

‘Historical opportunity’: Baltic nations seek to purge Russian influence in wake of Ukraine war

[stripes.com/theaters/europe/2023-11-30/latvia-baltics-ukraine-war-russians-12204237.html](https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2023-11-30/latvia-baltics-ukraine-war-russians-12204237.html)

Svetlana Shkolnikova



The streets of Riga, Latvia, as seen from St. Peter’s Church on Nov. 10, 2023. (Svetlana Shkolnikova/Stars and Stripes)

RIGA, Latvia — A 69-year-old pensioner born in Ukraine, living in Latvia and holding a Russian passport has spent months studying the Latvian language in hopes of earning the right to stay in the country she has called home for 40 years.

She is on her second three-month course in a year and has failed her first attempt to pass the language exam now required for Russian citizens to extend their Latvian residency permits.

“If someone had hinted to me that this was waiting for me, I would have never come here,” said Natalya, who arrived in Riga, the Latvian capital, from Odesa, Ukraine, in 1984. She declined to provide her last name, saying she was nervous about repercussions.

Natalya is one of 20,000 Latvian residents subject to an amended immigration law adopted after Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year that requires Russian citizens wishing to extend their residence permits to prove a proficiency in Latvian, a challenging language for foreigners to master.

The policy is part of a host of controversial “de-Russification” measures sweeping the Baltics as they ride a wave of anti-Russia sentiment to purge Russian influence and the remaining vestiges of their Soviet past. Moscow annexed the Baltics in 1940, and the three countries — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — only gained full independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

“The war in Ukraine opened up a new opportunity to regain Latvian dignity and also make Latvian society more amalgamated,” said Māris Andžāns, director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga, an independent think tank. “This is a historical opportunity for the Baltic states, especially for Latvia and Estonia, to get rid of the remaining issues here.”

The unresolved issues mainly concern the continued prevalence of the Russian language, in schools and public life.

About one-third of the populations of Latvia and Estonia are ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking, a legacy of a half century of Soviet rule that saw large numbers of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians settle in the Baltics to Russify and rebuild after World War II.



Latvians in Riga celebrate Lāčplēsis Day, or Freedom Fighters' Remembrance Day, on Nov. 11, 2023, to mark the Latvian army's victory over a joint Russian-Germany army during the Latvian War of Independence in 1919. After a torchlight procession, the torches are stuck in the ground. (Svetlana Shkolnikova/Stars and Stripes)

Prior to the Ukraine war, a person merely proposing the demolition of Riga's Soviet-era "Victory" monument would be branded a "national radical," Andžāns said. Now such views are considered mainstream, he added. The memorial, viewed by many Latvians as a symbol of Soviet subjugation, was torn down last year.

Similar monuments commemorating Soviet soldiers who defeated Nazism have been toppled across the Baltics, often over the objections of their Russian-speaking communities, who say the removals defile the memory of relatives who fought and died in the Red Army.

Conservative lawmaker Rihards Kols, chairman of the Latvian parliament's foreign affairs committee, said such actions are long overdue and show "an awakening in our society, in our consciousness."

They are also deemed critical for national security after Russian President Vladimir Putin partly justified his invasion of Ukraine as an intervention to protect ethnic Russians from oppression and "genocide." Russian citizens in Latvia are "absolutely right now" considered a threat, Kols said.

"We understand that it is vital to our existence to introduce these reforms," he said. "The problem is still those who associate themselves with Czarist Russia, with the Soviet Union. There are people in Latvia that are nostalgic for Soviet times."

That mindset is believed to be widespread among residents who gave up Latvian-issued documents in favor of Russian passports following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. An additional 200,000 residents in Latvia and 65,000 residents in Estonia are considered stateless because they or their families arrived during the Soviet occupation and failed to naturalize after the Baltics won independence.

Many of Latvia's Russian citizens under age 75 are enrolled in Latvian language classes to be able to demonstrate a basic knowledge of Latvian, and, in effect, their loyalty to a country where they have lived for decades. Those who are unable to do so could face expulsion.

Natalya, the 69-year-old pensioner, said she fell into "a total depression" when the new residency law passed, spending days in bed worried about her future. She was 30 when she moved to Latvia from Ukraine for a job opportunity and said she never learned Latvian because "everything was in Russian."

Later, she decided to apply for Russian citizenship because it meant she could retire and receive a pension years earlier than a citizen of Latvia.

“And now time has passed, and they’re saying, ‘Go back to those who gave you your citizenship,’ but where? We don’t have anyone there,” Natalya said. “I am an only child; I don’t have children. I have relatives in Odesa but to them I’m a traitor.”

She said she began selling furniture and searching for places in Russia to relocate to, convinced she will never be able to grasp Latvian at her age. Natalya takes some comfort now in a two-year grace period announced by the Latvian government this summer but said she feels discriminated against in a city where she once spoke Russian freely.

“When you go to some establishments, they don’t want to speak Russian anymore even though earlier they would speak it with you,” she said. “Before the war, everybody was more personable, there was a friendship of the people.”



Russian language speakers attend a Latvian language class in Riga, Latvia, in November. (Svetlana Shkolnikova/Stars and Stripes)

There is a risk that the steps the Baltics are taking will deepen divisions between ethnic Latvians and Estonians and their Russian minorities, said Andžāns, the think tank director. But any potential short-term tension is outweighed by an urgency to integrate societies as much as possible, he said.

“It’s better to finish the job earlier while the window of opportunity is still open,” he said. “Currently the Baltic states are safer than ever, and Russia is weaker than in past decades. But Russia is going to get back on track, unfortunately, so it looks like the window is slowly

closing.”

The Baltics were long hesitant to pursue tough de-Russification measures due to fear of Russia’s reaction and pushback from the West, Andžāns said. With Russia’s attention focused on its war in Ukraine, that trepidation has largely dissipated, he said. The criticism has lingered.

The European Broadcasting Union and other international journalism organizations warned last month that Latvia’s proposal to remove Russian from its public radio and television broadcasts will “undermine citizens’ fundamental human rights” and make Russian speakers more vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda.

And human rights experts for the United Nations have expressed concern about restrictive laws in Latvia and Estonia that will require Russian-language schools to phase out instruction in Russian, calling them discriminatory.

Igor Pimenov, a former member of Latvian parliament and chairman of the board of an association that advocates for Russian language schooling in Latvia, said his group sees the forced transition as an attack on multiculturalism and an affront to democratic values.

“What could be more important than the desire of people to keep their cultural identity?” he said. “My family is not a threat to the Latvian culture and Latvian language, why should my theoretical grandchildren study in the Latvian language? The problem is these are not parents deciding but the state deciding what is better for their children.”

Latvian officials argue the education reforms will eliminate one of the main drivers of segregation, make children from Russian-speaking families more employable and sever the link between a Russian-language education and the consumption of Russian state media.

“We see that the best integrator in a society is through language,” Kols, the lawmaker, said. “I have come around people in my life in Latvia where I speak to them in Latvian, and they reply, ‘I will not speak in your dog language’ — that is an attitude, an imperialistic thinking [we are fighting].”



In Narva, Estonia's most ethnically Russian city, a river separates Estonia on the left from Russia on the right. (Svetlana Shkolnikova/Stars and Stripes)

Hundreds of miles north in Narva, the most ethnically Russian city in Estonia, some residents bristle at what they perceive as a sidelining of the Russian language and culture. They also echo the Kremlin's narrative about the war in Ukraine, despite Estonia's ban on Russian television channels.

"No one will win against Russia," said a 65-year-old man fishing in the Narva river, who only agreed to be identified as a "pensioner." "Ukraine has always been full of fascists, Nazis. I don't know, I don't like them."

Sympathy toward Russia is typical in Narva, said Elena, 63, and Argo, 53, a Russian-Estonian couple. They recalled how crowds thronged the city's promenade this spring to watch World War II victory day celebrations across the river that separates Narva from Russia.

Argo said he was glad to see Estonia promoting its language after completing schooling in Estonia that was dominated by the Russian language. Today he feels out of place in Narva, where even his doctors insist he speak Russian.

"Estonians are the ones who are being offended. Why do I have to speak Russian in Estonia?" he said. [De-Russification] should've been done 30 years ago."

