

## LATVIAN NATIONALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'LATGALIAN IDENTITY'

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**Abstract.** Since the early 1990s, when Latvia regained its independence from the Soviet Union (1991), Latvia's historical region of Latgale has become a site of unending political activism aimed at opposing Latvian nationalism. Claiming to represent Latvians of that region or Latgalians, political activists have been declaring that they are struggling against the ongoing state oppression of their distinct, regionally and historically rooted Latgalian identity and language, and have been demanding more autonomy in cultural, linguistic and economic affairs for Latgale. In this article I will attempt to reveal the wider historical, political and social contexts that are evoking, triggering and shaping Latgalian political activism. I will argue that Latgalian activism represents an attempt to invigorate an imagined Latgalian community that is separate from Latvians in order to achieve official affirmation of Latgalians as an inseparable part of the Latvian nation. I also engage in theoretical debates on different manifestations of sub-state nationalisms inside Europe by presenting this case study of a territorially based nationalist movement as being aimed not at separation, but at inclusion within a dominant nationalist imagination.

It is the early morning of 26 September 2009. A dozen pickets have gathered in front of the Riga State First Gymnasium, where various activities are being held by the Latvian Language Agency on the occasion of the European Day of Languages. In their hands the pickets hold large homemade posters containing inscriptions such as 'The Latgalian language is not dead!', 'Stop the assimilation of our children!', 'Stop language ethnocide in Latgale!' and 'Is Latgale and the Latgalian language in Europe?' Passers-by are given a leaflet about the written tradition of the Latgalian language. The event is immediately covered by the biggest news media in Latvia, together with an announcement by its main organizer, Mareks Gabrišs, who identifies himself as a member of the NGO Latgaļu Sāta or the 'Latgale Traditional Culture Centre'. Gabrišs declares that the Latvian state should stop the 'discrimination' and 'ignoring' of Latgalian and ensure its representation along with other European languages on the next European Day of Languages. He also claims that ultimately the state should also start doing more to ensure the preservation and development of Latgalian, which is otherwise the concern of just a few enthusiasts.

This was the third and latest public protest action against the Latvian state's allegedly dismissive attitude towards Latgalians and their language carried out in Riga

by the same dozen or so activists. Every time it had been introduced and surrounded by an almost identical activist discourse, representing Latgalian as having their own language, culture and literature that is distinct from Latvian and is continuously under the threat of extinction due to the absence of any legal framework on the part of the Latvian state to guarantee the protection and maintenance of the Latgalian language. The activists had repeatedly demanded that the Latvian state introduce the Latgalian language in school curricula in both Latgale region and the rest of Latvia, to provide broadcasts in Latgalian on public radio and television and to grant Latgalian the status of a regional language in Latgale. ‘Latvians must at last accept the fact that we are one nation but with two different languages,’ activist Mareks Gabrišs was quoted as saying by an online news portals after the picketing of the University of Latvia on 22 September 2007.

The state’s official position on this issue has taken the form of rhetorical statements acknowledging Latgalian as a part of the Latvian nation but as having their own particularities in culture, traditions, lifestyle and dialects – in other words, a similar status to many other ‘local identities’ in Latvia, among them Selonians and Suiti. Latgalian identity and local dialect has been articulated as an enormous asset of Latvian culture and Latvian national identity by official bodies. At the same time the state’s representatives have categorically opposed the activists’ claim that Latgalian is a distinct language, proposing instead that in Latvia Latgalian has been and always will be recognized as a dialect, a locally spoken variety of Latvian. The official opinion of the State Language Commission, chairman Andrejs Veisbergs told news portal *DELFI* (01.11.2011), is that ‘The Latgalian language is a variety of the Latvian language and is not a different language, and it should not become a second or third or any other official language’. Official bodies perceive the activism itself as dangerous, as it may lead to the division of the nation and to a weakened position of the Latvian language for the benefit of pro-Russian political forces, which are seen as hostile to Latvia. This has also been the prevailing discourse in society when it comes to the activists’ demands, which have their roots in the origin of the current status of Latgalian and Latgale within the Latvian state.

### **Historical background**

Like today, Latgale and Latgalians were also a subject of heated public debates at the time of the Latvian nationalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which eventually led to the establishment of an independent Latvia in 1918. Mainly initiated and carried out by the Latvian intelligentsia residing in Russia's Baltic provinces (southern Livland and Courland), the movement recognized that administratively separate Latvians dwelling in Russia's Vitebsk province (the territory of Latgale) had to be involved in all discussions concerning the future of the Latvian nation (Plakans 2011: 52). However, in public discourse, as newspapers of the time reveal, these Latgale Latvians, also called Latgalians, were perceived as the 'darkest layers' of the Latvian nation – uneducated, poor, with underdeveloped agriculture, and under the persistent threat of Russification, but also thirsty for the 'light' of (Baltic) Latvian culture that would eventually improve Latgalians' overall situation.

The idea of the Latvian nation was promoted by Baltic Latvians in their attempts to raise awareness among territorially dispersed Latvians that they belonged to one nation, with its own language, history, culture, customs and folklore. This sense of belonging was reified by carrying out various activities in the (Baltic) Latvian language, such as publishing newspapers and secular literature, organising song festivals, founding cultural societies and establishing Latvian primary schools, which mainly took place in the Baltic Latvian areas of Livland and Courland (Plakans 2011: 52-53).

Latvian intellectuals and clergy in Latgale, having been invited to participate in the process of 'national awakening', sought to evoke a sense of belonging to the Latvian nation among Latgalians by replicating the methods of Baltic Latvian nationalists. Just after the forty-year prohibition on printing books in the Latin alphabet in Vitebsk was lifted in 1904, Latgalian activists began to found Latgalian cultural societies and choirs, to publish newspapers and calendars, and to create a literature in their local version of spoken and written Latvian. However, this largely took place outside the territory of Latgale, particularly in Saint Petersburg, where the main figures of the movement studied, worked and lived at the beginning of the twentieth century. Only a few Latvian schools had been founded and a couple of

newspapers published in Latgale by the time the Republic of Latvia was founded in 1918 (Zeile 1996: 79).

Regardless of the similarity of approaches, the nations imagined respectively by the Baltic Latvian and Latgalian intelligentsia differed significantly. Awareness of being Latvian among Latgalians was in the first place construed by stressing their common belonging ~~not only~~ to Latgale instead of ~~, but also to the~~ territorially dispersed Latvians as a whole, which was emphasized by nationalists in the Baltic provinces. That is, Latgalians were first and foremost imagined through belonging to Latgale, and the intelligentsia were aware of being different from Latvians, so that belonging to territorially dispersed Latvians was stressed in the second place. [While Baltic nationalists opposed the Baltic German nobility and 'Germanization' \(Plakans 2011, Zeile 2006\)](#), the 'national awakening' in Latgale was directed against Russification, the Polish nobility and Polonization.. Moreover, the discourse on whether and how Latgale Latvians or Latgalians should unite with Baltic Latvians differed among the activists themselves. One of them, a Catholic priest, Francis Trasūns, advocated Latgalians joining Latvians in their aspirations for self-determination and the establishment of an autonomous territory (province) of Latvians within Russia, while another leading figure, seminarian and engineer Francis Kemps, suggested that Latgalians remain separate due to prominent differences in language and history (Plakans 2011: 55; Zeile 2006: 363).

The distinctiveness of Latgalians was represented by Latgale nationalists as rooted in the common past of the people. In their discourse, nationalists repeatedly stressed the fact that Latgale had had its own history of oppression for more than three hundred years, in parallel to Courland and Livland. It was a history that had begun with Latgale coming under Polish rule in 1561 and had continued when it became part of the Russian empire in 1772, as serfdom in Vitebsk province was abolished later than in the Baltic provinces, and Latgalians enjoyed almost no linguistic and cultural rights in their territory, in contrast to Latvians in Livland and Courland. Latgalians saw this separate historical experience as involving long years of isolation that had led to Latgale and Latgalians lagging behind Courland and Livland. But it was also represented as essential for the development of a culture specific to Latgalians, including traditions, mentality, a strong Catholic faith (in contrast to the Protestant domination of Livland and Courland) and a distinct literary tradition based on the

Latin alphabet (instead of the Gothic script used for the Latvian language in the other Latvian territories) (Zeile 2006: 372). ‘It is not possible to blend us but to position us side by side as the two independent national organisms we have historically grown into and matured as’, Kemps wrote in the Latgalian newspaper *Dryva* in 1917 (Zeile 2006: 363). Some leading (Baltic) Latvian activists opposed Kemps’ political ideas, as well as attempts by Latgalian intellectuals to invigorate their own language and literature. Instead they stressed the need to bring both parts of the Latvian nation closer by dissolving the differences between them (Zeile, *ibid.*).

During the Latgalian Congress in Rēzekne in May 1917, a majority of delegates from all over Latgale decided to unite with the other parts of Latvia while still preserving their local self-government and cultural autonomy in Latgale. Thus, the inclusion of Latgale within an independent Latvia was accompanied by Latvian nationalists acknowledging that Latgale was a specific region of Latvia with the right to considerable autonomy (Bukšs 1971: 69), unlike the case of either Courland or Livland. After the democratic Republic of Latvia was proclaimed in 1918, Latgalian nationalists continued to replicate Latvian nationalism by strengthening the position of the Latgalian language within the region. Officially Latgalian was recognized as a regional language of administration, being taught in schools and with a considerable body of literature and print media being created (Marten et al. 2009: 6-7).

In political discourse, the debates over Latvian nation-building continued. Latgalian nationalists proceeded to reproduce the image of Latgalians as being oppressed, this time by the Latvian state, which was blamed for providing insufficient support for the development of Latgalian culture and language in the region. This was still opposed by non-Latvians, that is, those Poles, Jews and other national minorities who had come to Latgale during the periods of Polish and Russian rule. Latvian nationalists, by contrast, were aiming to institutionalize a uniform (Baltic) Latvian language and culture within the whole territory of Latvia in order to strengthen the position of Latvians as a titular nation while excluding the still present and economically and socially influential national minorities (especially Germans and Jews) from important domains of Latvian life (Plakans 2011: 58). Within this context, Latgale appeared especially problematic due to the fact that, in contrast to other Latvian regions, in Latgale Latvians (Latgalians) barely comprised a majority (*ibid.*: 59).

This discourse became even more pronounced after Kārlis Ulmani's coup and his subsequent establishment of an authoritarian regime in Latvia in 1934. Ulmani's nationalist ideology emphasized the necessity to perfect the Latvian nation and to develop a powerful Latvian state (Zaķe 2009: 305-6) through the development of a monolithic Latvian nation, the exclusion of the most influential minorities and the integration of economically backward Latgale into the Latvian state (Hanovs and Tēraudkalns 2013: 79-81). The immersion of the Latgalian into (Baltic) Latvian culture was adopted as the main method of such integration, implemented by opening new Latvian schools and theatres and by building roads. Any expression or accentuation of Latgale regional peculiarities was construed as opposing the national interest (ibid.: 85-6). The Latgalian language was gradually eradicated from the public space in schools, print media and public events (Lazdiņa and Marten 2012: 70). The number of books published in Latgalian shrank significantly, and only a few new Latgalian newspapers were launched (Mjartāns 2008: 22). Among Latgalian activists, those who outwardly supported Ulmani's regime became more visible. In the media Latgalian intellectuals explicitly redefined Latgalian as Latvians, similar to those from the other two regions of Vidzeme and Kurzeme, but the Latgalian language was interpreted as a vernacular merger with literary Latvian (Hanovs and Tēraudkalns 2013: 90).

A similarly restrictive policy towards the publication of Latgalian books, press and other Latgalian activists' attempts to claim Latgalian distinctiveness was implemented during the period of Soviet occupation in Latvia from 1940 to 1941. However, the ensuing Nazi regime (1941-1944) was more approving of Latgalian activism, giving permission, for instance, for Latgalian intellectuals to establish a regional publishing house that issued a significant number of works in Latgalian. Historians argue that Latgalian activism was tolerated as the German authorities perceived Latgalian as belonging to a different 'race' from Latvians, due to much Slav influence, and as such being unsuitable for eventual Germanization (Plakans 2011: 61; Mjartāns 2008: 28). By encouraging the cultivation of regional peculiarities, Nazi rule aimed at stimulating mutual hostility and eventual separation between Latvians and Latgalian, as it was planned to deport the latter. Upon the reoccupation of Latvia by Soviet military forces in 1944, the most active Latgalian – religious leaders, politicians and intellectuals – went into exile, mainly to Germany and the

USA (Mjartāns 2008: 33). Within the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic, the use of Latgalian in official settings was banned (Lazdiņa and Marten 2012: 70), as the language policy of the Soviet Union was aimed at promoting the gradual standardization of local titular languages within the Soviet republics, languages without this status being suppressed (Pavlenko 2006: 83). In the 1960s Soviet rule prohibited the printing of Catholic church calendars, meaning that the use of written Latgalian eventually ceased as well. Latgalian nonetheless remained as the main language of Catholic services, and it was still spoken in homes in rural areas especially (Marten et al. 2009: 7).

Under Soviet rule, the citizens of the Soviet republic were constructed as belonging to an abstract 'Soviet' society with a uniform (Russian) language and culture, but the system of the republics also provided a legal framework that allowed national cultures to be reproduced (Plakans 2011: 61-2). Latvian nationalism manifested itself in such a way that intellectuals were able to construct Latvianness as the core of the Latvian nation by emphasizing Latvian literature, visual arts and music (Zaķe 2009: 307). Special meaning was given to the mythical past of Latvia and the Latvian nation. Folklore and ethnography were gathered and represented as falling within the scope of the particular region, and within this context Latgale was (re)constructed as one of the historical-cultural regions comprising Latvian territory, but with the local population manifesting regional sentiments by practising Latgalian traditional artistic design, especially in ceramics, maintaining a strong Catholic faith and undertaking birthplace visits (Plakans 2011: 62). In fact it was a different Latgale region that Latvian intellectuals were defining as a historical part of Latvia. Not only did Soviet rule separate Abrene, the north-eastern district of Latgale, and add it to the territory of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, but, due to its migration policy, thousands of Russian-speakers (people with Russian as their native language, mainly ethnic Russians) were settled in the region. As a result, by 1989 the proportion of Latvians (Latgalians) residing in Latgale had fallen to 39.4% of the total population (Marten et al. 2009: 11).

In the same period, Latgalian activists in exile were striving to achieve equal linguistic rights and status to Latvians within the émigré community. In their new countries of settlement, a discourse prevailed stating that, in order for Latvians to resist the persistent threat of cultural assimilation, it was essential to emphasize

cultural and linguistic unity and to speak and publish only in ‘standard Latvian’. Latgalian speech and writing in Latgalian were therefore not supported. According to the memoirs of the Latgalian historian Miķelis Bukšs (1971), use of Latgalian was greeted with hostility and condemnation, justified by the argument that exile is not the proper place for the preservation of Latgalian traditions, as there are too few people (i.e. Latvians) (Bukšs 1971: 32). Thus, Latgalian activists created and maintained their own shared communication space in exile, exclusively Latgalian, parallel to Latvian, and aimed not only at preserving their ‘ancestors’ heritage’ but also at opposing the ongoing representation of the Latvian nation and ‘Latvianness’ without the Latgalian language and history being recognized as an integral part of it. Latgalian activists published and circulated newspapers, magazines and literature in Latgalian (Mjartāns 2008: 34), wrote scholarly books dedicated to the Latgalian language and the history of Latgale and Latgalians, and put on language courses and scholarly conferences (2013 Latgale Research Centre). In doing so Latgalian activists were hoping that, after Latvia’s independence was re-established, Latvia would become a state with two official languages, Latvian and Latgalian (Bukšs 1971: 27).

### **Current situation**

The State Language Law acknowledges literary Latgalian as a ‘historical variant of the Latvian language’ and guarantees its preservation, protection and development. Responding to Latgalian activists’ demands, the Latvian Language Centre, which is responsible for the implementation of language policy, drew up and approved ‘Regulations on Latgalian spelling’ in 2007 that officially regulate the use of the written Latgalian. However, the state does not support the teaching of spoken and literary Latgalian (nor Latgale history) in local schools, and the legal framework does not allow its use in official correspondence. In official rhetoric Latgalian is defined exclusively as a dialect, equivalent to the dialect of Courland and all other spoken regional varieties of Latvian, none of which, in contrast to Latgalian, have written traditions.

Officially Latgalians are recognized as belonging to the Latvian nation and Latvian nationality. In state policy planning documents (e.g. the latest government declaration of 2011), Latgale’s strong regional sentiment and distinct identity (culture, language, traditions) are acknowledged as an important part of Latvian national



identity, to be preserved and developed. In 2005 Latgale became the first region (followed by Kurzeme, Vidzeme and Zemgale within a year) to receive funding through a purpose-built programme launched by the State Culture Capital Foundation to ensure the preservation of the local cultural heritage.

I have observed that Latvians construct Latgalians as having their own unique culture and Latgale as special region with beautiful scenery, architecture, still living folk traditions and widespread Catholic practice – not characteristic of other historical regions – during various situations of everyday life, for example, while they are watching popular local TV singing shows in which Latgalians participate, or while discussing places to visit in Latvia, etc. During everyday conversations and internet comments touching upon Latgale, the image of Latgalians is created by characterizing them as having specific traits, among which are ‘friendliness’, ‘warm-heartedness’ and ‘helpfulness’, but Latgalians are also blamed for being ‘backward’, ‘uneducated’, ‘lazy’, ‘unreliable’, ‘idlers’, ‘stupid’, ‘alcoholics’ and ‘criminals’.

These frequently circulating stereotypes in Latvian society must be placed in the overall context of socio-economic conditions in Latgale. Since the 1990s it has been the most economically underdeveloped region, with the lowest per capita GDP and the highest rates of unemployment, outmigration and alcoholism, coupled with the widespread practices of illegal employment, informal economic activities and smuggling. Upon Latvia’s accession to the European Union in 2004, Latgale was acknowledged to be the poorest region in the whole Union. Thus, in the light of such facts, Latgale has been portrayed by the Latvian mass media as the most backward, dangerous and undesirable region of the country in which to live. When I told an acquaintance of mine in Jaunjelgava (Zemgale region) that I had been living in Latgale for a while, he became confused and said: ‘But there is nothing there – complete emptiness – how can anybody live in Latgale?’

In order to reduce the economic and social gap separating Latgale from the other historical regions, in 2012 the Latvian government launched an ‘Action Plan for Latgale Regional Development, 2012-2013’, providing for various activities to foster local businesses and attract private investments. Various state-funded activities have been carried out to meet the demands of Latgalian activists as well. A working group for the development and protection of the Latgalian language was established in 2007 under the Ministry of Science and Education, while the Ministry of Culture assembled

a Latgale working group in 2012 to strengthen Latgalian identity. The Ministry has carried out a series of measures to ensure that Latgalian culture becomes more visible in Latvia's public space, including broadcasts in Latgalian on national (public) radio and (public) television about Latgale, its people and their regional identity.

Nevertheless, Latgalian activists continue to express dissatisfaction with the treatment of Latgalians within the Latvian state by arguing that their language and culture are being ignored. This suggests that, because Latgalian activists are actually attempting to revitalize a community that would be separate from Latvians, they are perceived as a threat to the Latvian state and Latvian nation.

According to the official statistics of 2011 (Population Census), Latgale has a population of 304,032 or about 15% of the total population of Latvia. It is one of five planning regions, along with Riga, Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Zemgale, comprising the territory of Latvia. However, Latgale's current boundaries do not exactly match those of the historical territory of Latgale. The region incorporates nineteen counties and the two republican cities of Rēzekne and Daugavpils. As a planning region, Latgale has its own decision-making body, the Latgale Planning Region Development Council, which is responsible for drawing up different types of regional planning documents, such as territorial planning, development programs and their implementation by local municipalities. Since planning regions are not administrative territorial divisions, Latgale does not have a regional government, though it functions as a statistical region and a constituency.

### **Seeking equality**

Apart from organizing three pickets, Latgalians activists have mainly been struggling for Latgalian rights by writing articles for the Latvian mass media, addressing official declarations to Latvia's highest officials and initiating meetings with members of Parliament. One of these, which I attended, took place in Parliament on 22 March 2011, since it fell within the scope of activities carried out by the Parliamentary Latgale Support Group. This illustrates how Latgalian activism is actually being shaped by the framework of Latvian nationalism, which defines the Latvian language as the core element of Latvianness and proficiency in its use as crucial for belonging to the Latvian nation and the Latvian state (Kehris 2008: 8). Latvians as the titular nation within a country where, upon the reestablishment of independence, non-

Latvians comprised almost 50% of its total population have been imagined by strengthening the position of the Latvian language in every aspect of Latvian residents' lives. In practice, the boundary between Latvians and other nationalities has been drawn by implementing a strict language policy (Schmid et al. 2004: 235) grounded in the State Language Law, which acknowledges Latvian as the only official language in the state. This guarantees the development, preservation and promotion of Latvian, while restricting the presence of other languages within the Latvian public space. Likewise, the Education Law prioritizes Latvian language over other languages in the school system. According to the Citizenship Law, finally, proficiency in Latvian is required to become a citizen of the Latvian state. These policies, accompanied and justified by the official state discourse, represent the Latvian nation and language as being under the permanent threat of extinction (Morris 2003: 24; Kļava 2012: 16).

The meeting took place in the Parliament's Red Conference Hall, where the 22 participants in the round table were seated, including seven members of Parliament elected from Latgale constituency, a chairman of Rēzekne county council (the second biggest city in the region) and representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science and the Language Institute of the University of Latvia. The first speaker, Veronika Dundure, Head of the Latgalian Teachers' Association, suggested that it was necessary to introduce the Latgalian language, literature and history into Latgale school curricula to awake patriotic feelings among local children. Her suggestion was received rather indifferently by the attendees, who remained silent or kept chatting quietly among themselves. The overall mood in the hall changed dramatically as soon as the most publicly visible figure of Latgalian activism, Juris Viļums, deputy of Dagda council (in Latgale) and chair of the NGO *Latgolys Saeima* ('Latgalian Parliament'), started his Powerpoint presentation in Latgalian, which was greeted by an impatient murmur. Viļums said that it was crucial to make changes in the State Language Law so that the status of the Latgalian language and of Latgalians in the Latvian state would finally be clarified. According to the current version, claimed Viļums, Latgalian is either inferior to Latvian or incorrect Latvian, but certainly not a fully fledged part of it. 'If the Latgalian language is a sub-type of Latvian, as the law defines it, then who are Latgalians? Are they just a sub-type of Latvians within this state?', Viļums asked emotionally.

Also at the meeting, Arvīds Turlajs, another visible figure within Latgalian activism and a member of the NGOs *Es Latgalei* ('I for Latgale') and *Latgolys Saeima*, distributed copies of the verdict of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Latvia stating that applications submitted to the Register of Enterprises in Latgalian must be treated as having been written in a foreign language. Heated debates started in the hall. The linguist Anna Stafecka from the Latvian Language Institute opposed Viļums by asserting that the law already defines written Latgalian and literary Latvian as equivalent and adding that Latgalian was definitely not a third Baltic language due to its spoken variant not being standardized. But Zaiga Sneibe from the Ministry of Education and Science noted that Latgalian NGOs had rejected the strategy she had developed to promote Latgalian in Latvian society and that the Ministry did not have the resources to design another one.

Then a Member of Parliament Staņislavs Šķesters (Latgale) joined the dispute, arguing that the severe economic situation in Latgale is an issue needing a more urgent solution than the preservation of the Latgalian language and culture. His opinion was echoed in the objections made by other deputies, but especially in the irony voiced by the chairman of Rēzekne county council, Monvīds Švarcs, who remarked that if mortality rates continued to exceed birth rates in Latgale there would be no one left to speak Latgalian anyway. The meeting, which lasted for more than two hours, was closed shortly afterwards by a well-known folklorist and member of the Parliament Janīna Kursīte suggesting that it end 'on a positive note'. She said: 'Instead of demanding support from the state again and again, I suggest we focus more on what could be done on our own. [...] The promotion of Latgale is in our own hands.'

Latgalian activism takes place within the contours of Latvian nationalism. Substantially, it is aiming to acquire greater influence, namely official status for Latgalian within the Latvian state, and especially in the Latgale region. Oppression of and ignorance about Latgalians and their linguistic and cultural rights is laid at the door of the state. While Latgalians are acknowledged as being an integral part of the Latvian nation, Latgalian does not receive legal and financial support equal to Latvian to enhance Latgalian culture and language. Moreover, Latgalian activists are emulating the discourses and methods of Latvian nationalism in trying to build a Latgalian community and striving to enliven a sense of belonging among Latgalians,

as well as patriotic sentiments towards the region by promoting the Latgalian language. Although acting mainly outside the scope of the institutional framework, using their own money or applying for state or EU funding as NGOs, activists are encouraging the use and learning of Latgalian by teaching it in local schools, arranging written language courses free of charge, creating and publishing periodicals, literature and music in Latgalian, and organizing culture festivals in the region. Special efforts have been made to institutionalize a standardized Latgalian language. This has been backed by Latgalian and foreign scientists' researches, conferences, publications, encyclopaedias and dictionaries, and facilitated through Latgale-focused broadcasts (produced by the activists) in the public and local private media and online news sites, all of which serve to create spaces of shared Latgalian experience of life in the region. The attempts to imagine Latgalians through their being bound to a particular territory and thus constituting a sovereign community also corresponds to the activists' perpetual demands to grant Latgalian official status as the regional language of Latgale.

This demand has been received with outward hostility by the Latvian state and society. Latgalian activists are accused of separatism, of attempts to cleave the Latvian nation and Latvia into two hostile parts, and thus of actually supporting Russian political forces and their attempts to Russify the territory of Latvia so that it can eventually be handed back to Russia. Following one of the regular activists' public announcements claiming the status of a regional language for Latgalian, Janīna Kursīte responded by stating: 'The request for Latgalian as a regional language opens the door to other precedents. Also Old Believers<sup>1</sup> might want this, and this means that the Russian language will come in. And then the position of Latvian as well as of the Latgalian language will be weakened, and both will come under the threats of extinction' (Gabre 2011). This response unfolds in the context of a Latvian nationalism grounded in the principle of rebuilding the Latvian state as it existed before the occupation, thus stressing continuity with the First Republic of Latvia

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<sup>1</sup> Large numbers of Russian Old Believers moved to Latvian territory, particularly Latgale, in the late seventeenth century after they were expelled by the Russian Orthodox Church and suffered persecution. According to the statistics of 2010 there are approximately 2300 Old Believers in Latvia, most of them in Latgale. Their spoken language was represented as being a regional dialect along with Latgalian and other languages in Latvia by the Latvian Bureau of Lesser-Used Languages, which was founded in 2009 under the European Bureau for Lesser-Used languages (discontinued in 2010).

(Verdery 1996) mainly by eradicating any remnants of the recent Soviet past and ensuring that Latvians are a majority in the country (Bjorklund 2004). This has manifested itself in Latvian nationalism being directed against Soviet-era settlers, the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia,<sup>2</sup> who are perceived as a threat due to their comprising 37.2 % (1991) of the total population, and as disloyal to the idea of the independent Latvian state by not having acquired the Latvian language and culture, but instead demanding political rights for their native Russian (Kehris 2008, Morris 2003). Thus, on the one hand official recognition of Latgalian is perceived as disloyalty to the Latvian state (Saarikivi and Marten 2012) and articulated by official bodies as ‘dangerous’ due to its potentially reducing the number of Latvian-speakers and thereby threatening the position of Latvians as a majority within that state (Druviete and Strelēviča-Ošiņa 2008: 108). On the other hand, such discursive framing cannot be grasped without considering the specific role of the Latgale region in shaping relations between Latvians and Russian-speakers.

It is not only that Russian-speakers comprise about 60 percent of the total population in Latgale according to the data of the latest Census (2011), which shows some of the local towns as being completely dominated by the Russian language; research by the National Electronic Mass Media Council (2012) also shows that only about 60% of Latgale’s population ‘inhabits’ the Latvian information space, with the other half preferring broadcasts produced in the Russian language and in Russia that have been associated with Russia’s ‘soft power’<sup>3</sup> in the region. Moreover, the residents of Latgale region have been the main supporters of Latvia’s pro-Russian (Russian-oriented) political forces in both the parliamentary and local government elections. The centre-left party ‘Saskaņas Centrs’ (Harmony Centre), which has been explicitly linked in the mass media with Putin’s regime in Russia and with attempts to reduce the role of the Latvian language within the Latvian state, is represented in 18 out of 21 local municipalities in Latgale. Within this context Latgalian activism on

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<sup>2</sup> The Russian-speaking minority consists of Soviet-era settlers – Ukrainians, Belarussians, Russians and other Soviet nationalities – who fled the country during the period of the Soviet Union and had Russian as their native and first language. Thus, because it is monolingual, the Russian-speaking minority is interpreted as a separate ethnic minority by Latvian nationalism (see Bjorklund 2004).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Soft power’ is a concept developed by Joseph Nye, who defines it as the ‘ability to attract’ using such resources as culture, political values and a foreign policy that is perceived as legitimate and as having moral authority. The term is widely used by Latvian scholars (see Muižnieks 2011) and politicians to describe how Russia is gaining influence in Latvia.

language issues has been interpreted as coming under the control of Russian-backed politics, while Latgalian activism in general is perceived as ‘political provocation’ and ‘anti-state activism’.

Latgalian activists have therefore incorporated this claim into their discursive repertoires with greater vigour and assertiveness in order to construct the idea of a Latgalian community as suffering from both past and present ‘oppression’, ‘discrimination’ and ‘injustices’ practised by Latvians and the Latvian state. While putting forward the Latgalian language as the most essential aspect of Latgalian identity, this is also represented as something that Latgalians have cultivated for centuries, despite constant oppression by ‘foreign powers’ such as Polish Inflanty (or Polish Livonia) and Tsarist Russia, and which is now currently being set on a certain path to complete extinction by the Latvian state failing to protect it. The image of Latgalians as continuously facing unfair treatment within their own state has likewise been reinforced by claiming a resemblance between the present-day ‘policy regarding Latgalians’ and Ulmanis’ authoritarian regime of the 1930s. This takes the form of Latgalians not being able to use their language while speaking to Latvians or in official settings such as taking the parliamentary oath, whilst at the same time Latvians do not acquire any knowledge of the written, spoken Latgalian tradition, history or literature.

Similarly, the emphasis on the inequality experienced by Latgalians is extended to the interpretation of Latgale as the region that receives the smallest share of EU funding from the Latvian state as compared to the other four planning regions. However, the central claim characterising Latgalian activism as fundamentally directed against Latvians is the accusation that the Latvian state prefers to spend thousands on the Russian language every year instead of providing any support to Latgalian. Activists repeatedly declare that this is not fair and that, by running Russian kindergartens, schools and financing broadcasts in Russian in the region, Latvians are fostering the complete Russification of Latgale and leaving one part of the nation ‘to its own fate’, that is, eventual elimination. Thus, this discursive reinforcement of the boundary between Latgalians and other Latvians takes the form of another method serving the activists to imagine Latgalians as separate from the Latvian community. However, the attempt to mobilize Latgalians in this particular way is unfolding in the wider context of the development of a minority rights

framework in Latvia. This is determined by Latvian nationalism, European Union requirements regarding the treatment of national minorities in Latvia and Russia's discourse concerning its own 'compatriots' in Latvia.

### **Emulating Latvian nationalists**

Discursively framed as not belonging to the Latvian nation and as foreigners on the national territory, a large proportion (700,000) of the Soviet-era settlers – Russian-speakers – were denied Latvian citizenship upon the reestablishment of independence, were left without the right to vote, hold civil service jobs, buy land, own shares in companies or receive state benefits, and were thus excluded from participation in Latvia's national political, social and economic life. These nationalistic practices, including limiting naturalization procedures, were apparently introduced to ensure that the dominant positions in every sphere of national life should be reserved for Latvian citizens, mainly Latvians, but also descendants of members of national minorities residing in Latvia before 1940 (Hughes 2005, Bjorklund 2004).

At the same time, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities that Latvia adopted in 2005 guarantees the right to preserve and develop the language, ethnic and cultural particularities of national minorities. The state provides preschool and secondary education in minority languages in state-funded schools, most of which are Russian. Moreover, under pressure from the EU and especially the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the state has implemented more inclusive naturalization procedures. Nevertheless, equal access to these rights for Russian-speakers has remained a focus of the international community's concerns over minority issues (Johns 2003, Morris 2003).

This process has been strongly intertwined with Russia's discourse on its compatriots in Latvia. It emphasizes that 'Russians are not Soviet immigrants but the basic nation' of Latvia (Kudors 2012) and that the restrictive language and citizenship policy towards the Russian-speaking population represents a violation of their human rights (Muižnieks 2006). This ideology is represented by different pro-Russian political forces in Latvia focusing on the differences between Latvians and Russians, especially the radical-left party *Par Dzimto Valodu* ('For the Native Language'). While still having the status of an organization, at the beginning of 2011 it initiated a petition that led to a referendum in 2012 on making Russian a second official state



language in Latvia, but currently it is propagating the idea of an autonomous Latgale, while incorporating the Latgalian activists' claims as an important part of its rhetoric. One of its ideological leaders, a non-citizen, Aleksandrs Gaponenko, argues that Latgalians are the 'ethnic group' that is most oppressed by Latvians in Latvia and that Latgalian struggles for linguistic and cultural rights are creating sympathy among Russians, who would like to help due to their own attempts to 'solve similar problems'. He is certain that the survival of Latgalians is only possible in an autonomous Latgale (Avotiņš 2013, Gaponenko 2011).

This discourse, and a conference the party organized in the largest Latgale city of Daugavpils to discuss the idea of autonomy in greater detail, have provoked Latgalian activists to emulate Latvian nationalism even more explicitly. The NGO *Latgolys Saeima*, which involves some of the most active 'Latgale patriots', has published official announcements in the Latvian mass media and sent them to ministries, declaring that they 'publicly condemn' the idea of Latgale separatism and autonomy and consider it disloyal to the concept of the Latvian state and as 'Slavic and Soviet in its content'. In this manner the activists are actually replicating the discourses of Latvian nationalism, which are essentially directed against Russian-speakers. Moreover, the activists have repeatedly asserted publicly that they are against any pro-Russian political activities in both the region and Latvia generally, especially those aimed at achieving official status for the Russian language. This is very well illustrated by one of many articles written by the activist Mareks Gabrišs and published by the biggest Latvian newspaper, *Latvijas Avīze* (14.04.2011):

We hereby bring to notice that we Latgalians are not 'Moscow's hand' and that we are against any rights for the Russian language in Latvia. The Latgalians, who have been suffering the consequences of Russification and Russian colonization for centuries, will never support and cooperate with forces hostile to Latvia. We stress that Russian Latvia and [making] the Russian language the second official state language are against the interests of Latvian Latvia, Latgalians and Latgalian Latgale! [...] None of the regimes of colonization and occupation has ever asked ancient Lettigalls or their descendants – Latgale Latvians – for their permission for housing or foreigners to come into Latgale. Non-invited Russian-speakers are not and will never be a natural component of Latgale.

The drawing of this sharp boundary between Latgalians and Russian-speaking residents of Latgale appears to be serving the activists in furthering their attempts to imagine Latgalians as a separate community, bound to the territory of Latgale through its origin. However, this nationalist method also reveals the ambiguity at the heart of the Latgalian movement. While fundamentally directed against the Latvian state and against Latvians as the oppressors of Latgalians, it is represented as essential to Latvian nationhood and its attempts to resist Russification. The activists argue that the goal of Latgalian struggles has always been to secure a Latvian Latgale. Therefore, there is an obligation for the Latvian state to assist their endeavours in strengthening Latgalianness as ‘the most natural Latvianness’ of Latgale by providing education and mass media in the region in the Latgalian language. This argument they substantiate by asserting that Latgale’s Russian-speakers would be more willing to integrate into Latvian society through Latgalian than through the official state language, Latvian.

### **The most ‘authentic’ Latvians**

Nevertheless, the interviews I conducted with the activists and some of the statements they made in public contradict this more categorical kind of discourse. For example, during a broadcast on the Russian-language radio station *Baltkom* (11.12.2012) the most publicly visible activist, Juris Viļums, who is also a member of the current Parliament (2011-2014) and comes from a centre-right party, *Reformu Partija* (‘Reform Party’), proposed that Russians in Latgale region should be allowed to put nameplates on their houses in their native language if they wished to do so. This is contrary to the State Language Law, which is designed to eradicate Russian from Latvia’s public space. It thus appears that the activists’ rhetoric, representing Russian-speakers as unwanted guests in the region, is but one of many other tactics the activists have practiced in the course of time, including the demand for Latgalian to be granted the status of a regional language, which has actually not been mentioned recently. Each of these tactics has been chosen to accord with the wider political, economic and social dynamics within the state. But all of them have been introduced to achieve the activists’ major aspiration, namely that Latgalians should be acknowledged as a fully fledged part of the Latvian nation by virtue of their belonging to Latgale region. The reason Latgalian activism is determined by the framework of Latvian nationalism, its methods and practices is because the activists are attempting

to imagine the Latgalian community as Latvians, similarly to the birth of the Latvian nationhood and the Latvian state.

This corresponds to the way in which Latgalians were constructed during the activists' meeting and while I was conducting interviews with them. The activists selected and emphasized historical facts to represent Latgalian culture and language as lying at the core of Latvianness. For example, they were assured that the ancient Lettigall tribe, the ancestors of present-day Latgalians, had formed the basis of the whole Latvian nation, as it was the largest of those Baltic tribes (the others being the Semigallians, Curonians and Selonians) who originally settled in the modern territory of Latvia. They also agreed that they were the least globalized Latvians, who had not mixed with other cultures so heavily, as they had been isolated for so many centuries. In their opinion, this condition has ensured that Latgalians have inherited the ancient Latvian traditions, customs and culture in a more authentic form. Among other proofs that Latgalians are the truest Latvians and deserve to be acknowledged as such was also the statement that the modern Latvian language has developed after the example of Latgalian, as the latter was written in the Latin script long before the Latin alphabet was introduced for Latvian. Also the activists were certain that a majority of Latvian folksongs initially came from Latgale but had been 'Latvianized' subsequently. Almost every one of these statements was followed by the activists expressing deep disappointment and discontent with Latvians who ignore the Latgalian contribution to their culture. Many of them became emotionally excited, even angry, and voiced their readiness and determination to fight this unfair situation. This strengthens the suggestion that, by initiating the movement, the activists are demanding that, while remaining distinct and even separate in language and culture, Latgalians should find a place within the dominant imagination of the Latvian nation.

During my stay in Rēzekne at the beginning of 2011, an extensive celebration was held in honour of the Latgalian journalist Bronislavs Spridzāns for his seventieth birthday. Organized by Rēzekne county council, it was meant to congratulate Spridzāns publicly for authoring, editing and anchoring the only broadcast by national public radio about Latgale in the Latgalian language. The event was free of charge and took place in the city's house of culture, bringing together about 250 formally dressed guests, mainly local intelligentsia: scholars, writers, journalists, teachers, artists and film directors. About ten of the most active figures in the Latgalian

movement were also present. Just a few hours earlier they, together with sixteen more people in Rēzekne higher education, had founded a new NGO, *Latgolys Saeima* ('Latgalian Parliament'), to 'ensure Latgale economic development and that Latvian-Latgalian Latgale with its cultural assets be secured for future generations'. This was endorsed by the presence of the Minister of Culture, Sarmīte Ēlerte (2010-2011).

More than two hours of celebrations on stage were communicated exclusively in Latgalian. Fragments of recordings of Spridzāns' broadcasts and their related videos were played and then interspersed by local musicians performing Latgalian folk or pop music greeting Bronislavs on his anniversary, while local Catholic priests, scholars, members of Latgalian NGOs, Latgalian artists and representatives of the regional municipalities came on to the stage to deliver congratulatory addresses, flowers and gifts. The speeches focused on the Latgalian language, its meaning for local people and its situation in different municipalities. For example, the mayor of Balvi county council, Andris Kazinovskis, a member of *Latgolys Saeima*, suggested that Spridzāns should be given a medal for his contribution in promoting the Latgalian language for over 22 years. At the same time he claimed that Spridzāns' broadcasts had erroneously represented Balvi as a place where nobody speaks Latgalian. 'People do speak Latgalian in Balvi!', Kazinovskis objected. 'Balvi is a very Latgalian place,' he added, and he concluded that, in order to avoid such misunderstandings and the separation of Latgale's places, the mayors should come together and finally form a Latgale region.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Andris Kazinovskis is especially eager in defending the idea of Latgale becoming a first-level NUTS region, that is, a separate regional administrative division of local government, eligible to receive its own EU funding instead of being dependent on the decisions made by the central state. Together with another member of the NGO *Latgales Pētniecības Institūts* ('Latgale Research Institute'), he made this demand to members of the previous Parliament. I also participated in this meeting between Kazinovskis, his colleague, Professor of Economics Staņislavs Keišs., and the right-wing party alliance, *Visu Latvījai/LNNK*, which did not take this proposition seriously. The deputies demanded that more research be carried out on the subject, but admitted that they did not consider Latgale to be an economic region due to the severe overall state of the regional infrastructure. Most activists agree that the economic development of Latgale is one of their central aims, but opinions differ on how it should be realized. Contrary to the demands for linguistic and cultural rights, the activists cannot provide concrete proposals for fostering regional economic progress. The idea of Latgale as an economic region has nonetheless been accepted by Ilga Šuplinska, a philologist working at Rēzekne Higher Educational Institution. During our interview she said that, if Latgale were made an economic region, people would become more motivated to stay and work there, and the 'utilitarian value' of the Latgalian language would gradually increase, securing it from eventual extinction and also making it more equal to the Latvian language.

As soon as he had finished, there was applause in the hall. The guests acclaimed each and every recording, song or speech, but especially eagerly the one delivered by Ludza county representative Arnis Ziediņš: ‘If Rēzekne is the heart of Latgale, then Ludza is the soul of Latgale,’ he said in his introduction and then paused. ‘The Latgalians are a very special people. Their language is special and their culture is special. Even if oppressed, even if poor, Latgalian folk are tough and thus have been able to resist, to stay alive, and will manage to do the same in the future.’ He ended his brief speech by solemnly crying: ‘God, bless Latvia! God, bless Latgale!’,<sup>5</sup> which produced an elated mood among the guests, and applause broke out in the hall, which did not quieten down for some time.

According to the latest Census, there are 164,510 Latgalian speakers in Latvia, which is 8.8 % of the total population, including non-Latvians. Most of these speakers, or 97,600, live in Latgale, thus comprising 35.5 % of the residents of the region. In the course of approximately ten years there have been various initiatives proposed by activists aiming to involve greater numbers of Latgalians in their movement, for example, by trying to ensure that Latgalian is taught in local schools or is granted official status. The most usual way of making these claims is by collecting signatures. For example, in July 2011, a signature collection campaign was held for Latgalian to be treated as a regional language, using the public online initiative platform *ManaBalss.lv* (‘MyVoice.lv’), created to involve Latvia’s inhabitants in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the proposal was supported by only 1868 residents and thus failed to reach the 10,000 votes needed for it to be examined in Parliament. The activists have also been attempting to substantiate this demand by providing data showing that nearly 60% of the inhabitants of the region are of the opinion that Latgalian should be taught in local schools as an optional subject and that 35% of the Latgale population support its use in local state institutions.<sup>6</sup> Otherwise there have been no surveys carried out in the region regarding the official status of Latgalian.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘God, bless Latvia!’ is the first line of the national anthem. Ziediņš said it in the Latgalian language.

<sup>6</sup> This survey, entitled ‘Research on the Ethnolinguistic Situation of Latgale’, covered 74 territorial units (parishes, cities) in Latgale and polled 9,134 respondents. It was carried out by six researchers from the Rēzekne Higher Education Institution and the University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy, in the course of 2006-2009.

In fact, most of the non-activist Latgalians I have spoken to – students, teachers, the unemployed, pensioners, unskilled workers and civil servants – had not heard of the activists' political demands, and some of them expressed surprise in learning about them. They did acknowledge that the preservation of Latgalian culture and language is personally important to them, but they were against any initiatives imposing the acquisition of Latgalian upon Latgalians, Latvians or Russians, emphasizing that learning Latgalian should definitely be a matter of free choice. Such responses once again reaffirm the suggestion that the activists are focused on Latgalianness to be included within the dominant Latvian national imagination, an objective that is also manifest in their chosen methods. The majority of their activities had been carried out in Riga and addressed to Parliament, the government and Latvian society outside the region. In Latgale the activists do not organize information campaigns, pickets, meetings, distributions of newsletters, open conferences or any other activities to gain support and achieve wider regional political mobilization.<sup>7</sup>

## **Discussion**

By emphasizing a distinct, separate identity grounded in a common culture, history and territorial attachment, Latgalian activists are imagining a community that falls entirely within the definition of 'nations without states' (Guibernau 2003: 4). These nations happen to remain at the centre of international political, social and theoretical debates, as they are constantly refreshed by the regionally encompassed nationalist movements pursuing activities across Europe. Being situated in the context of the Baltic States, the Latgalian movement coincides with other regionally rooted nationalistic movements that emerged upon the re-establishment of independent Estonia and Lithuania, yet which were regarded as a challenge to these new democracies. For example, several thousand political activists in the Lithuanian ethnographic-historical region of Samogitia have been claiming that Samogitians are a distinct ethnic group not belonging to the Lithuanian nation due to their different history, language, customs and culture (Kalnius 2007, Mažeikis 2006). Along similar

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<sup>7</sup> Most of those Latgalian activists who have run for the Parliamentary elections have not managed to collect a sufficient number of votes within the Latgale constituency to enter Parliament. Interestingly, the 'Latgalian Parliament', which aims to function as an umbrella organization for Latgalian patriots, does not make information about its regular meetings or its plans concerning its struggle for Latgalian rights public.

lines – that is, by emphasizing a territorially determined history, language, culture but also religion (Orthodox instead of Protestant) – a Seto community is being imagined in the border zone between Estonia and Russia (Kuutma et al. 2012). All three movements – Seto, Samogitian and Latgalian – resemble each other in their respective regional activists' political aspirations for administratively and culturally (and also linguistically) autonomous territories for their respective communities. In none of the three Baltic States do local administrative divisions correspond to the boundaries of the historical-cultural regions, unlike the situation in other member states of the European Union that are facing relentless regional political activism.

In the cases of Scotland, Flanders and Catalonia, secessionist movements are taking place in territories that have already been granted administrative autonomy in matters of economy, culture, education and social policy. Yet there are other aspects of Catalan, Flemish and Scottish nationalisms that are also characteristic of Latgalian activism, thus binding it to a wider theoretical framework of 'sub-state nationalism' (Lluch 2011, Guibernau 2003). In all of these cases the activism is a manifestation of resistance to the central state and/or 'majority nation' due to perceived injustices and limitations imposed upon the region and its communities. However, while Catalan, Flemish and Scottish nationalists are seeking to overcome constraints on progress with economic and social prosperity, Latgalian activists are fighting the practices of Latvian nationalism, which they see as discriminating against their language and culture.

These quests for self-determination are evoked by raising national sentiments among community members and by stressing a distinct cultural identity for the people historically inhabiting a particular territory (Guibernau 2003). For example, the representatives of the Samogitian movement introduced special passports that acknowledge their holders' regional affiliation. The demand that a Samogitian nationality be officially recognized by the Lithuanian state remains on activists' political agenda. Likewise Seto activists are aiming to have Setos granted the status of a national minority in Estonia (Runnel 2002). Even though Latgalian activism is aimed at strengthening regional affiliation among Latgalians and it is directed against the state and Latvians, it is not being pursued to achieve Latgalian self-determination. On the contrary, by invigorating a separate territorial community, Latgalian activists are aspiring to have Latgalian culture and language included in the dominant

nationalism in a way that would make Latgalian equal to Latvians within the imagination of the Latvian nation. It can therefore be argued that Latgalian activism is an atypical case of sub-state nationalism.

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