

Ethnic Structure and Minority Rights in the interwar and post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia

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1. Introduction

The Baltic region plays the role of a special macro-region on our continent: it constitutes a bridge, however sometimes a wall and fortress between Northern, Eastern and Central Europe. For hundreds of years this peculiar geostrategic position has been determining the everyday life of the area's inhabitants, thus one of the oldest and most typical "geopolitical buffer zones" as well as "ethnic contact zones" are located here. During the 19th-20th centuries an almost unexampled mix of ethnic groups lived in this area; little wonder that managing minorities was a serious challenge for the small independent Baltic countries during the interwar period and it is one of the most serious challenges in the post-Soviet Baltics – first and foremost in Estonia and Latvia – as well.

The study seeks the answer when and how the ethnic structures and the minority policies evolved in the Baltic States – particularly in Estonia and Latvia – during the first and second periods of independence. Which are the most important lessons to be learned for the Central European minority policies?

2. Ethnic structure and minority rights in interwar Estonia and Latvia

At the turn of the 19-20th century within the boundary of subsequent Estonia 91% of the population defined Estonian as their mother tongue, while in the case of Latvia this ratio was 68% and in Lithuania only 61% (Figure 1). The most numerous minorities in the Baltic region were the Jews (ca. 497,000), Russians (398,000), Poles (325,000), Germans (271,000) and Belarusians (126,000). The Baltic nations gained their independence from the Russian Empire in the wake of World War I. Although they declared their sovereignty in 1918, it was only recognized by the Bolshevik Russia in 1920. The interwar Baltic republics were often referred to as "limitrophe countries" and – in a French term – they were the part of the "cordon sanitaire". Nevertheless the boundaries of the interwar Baltic republics differed from the current ones, thus by analyzing ethnic composition and minority rights we have to take into consideration the interwar state borders. Under the Tartu and Riga peace treaty with Soviet Russia in 1920 two small, predominantly Russian-populated regions became incorporated into Estonia (Petseri and Prinarova), and one (Abrene) into Latvia (Figure 2-3). (The geopolitical state of the Lithuanian Republic was more complicated, since the southernmost Baltic country was at quasi enmity with two of its neighboring states, Germany and Poland. The root of hostility bore a relation to two multiethnic and multicultural areas: the Vilnius and the Klaipėda/Memel regions.)

In 1920 three "brand new" states emerged in Europe which were quite similar considering their size, their population number, their political, economical orientation, and they had to

find solutions for similar challenges in minority questions too. Since 1897 the ethnic composition of the region has changed significantly. By 1935 the share of Estonians increased over 88% and the ratio of Latvians reached 77% within the interwar state borders. Henceforward the most numerous national minorities remained the Russians, Germans, Jews and Poles; although in every country in different order (Figure 3). From the viewpoint of the spatial feature of the ethnic structure, first and foremost the city-countryside and the west-east dichotomy must be highlighted. Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians and Belarusians making up peasantry preferably concentrated in the countryside. On the other hand, traditionally cities were multicultural centres where the most of the Germans, Russians and Jews concentrated. The ethnic diversity of Riga, Tallinn and Kaunas, as well as of the smaller cities like Daugavpils, Ventspils, Tartu, Kuressaare etc. was everywhere significantly higher than the counties' average. The most diverse regions – in other words the Baltic-Slavic ethnic contact zone – located on the East: Petseri in Estonia, Latgale in Latvia and the Vilnius region along the border of Lithuania and Poland. Other areas were more or less ethnically homogeneous; except the Klaipėda/Memel region (Figure 4).

“When considering Baltic contributions to the construction of Europe over the past century, it is important to keep in mind the pioneering efforts by the three countries to implement non-territorial cultural autonomy for their national minorities during the period between the two world wars”. Nevertheless while theoretically each founding constitutions contained the opportunity of creating cultural autonomy, it went on to implement it in practice to various degrees, and in *the 1920s* only Estonia drafted full minorities law on this basis (Smith 2005, p. 211). However it is an unwantedly respectable fact that Estonia became the only country in the world to pass on full cultural autonomy in the interwar period.

Since the *Estonian* law of cultural autonomy established precedent, it is important to review the most essential components of the law. “§ 2, the tasks of the cultural autonomy bodies include (a) organizing and administrating own-language schools for minority nationalities, (b) taking care of other cultural tasks and institutions organized for that purpose; § 5, the autonomy body is directed by a cultural council and board elected by the minority in question; § 6, the financial basis of the autonomy bodies consists of (a) school costs paid by the state, (b) school costs paid by the local government (municipalities and cities), (c) state and local government support for implementing other cultural tasks, (d) fees collected from members of the minority, which are specified by the cultural council, but confirmed by the government of the republic as proposed by the ministries of finances and education, (e) gifts, collections, sales income and the like; § 8, minority nationalities as defined by the law are Germans, Russians, Swedes, and other minorities with at least 3,000 persons living in Estonia; § 9, the minority group includes adult citizens of Estonia who have enrolled themselves on the national register of the minority in question; § 12, belonging under the cultural autonomy of a minority does not free the members of the minority from their other civic duties” (after Alenius 2007, pp. 445-446)¹.

Nevertheless only two minority groups took advantage of cultural autonomy: the Germans and Jews. These communities were initiative and very active, thus they were able to build up the structure of their own cultural autonomy immediately after the codification. As a sign of gratitude the Jewish National Fund in Palestine presented special award, called “Golden Book Certificate” in 1927 to the Republic of Estonia which document was the first historical deed in the history of Israel (Parming 1979, p. 354). The Swedish minority – mostly fishers who lived in compact settlements on the west coast near Haapasaalu, on Vormsi and Hiiumaa islands – constituted the poorest and most isolated ethnic group. They apparently did not need autonomy; they contented themselves with the provisions of the Estonian constitution (Weiss-

¹ Riigi teataja, 31/32, 1925, pp. 153-156.

Wendt 2008, p. 99). What is more surprising: the Russian minority – which was the most significant one in Estonia – also did not make move to implement an own cultural autonomy. On the one hand they formed compact blocks in Petseri and Prinarova regions, thus according to the 1920 constitution they had the right to use Russian as a second official language of administration where their share exceeded 50%. Moreover the law of education provided teaching in the relevant language wherever the number of the pupils of a minority group was above 30 (Smith 2005, p. 224). On the other hand – according to Mikhail Kurchinskii – relative poverty, illiteracy, arrogance and low level of self-consciousness of the Russian peasants (after Weiss-Wendt 2008, pp. 99-100)², as well as the deep division within the Russian intellectual, political elite (Smith 1999, pp. 465-469) caused their passivity toward the idea of autonomy. When the unorganized Russian minority finally reached consensus and requested cultural autonomy in 1937, it was too late: the authoritarian Estonian government rejected the appeal.

Latvia never formally adopted the cultural autonomy law, even so the interwar Latvian minority rights can be recognized as relatively favorable. Actually, during the 1920s the minorities enjoyed a high degree of autonomy (Smith 2005, p. 212), although it proved to be quite unstable. The Germans of Latvia adopted many of the practices of the cultural autonomy, e.g. self-taxation on a voluntary basis. It is important to emphasize the efforts of a German politician Paul Schiemann, who was he editor of the most significant German-language daily *Rigasche Rundschau*.

During *the 1930s* ethnic relations became more strained. On the one hand, all Baltic countries succumbed to a – relatively mild – right wing authoritarian rule; in Latvia Kārlis Ulmanis, in Estonia Konstantin Päts assumed the political power in 1934. On the other hand, “*Volksgemeinschaft*” and later Nazism extended its influence amongst the Baltic Germans. In *Estonia* the authoritarian regime left the minority legislation generally intact. The cultural autonomy never formally abolished and the minority groups continued to enjoy advantages. Estonia probably did not want to lose its international prestige and did not want to jeopardize the strategic connections with Germany for the sake of the Baltic-German minority issue (Weiss-Wendt 2008, p. 101).

In *Latvia* the position of the national minorities got worse, and their de-facto autonomy was markedly curtailed. An evident sign of this process was the effort to “Latvianise” the educational system (Lacombe 1997, Smith 2005). The new legislation relegated the minority representatives to a purely advisory role within the ministry of education. Furthermore the Ministry of the Interior’s tried to find a solution how to combat the perceived threat from the minority schools within the system of democracy and minority rights guaranteed by law. An interesting attempt was e.g. the free lunch program in elementary schools (Purs 2002). The indirect aim of these actions could also be the quickening of assimilation, which – according to the census in 1935 – was relatively successful: “about 50,000 former non-Latvians became Latvians by assimilation, most of them in Eastern Latvia” (Mežs 1994, p. 20). It is difficult to determine whether it was a spontaneous or rather a controlled process; nevertheless the total population count of the minorities was definitely higher than shown by the statistics. In the era of the Ulmanis regime aspects related to family and workplace could have raised difficulties to provide reliable data (Rauch & Misiunas & Taagepera 1994, p. 59). The “statistical assimilation” was supported, among others, by the fact that the children born in ethnically mixed families – one of the parents being Latvian – were automatically termed Latvian in the course of the 1935 census (Zvidriņš & Vanovska 1992, p. 28). In fact, many people having a multiple identity in the Baltic-Slavic contact zone chose to belong to the Latvian nation for different reasons.

² “Von einer russischen Kulturselbstverwaltung in Estland;” “Die Lage: Estland;” Mikhail Kurchinskii, “Kulturautonomie und die russische Minderheit in Estland,” *Nation und Staat* 2 (1928-9), 642-3, 716-17, 775-84.

Summing up and complementing the above detailed processes, the attitude of the interwar Baltic States toward minority rights and the circumstances of the birth of cultural autonomy might be surveyed by taking into consideration the different historical, geographical, demographical, social and political factors. The list – after Alenius (2007, pp. 446-458) but modified by the authors of this article – is the following:

1. Proportion and spatial distribution of the minorities,
2. General relation between the majority and the minorities: historical and contemporary discontents; the minorities' attitude towards the new state (e.g. separatism or loyalty); the majority's attitude towards the idea of minority rights,
3. Activity and persistence in advancing cultural autonomy,
4. Individual supporters,
5. Role of external pressure,
6. Other factors.

In the authors' opinion among these six factors – from the point of view of the development of minority rights and the cultural autonomy – the first, second and third had capital importance. The number and share of the minorities is always crucial (Coakley 1994, p. 301-303); the correlation between a more homogeneous ethnic composition and a tolerant way of minority policy seems unequivocal. A classical example is even Estonia; during the 1920s it was one of the ethnically most homogeneous states in Central and Eastern Europe. The minorities, including the most active ethnic groups: the Germans and Jews did not form compact blocks anywhere, except the predominantly Russian-populated Petseri and Abrene districts. Moreover the general relation between the Estonians and the minorities improved significantly (in the case of Latvia it was probably a less apparent phenomenon). During the interwar period the minorities proved to be loyal toward the new states; the idea of separatism was not popular at all either in Estonia, or in Latvia. (Even an opposite tendency occurred in Lithuania where the relations between the Lithuanian majority and the Polish minority were consistently bad, and the aims of the Poles varied from the cultural autonomy to incorporation into Poland. Consequently, they were generally seen as the greatest threat to Lithuanian independence – Krivickas 1975, p. 82). Furthermore, the surprising maturity of the Estonian political elite was also respectable. They understood the needs of minorities – even in the case of their former 'oppressor groups': the Germans and Russians too –, which derived from their general worldview, ideological heritage and their own negative experiences about minority status. However we must not forget that the Estonians' and Latvians' revenge – called land reform, which fundamentally undermined the economic power and social status of the Baltic Germans – helped them to forget the old traumas quickly (Alenius 2007, pp. 449-454). However, in the late 1930s trenchant changes took place in the Baltic German identity; the new generation conceived 'Volksgemeinschaft' as an "organic entity within which the interests of the individual were firmly subordinate to those of collective". In other words, loyalty to the German Volk or German Reich in some ways "superseded all other considerations, including any semblance of loyalty to the local 'Staatgemeinschaft'," (Smith 2005, p. 221). The activity and persistence of the Baltic Germans in advancing cultural autonomy was also crucial, thus the others – first of all the Jews – could practically 'move in a rut'. Both countries had some memorable individual supporters of liberal minority rights; first and foremost it is important to elevate Paul Schiemann in Latvia and Mikhail Kurchinskii in Estonia. Although the League of Nations as well as Germany pressurized the Baltic States, the role of external pressure was on the whole less significant is this question. In Estonia another factor also helped the establishment of cultural autonomy, namely the attempted takeover by the Estonian communists in 1924. After this unsuccessful event the Estonian government tried to "strengthen their position by gathering all non-communist groups behind them" (Alenius 2007, pp. 450-452).

3. The Soviet occupation period

The Baltic States have lost approximately 20% of their population in World War II which value is among the highest ones in Europe (Rauch & Misiunas & Taagepera 1994, p. 219). Hundreds of thousands of residents, mostly Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians but also Jews and Russians, were either deported or killed by Nazis or Communists and another thousands sought refuge in the West. During this time the Germans (about 130,000 people) and Jews (about 254,000 people) of the Baltic region virtually disappeared from the map of Europe; in 1939 the former ones were "repatriated" to Germany, the latter ones were almost exterminated by the Nazi invaders.

The Soviet Union occupied the Baltic States in 1944 and the republics could escape again from the "clamping arms" of Moscow around the collapse of the empire in 1991. These 47 years thanks to the permanent immigration flows changed the ethnic composition of the Baltic region again. According to the calculations between 1945 and 1955 net migration in the Baltics reached almost one million people (Zvidriņš 1994, p. 367). Most of the migrants were made up of "young Russian guest workers, who were looking for easy money-making and travelling throughout the whole Soviet Union, arrived only for short-term residence" (Rauch & Misiunas & Taagepera 1994, p. 332). The relatively developed economy and infrastructure of the Estonian and Latvian SSR was an attractive target for Russians who looked for higher wages, more secure livelihoods, but – as for Moscow the "stabilizing" of the Baltic region had strategic importance – in this case many experts talk about intentional "Russification" and not about a spontaneous migration process. The development of the heavy industry became the indirect means of these efforts which created serious labour shortage in the cities. According to the official view of Moscow it was appropriate and also necessary to make up the deficits from other areas of the Soviet Union. Moreover the natural increase among immigrants – due to the younger age structure – was much higher than among the Latvians or Estonians. Russians differed in their social and professional characteristics as well: they were overrepresented in industry and significantly underrepresented in agriculture (Volkov 1996, pp. 130-136). It is a shocking fact that while the number of Estonians as well as Latvians decreased after World War II (this is primarily due to the war, the deportations and the low fertility rate) (Dreifelds 1990) the Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians in 1989 have been more than five and a half times as many as in 1935. All in all, by 1989 only 62% of the population of Soviet Estonia and only 52% of Soviet Latvia belonged to the eponymous ethnic groups (Figure 1).

(Compared with the Soviet standard, the volume of immigration to Lithuania remained quite modest during the communist era. Due to the relatively high fertility rate and natural increase of the Lithuanians, the shortage in labour force was an almost unknown notion in the southernmost Baltic republic. Moreover during the 1950s – when the mass immigration excited to the highest pitch elsewhere – life in Lithuania might have seemed unsafe for the potential immigrants because of the partisan war. Thus the ration of the Lithuanians did not decrease after the WWII at all, even increased.)

4. Ethnic Structure and Minority Rights in post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the political transformation everything reversed that previously characterized the Soviet period. The natural increase was followed by natural decrease, mass immigration was replaced by emigration and the Russians have become from one moment to another a minority group within three reborn, westward-looking countries. Between 1989 and 2009 the population of the Baltic States decreased by about 956,200 due to

two components: the natural decrease and the negative international migration balance. Estonians “lost” ca. 40,000 Latvians 50,000, Lithuanians 114,000 citizens after the political transformation. However, the titular nationalities only contributed by one-fifth to the decrease of the total population in contrast to the Eastern Slavs, whose share to the loss was 78% (-589,000 Russian, -76,000 Belarusian, -80,000 Ukrainian).

At the beginning of the 1990s the industrial crisis and unemployment affected the Slavic dominated areas most sensitively, but due to the unstable political milieu e.g. the initially strict citizenship regulations (see below) many have returned to their mother country (Győri 2006). The level of emigration reached the peak in 1992, when the former Soviet military forces and their family members left the region (Vītolīņš & Zvidriņš 2002, p. 27). The situation has changed by today: in parallel with the stabilization of the economy and the improvement of living standards the volume of emigration of Russian-speakers has declined. Secondly, the Russian Federation is becoming less attractive from the point of view of potential emigrants, whose attention is thus turning towards Western Europe, irrespective of their ethnicity. Obviously the reversal of the demographic patterns has changed the ethnic composition of the Baltic States again (Figure 1).

The Eastern Slavs remaining in Estonia and Latvia (ca. 389,000 and 766,000 people) form typical urban communities. In Estonia 87% of them live in the sixteen biggest cities/towns with population number above 8 thousand; the same ratio is only 48% in the case of Estonians. All in all, the ethnic composition of the urban settlements is the following: 53% Estonian, 45% Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian. Out of the most significant cities Narva, Sillamäe, Kohtla-Järve, Jõhvi in Ida-Viru county, Maardu and Paldiski in Harju county are predominantly Russian-populated settlements. In Latvia 70% of the Eastern Slavs concentrate in the seven biggest cities, where they constitute a 49% relative majority of the population in contrast with the Latvians’ 43%. In 1989 the Latvians lived in a minority status in their own capital, Riga as well as in the six regional centers: Ventspils, Liepāja, Jūrmala, Jelgava, Rēzekne and Daugavpils. A similar situation emerged also in Latgale where before the restoration of independence out of the 420,000 people slightly over one-third identified themselves as Latvians. The ethnically most heterogeneous districts – Rēzeknes, Ludzas, Daugavpils and Krāslavas – were situated in Latgale. The rural municipalities in both countries are ethnically more or less homogeneous units with clear Estonian and Latvian majority (Figure 5).

The “journey” of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from former Soviet republics towards European integration is disturbed by economic, political, social as well as ethnic problems, which first of all bear a relation to the Slavic minorities; remnants of a lost empire, the Soviet Union. Since the Baltic region is still one of the ethnically most heterogeneous areas of Europe, the minority policies of these countries – first and foremost of Estonia and Latvia – are located constantly in the lime-light and often criticized by not only Russia, the EU and the NGOs, but scholars as well. During the 1990s, Estonia and Latvia were “usually dropped from the list of nations which have made considerable progress as consolidated democracies” (Parrott 1997, p. 6). Popular labels of the minority policy of the aforementioned countries were (and in some cases still are) e.g. ‘hyper national state’ (Dimitrevich 1994), ‘ethno-nationalism’ (Tishkov 1995, pp. 55-57), ‘ethnocracy’ (Poulsen 1994; Melvin 1995), ‘constitutional nationalism’ (Chinn & Kaiser 1996, p. 6), ‘ethnic democracy’ (Kempe & van Wim 1999; Rose 1997; Smith 1998; Järve 2000 etc.) – and finally the latest expression became the most often used term. The curiosity in this story is the following: Estonia and Latvia theoretically and also practically put into force the same (or very similar) minority laws, than in the interwar period. In this chapter the authors seek the answer, how is it possible to expound this paradox?

Compared to the interwar period the monitoring of human and minority rights became a 'multiplayer game', wherein several domestic and international factors play significant role (Rechel 2009, p. 5). The attitude of the recent Baltic States toward minority rights might be surveyed by taking into consideration the following factors again.

According to the authors' strong opinion the proportion of the minorities remained one of the most important factors. Thus the fact that by 1989 the Estonians and Latvians almost became minorities in their own fatherlands, basically determined these states' further attitude towards minority rights. "With such a large proportion of Russians and Russian-speakers, the first post-Soviet governments were keen to strengthen the states' independence, as well as to overcome the consequences of Soviet policies of Russification" (Galbreath & Muižnieks 2009, p. 137). The spatial characteristic of the ethnic composition of the Baltic States did not give a handle for fear of separatism or for possibility of the establishment of autonomy on a territorial basis. In the Baltic region compact ethnic blocks traditionally did not exist and during the Soviet era also did not come into existence. The ethnic groups in Estonia and Latvia always lived/live in a mixed pattern; the most typical feature of their distribution was/is the spatial 'dispersion'. The only exception is Ida-Viru county in Northeast Estonia. Although "the centre-periphery dichotomy in Estonia referred to the preconditions for peripheral mobilization", the secessionist or autonomist attempt had not become an aim for the Russian community in the culturally marginal, economically depressed Ida-Viru county. (The main reasons of the failure of an organized resistance might be the following. 1: widespread political apathy and passivity in this region; 2: limited scope of the non-citizens' political rights – e.g. they are unable to hold national office or form political parties; 3: interests of the Russian parties who "tried to appeal to as wide a constituency as possible to maximize their vote, that was to the whole national arena" – Berg 2001, pp. 22-24).

The general relation between the political elite of the majority and the minorities (primarily the Russian-speakers) is often referred to simply bad or unsatisfactory. In order to understand the evolution of minority rights in post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia – which is loaded by serious inconsistencies in itself – it is important to bring into focus the root of the debate. In 1989-1990 the Estonian and Latvian nationalist movements declared themselves as independent states, illegally occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940 and later in 1944. They maintained that the Baltic countries had to treat the entire mass immigration of Eastern Slavs during the Soviet era as an illegal settler population. Thus the "legal restorationism" became the dominant political doctrine in both republics (they actually reinstated the pre-war constitution and laws), and according to this idea, only pre-WWII citizens and their descendants could automatically get *citizenship*. In the meantime the Soviet passports lapsed; ca. quarter of the population of Estonia and Latvia became suddenly stateless "non-citizen" who had e.g. no right to vote during the parliamentary elections (Pettai & Kallas 2009). On the contrary, in accordance with the Russians' viewpoint the settlers of the Soviet era did not cross international borders at all, since the Baltic republics were parts of a single state, the Soviet Union. Furthermore these people have been living and working in the Baltics for 30-40 years, thus the denial of their Estonian or Latvian citizenship is a wrong-headed and unfair decision (Lagzi 2008, p. 10). The issue of citizenship proved to be the most sensitive question during the 1990s and actually is true nowadays as well.

Of course we can find positive elements in the development of minority policy as well. In the new *Estonian* constitution (1992) many fundamental minority rights were defined. E.g. § 12, no one shall be discriminated against on the basis of nationality, race, colour, sex, language, origin, religion, political ... or on other grounds; § 49, everyone has the right to preserve his or her national identity; § 50, national minorities have the right, in the interests of national culture, to establish self-governing agencies under conditions and pursuant to procedure provided by the National Minorities Cultural Autonomy Act; § 51. ... in localities

where at least one-half of the permanent residents belong to a national minority, everyone has the right to also receive responses from state agencies, local governments, and their officials in the language of the national minority; § 156, in elections for local government councils, persons who reside permanently in the territory of the local government ... have the right to vote (Constitution of the Republic of Estonia). In short: Estonia restored its interwar policy of cultural autonomy for minorities. In spite of this fact the Russian minority as well as the international public opinion regarded § 50 as an insincere article, because the law defined only those ethnically distinct people, who were citizens of Estonia as minorities. Thus only citizens could take part in cultural autonomy; 60% of the Russians, 71% of the Ukrainians, 77% of the Belarusians could not at all (Pettai & Kallas 2009, pp. 108-109). No wonder that neither Russians nor other minority politicians were elected to the first Estonian legislature. However in 1993 the Estonian parliament framed the language and other requirements for the naturalization process of the non-citizens and after an amendment it guaranteed residence permits to almost all non-citizens. Partly due to the uncertain political, economical situation in Estonia, partly due to Russia's simplified procedure to obtain citizenship, officially ca. 85,000 (according to estimates 153,000)³ people emigrated from the country in the first half of the 1990s and ca. 100,000 people applied for Russian citizenship (Németh & Kopári 2012). After the regained independence *Latvian* politicians also instituted a restorationist policy of nation-building with similar consequences. Likewise in the Northern "neighborhood", the total population of Latvia also decreased dramatically (by at least 405,000) during the last two decades; nearly half of this may be associated with the emigration of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians.

However not only the citizenship law, but also the language and education laws gave rise to debates. The language law (1995) revealed Estonian the only one official language and the rest became 'foreign languages'. In the municipalities where the ratio of the minorities exceeds 50%, the language of administration might be the minority language too; but the official language of communication with the state institutions remained solely Estonian. According to an amendment in 1998 a high level of Estonian knowledge is necessary for all deputies not only at national, but even at a local level. The first education law, adopted in 1993 was relatively mild. Estonian as foreign language, Estonian literature and history became compulsory subjects for the children of minority schools. However in 2007 an education reform came into force in Estonia which declared, that in higher classes (10-12.) of the Russian schools 60% of the subject must be taught in Estonian (Lagzi 2008, p. 12). According to the quite restrictive Latvian language law (2000) the Latvian is the only official language – as the main tool of integration policy – and any other language is qualified as 'foreign language' (except the Livonian). The use of the official language is obligatory in all states and local governmental institutions (also in private institutions in certain cases) and the same rule applies among others to posters', traffic signs' etc. inscriptions in public places. In 2012 a referendum refused the Eastern Slavic minorities' demand for the Russian as a second official language. The new education law passed in 1998 with primarily Latvian language curriculum an all state-funded schools. In 2004 the Latvian parliament decided about educational reforms in order to speed up the pace of integration: they increased the share of Latvian subjects at the expense of the subjects in minority language (Lagzi 2008, p. 33). No wonder that from the viewpoint of the Russian minority the Estonian and Latvian 'integration programme' generally rather looks like an 'assimilationist programme'.

The role of the factor of external pressure increased significantly compared to the interwar period; in other words, the international community played a significant role in Estonian and

³ The discrepancy has been caused by insufficient accounting of emigration during the period in the 1990s and by departure of the soldiers and prisoners of the former Soviet Union which do not include these data. (2000. Aasta Rahva Ja Eluruumide Loendus I. – Statistikaamet. pp. 13-14)

Latvian minority policy before and after the EU enlargement. After the rather ‘groping’ monitoring work of the OSCE during the 1990s, the EU and the European Council was able to put real pressure on the Baltic States to “rescind a number of measures clearly in violation of international laws” (Pettai & Kallas 2009, p. 114,). Conditionality was a critical part of this process; on the one hand, the threat of non-membership in EU and NATO, on the other hand, the use of financial instruments as the tool to influence policy in these countries (Dorodnova 2003, Morris 2003 etc.). In practice it meant the support of the EU of language trainings for non-citizens and in the integration programmes. In the case of Estonia the EU played in fact an indicator role in the ethno-political situation and made the Estonian integration programme (which as an endogenous process has already started in 1997) ‘irreversible’. However opinions are divided on the extent of success of this impact. Gelazis writes about a “great success” (Gelazis 2003, p. 69), but e.g. Hughes argues: “it is difficult to reconcile claims of successful international intervention with an outcome which left some 700,000 persons stateless” (Hughes 2005, p. 752).

Although the status of minorities of Estonia and Latvia has changed little since they became EU candidates and later members, some improvements unequivocally occurred. Since 1998 e.g. children who were born after the restored independence and their parents are non-citizens, but have been living in Estonia or Latvia for at least 5 years, could automatically get the citizenship. The lengths of the procedure decreased significantly and after the millennium other facilitations were introduced; e.g. refund of the costs of the language course after a successful citizenship exam etc. In 2001 Estonia liberalized the law on parliamentary and municipality elections: the knowledge of the Estonian language for the candidates is not a compulsory requirement anymore. The Latvian electorate approved the liberalizing changes in 1998; e.g. they rescinded the naturalization timetable called ‘windows system’, facilitated somewhat the citizenship regulations, established an Integration Ministry and a social integration project, which “encouraged acquisition of Latvian as a second language among minorities”. The number of the new citizens increased significantly twice during the last 20 years: at first after the abolition of the windows system and for the second time after 2004 when Latvia became the member of the EU (Galbreath & Muižnieks 2009, p. 141). Since 2007 their number have been stagnating on a lower level, due to first and foremost the opening of the EU labour market for non-citizens.

While the role played by the EU and other Western international organizations has been positive and “geared to the achievement of long-term goals in conformity with democracy and the interests of civil society”, the ‘compatriots policy’ of the Russian Federation could have – according to some political theorists – a “delaying effect on the process of ethnic integration”, moreover it also clashes at certain points with the Latvian constitutional provisions (Lerhis & Kudors & Indāns 2008, pp. 80-82).

Several other international or domestic factors could be mentioned in influence on internal affairs and minority policy of Estonia and Latvia; e.g. party constellations, state capacity etc. (see in detail Rechel 2009). The authors of this article would like to emphasize now a relatively rarely mentioned factor, namely the demographic factor. It is a commonly known fact that Estonians and Latvians are ones of the smallest ethnic groups in the world with own states. The trying historical experiences and the small population size could in itself result in a defensive attitude. If these components couple with such unfavorable demographic trends (low fertility rate, natural decrease - rapid depopulation), the ‘nightmare’ of extinction could be really threatening and could automatically ‘switch on’ the self-preservation reflex. By certain logic it is understandable (although not necessarily acceptable) to some degree the Estonians’ and Latvians’ persist in e.g. the restrictive language laws.

5. Similarities and differences in Central Europe

If we would like to look for parallel cases in the Central European multiethnic space, we could try to draw on the analogies of the minority situation in the Baltics. However the situation of the Baltic countries is so special, that Western democracies do not even possess adequate models to handle the Russian issue in Estonia and Latvia (Kymlicka 1998) and, on the other hand we cannot consider their experiences in solving ethnic problems universally applicable for the Central European countries. As the short outlook will show, behind every analogy there are key differences, thus the Baltic States are quite unique from this aspect.

Slowly vanishing, multiethnic spaces can still be found, predominantly on the semi-peripheries of the Carpathian Basin. The southern periphery of the Carpathian Basin bears some common characteristics with the Baltics: the degree of multi-ethnicity was very similar in the early 20th century, Serbs, Germans, Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, etc. and a notable Jewish population lived together (or side-by-side) in a mid-sized empire, enjoying different types and degrees of autonomies. The treaties following World War I turned the situation upside-down, the area today known as Vojvodina joined a Serbian-dominated south-Slavic monarchy (The Kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenes), the previously favored groups became minorities, and South Slavs became the constituent nations. From a non-Serb point of view, the new monarchy, later Yugoslavia represented a framework to establish Greater Serbia (Hastings 1997, pp.142-144.). The government immediately used the opportunities and began ethnic engineering on the newly acquired territories ('agrarian colonization'), resettled large masses from predominantly Serbian-speaking areas into Vojvodina, and performed a land reform discriminating primarily Germans and Hungarians. By the end of World War II Jews and Germans virtually disappeared. Ideologies and circumstances changed, but the political will to achieve Serbian majority remained during the Tito-led Yugoslavia. Masses from the rural areas continued to flow towards the northern province, the structural developments of the economy accelerated the assimilation of minorities through urbanization (Kocsis & Kicosev 2006). From the Serbian point of view, Vojvodina represents a successful integration, a dominant ethnic ratio was achieved, almost all traditional minority groups decreased in numbers, have worse vital statistics, etc. In other areas of the Yugoslav space the Serbian policies failed, after 1991 all conflicts were lost, the Serbian ethnic territory shrunk in the west and the south, and expanded in the north, virtually it experienced a northward shift (Léphaft 2011/b, p.115.). Vojvodina was just one of the areas of great importance. Like the previous South Slavic monarchy, the second (Tito) Yugoslavia was Serbian-dominated on the level of administration and military, therefore the Serbian presence was continuously strengthened on new levels. The breakup of Yugoslavia resulted in the withdrawal of Serbs from both urban and rural areas in all republics outside Serbia⁴ and Kosovo (Végh 2011, pp.115-145.), the military and bureaucratic apparatus totally disappeared.

Although the actors are different, the sizes of areas incomparable, there is a weak connection between Soviet Russification and the pursuance of Greater Serbia and Serbian politics in the 20th century. Both systems used resettlement as a tool for territorial acquisition⁵, the legal circumstances of annexation were questionable, the bureaucratic and military predominance was similar, and (although behind different and continuously changing ideological framework) the political will to incorporate the area under a singular, centralized political entity and expand influence of the 'first among equals' was clearly perceptible. If we continue to explore the policies of past political actors in the area, we'll recognize the same pattern. Approaches, techniques and intensity varied, but the abovementioned tools also

⁴ In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina the situation is somewhat different, as a result of the bloody conflict an internal homogenization took place (Reményi 2011, pp. 197-200.).

⁵ The Belgrade-based government used agrarian population, Moscow used industrial masses due to ideologic, thus economic differences of the target areas

characterized the 18-19th century Hungarian, and previously the Habsburg administration. Therefore the minority policies of the Serbian party also reflect defiance towards the previous 'oppressors' as it is typical for states that gained independence, transformed or acquired new territories from 'opponents'. The foreign relations are also crucial. For most of the 20th century the Serbian party was among the winners of conflicts and had the opportunity to independently create and exercise minority policies. Beginning with the last decade of the 20th century, the status of Serbia generally changed on both regional and global level. Despite policies changed and the minority rights improved in the past 12 years, with the current course problems like underrepresentation in state institutions (Léphaft 2011/a, p.24.), minority protection, etc. will remain a hardship. Whether the contemporary Serbian state is in position maintain or foster discriminative policies on its road to its problematic EU integration, the near future will show.

6. Summary

Unlike the traditional ethnic minorities in Central Europe, most persons belonging to these groups in Estonia and Latvia are relatively newcomers, having arrived during the Soviet era. Thus this situation (at least on the social level) can be more easily compared to that of France, Germany and the UK with their recent immigrants, than with its Central and East European counterparts, like e.g. Romania or Serbia (Galbreath & Muižnieks 2009, p. 140). As the previous chapter outlined, in the case of Vojvodina, a similar multiethnic area to that of the Baltics, was transformed into an almost homogenous one under 90 years of assimilative regime. Estonia and Latvia are unique from many aspects, therefore their experiences in solving minority issues could be very hard to compare.

Although it could seem outdated, the Estonian model still represents a golden standard in many aspects. It is somewhat ironic, that the state which was a pioneer in applying cultural autonomy, due to unfortunate historical circumstances would later struggle with large masses of undesired immigrants, and policies easing the newcomers' situation would only born as a response to external pressure. Despite all of the difficulties of the investigation we can formulate a universal lesson for the Central European reality. The moral of the Estonian model of cultural autonomy during the interwar period is that open minded politics on state level, successful self-organization on the levels of communities, and balanced international climate could result in exceptional solutions to minority questions.

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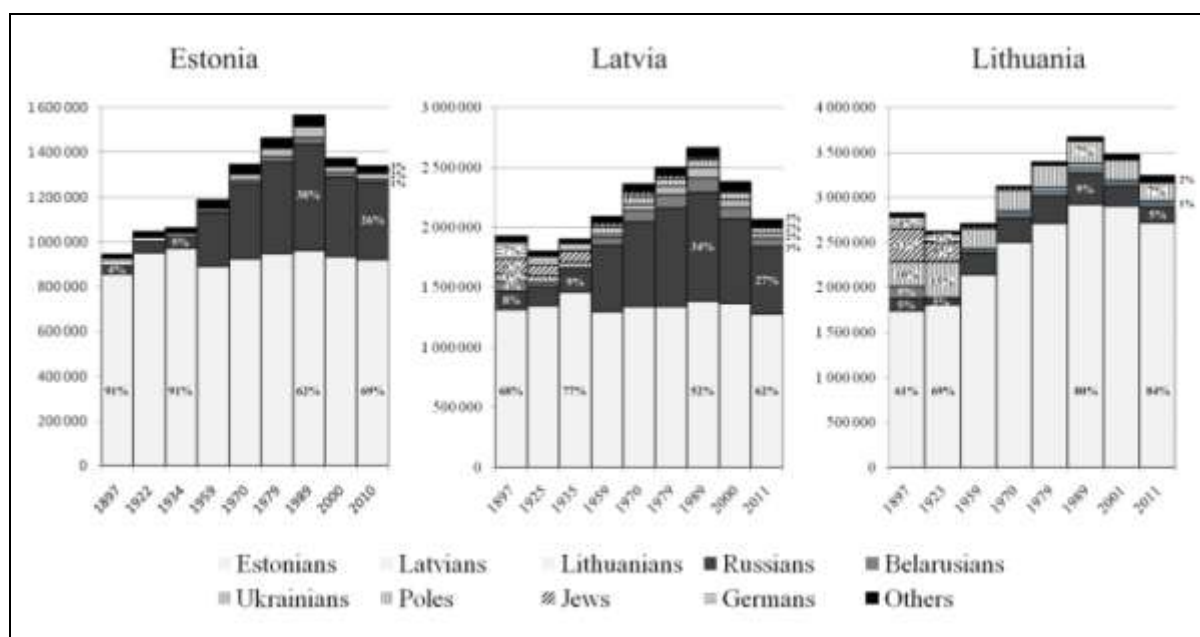


Figure 1. Change of the ethnic composition of the Baltic States within the current state borders.
 Edited by the authors



Figure 2-3. The Baltic States and their ethnic composition in the interwar period.

1: Prinarova, 2: Petseri, 3: Abrene region, 4: Part of Lithuania according to the Moscow treaty, but occupied by Poland in 1920, 5: current state border of Lithuania, 6: Klaipėda/Memel region.

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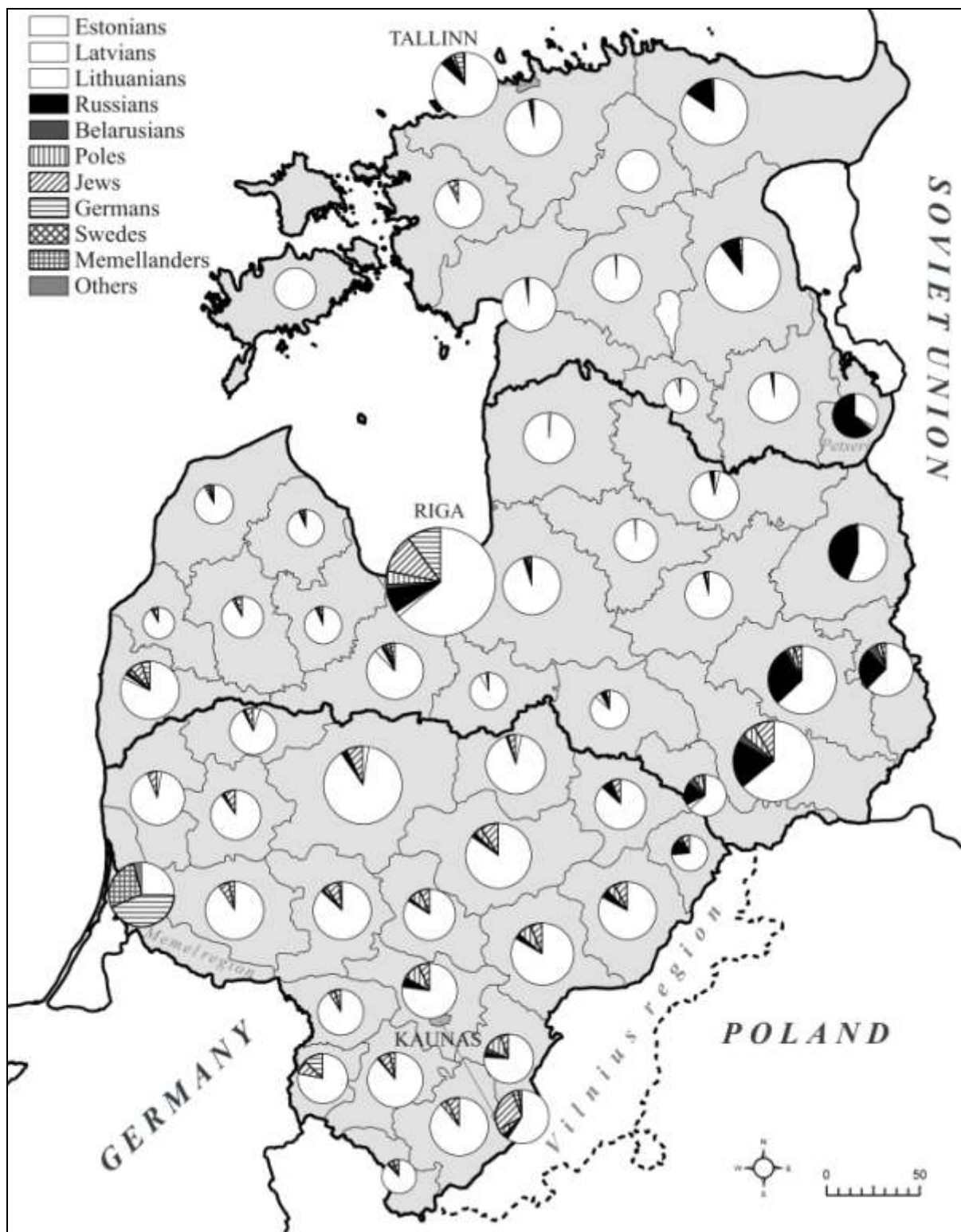


Figure 4. Ethnic structure of the Estonia (1934), Latvia (1935) and Lithuania (1923) by counties.
 Edited by the authors

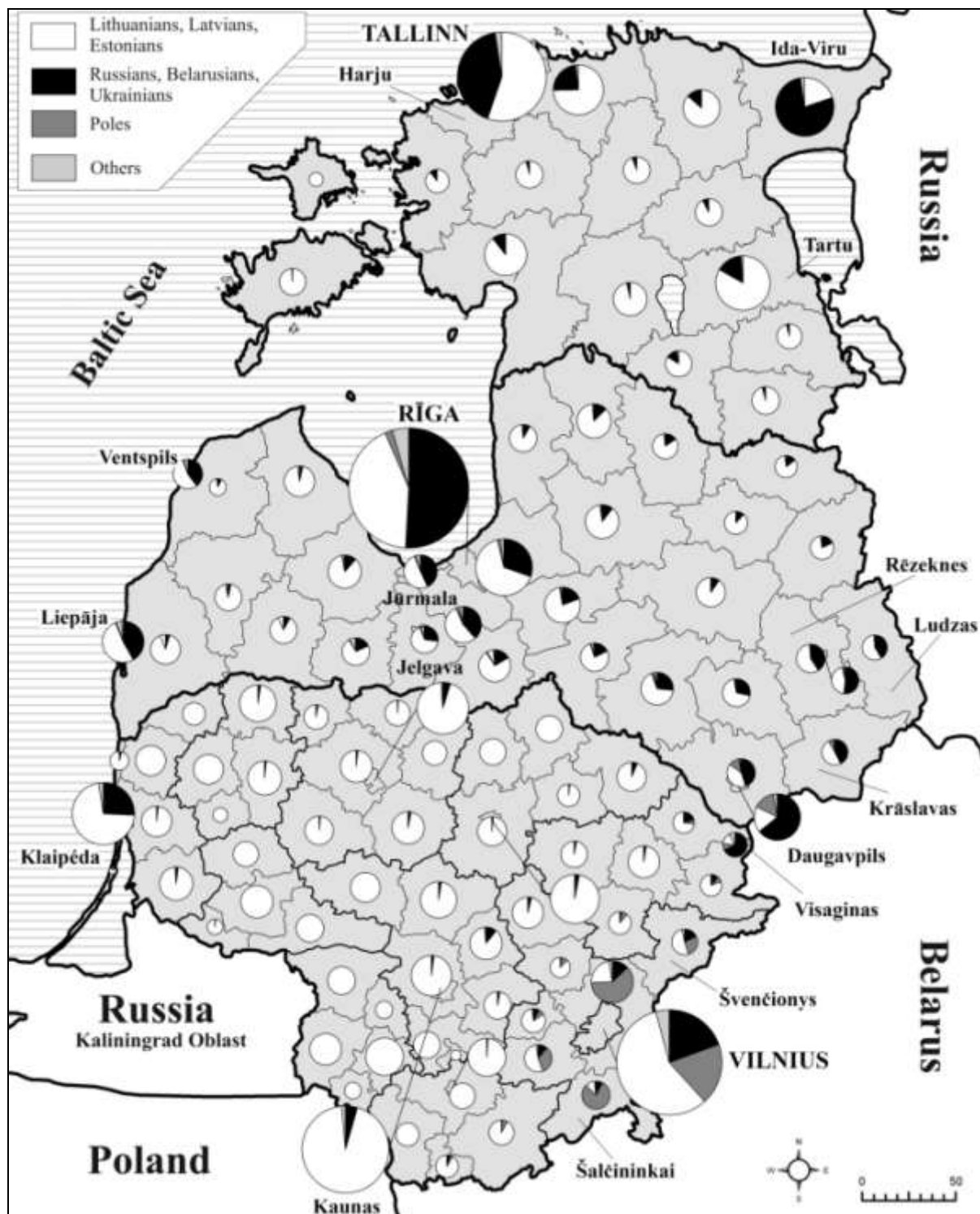


Figure 5. Ethnic structure of the Estonia, Latvia (2007) and Lithuania (2001) by districts
Németh, Á. 2009