Soviet regime aimed for a homogeneous society, terms related to the ideology were introduced across the whole country. “Many previously existing words have been re-semanticist to align their denotations (or connotations!) with their Russian ‘benchmarks’” (Knowles 1989: 149) what already began before the reestablishment of independence, continued by the new Governments after 1990/1991. A high degree of attention was given to language norms and form which is reflected, for instance, in the Lithuanian Language Law of 1995:

Article 19: “The state shall enhance the prestige of the correct Lithuanian language, provide conditions for protecting linguistic norms, personal names, place-names, dialects, and written language monuments, ensure the material basis for the state language functioning, provide general assistance to the Lithuanian language, as well as to publishing of books on the Lithuanian language science and practice.”

Similar trends can also be found in the Latvian Language Law in Section 22 which pays particular attention to the use of the Latvian language in specialized educational literature. Besides, particular governmental institutions have been established to supervise the implementation of the language policy in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. For instance, in Lithuania, the Lithuanian Language Commission, the State Language Inspectorate, and country-wide language service for the local supervision and the inspection of the use of the national language in public were established. The re-infusion of language culture was a major concern of these institutions. Regulations and implementation of norms were furthered through the publication of various grammars, orthographies, and dictionaries. It has to be stressed that syntactic constructions remain the focus of attention as well as the use of neologisms in written and oral use of the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian languages.

Additionally, the Commissions or similar institutions are involved in the standardization of names and further, in the approving of the standard technical terms (Hogan-Brun et al. 2008: 107–108). For instance, Latvia has introduced several language institutions with such

objectives. The State Language Center is responsible for ensuring the working of the language laws. There is also an instrument of language attestation for personnel in public and private employment in contact with the public. However, its advisory roles remained restricted due to its attachment to the Ministry of Justice (*ibid.*: 109). In 1998, The Commission of the Official Language was established to investigate the possibilities of strengthening the state language. In Estonia, the language policy is conducted by national research programs as well as governmental and non-governmental institutions. The Ministry of Education and Research, for example, has been responsible for language policy related to the preservation of the Estonian language and its dialects. Furthermore, it establishes programs and publications to offer general language support but also supports the Estonian language in higher education. The primary task of the Language Inspectorate is to ensure that the Estonian Language Law and other regulations of the language are respected and to provide advice in all necessary practical cases. Immediate results were the disappearance of the Cyrillic alphabet and inscriptions in public places and the improvement of the teaching of the titular languages.

All three East-Baltic States introduced obligatory language classes of their national languages until the end of secondary-level education. College and university education are with few exceptions held entirely in the titular languages (Hogan-Brun et al. 2008: 122). The necessity to learn an additional language is further encouraged as a continuation of the interwar period of independence language policy. English, German, and French are usually offered as the first additional language, nevertheless, the Russian language is also chosen as the second additional language since its status as lingua franca remains important among the former Soviet Republics (*ibid.*).

In Estonia and Latvia, the system of language education has been successful as the competence in the national languages increased from an average of 65% to 80% among the Russian population between 1989 to 2000. At the same time, the language competence of the national language in Lithuania increased from 85% to 94% (*ibid.*). A further marker of the development in this respect has been the attitude of the non-ethnic Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian communities to send their children to mainstream schools but also to the titular language kinder gardens. Especially in Latvia, a gradual increase in mainstream schools is visible (Hogan-Brun 2008: 113).

Final Words

Finally, an increased willingness to learn the titular language has been observed among the adult population although in 1994 some 35% of the native Russian language speakers believed that learning the titular language was important whereas over 50% of them disagreed. Nevertheless, increased competence in the titular languages is very visible in all three East-Baltic States today [see more in (Maarja, et al. 2017)].

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