

Cultural identity for Baltic Russian-Speakers: A survey-based study*

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Introduction

“The Russian-speaking population” or “Russian-speakers” refer to those living outside of the current Russian Federation whose primary language is Russian, regardless of ethnicity. This population includes not only Russians, but also Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, and representatives of other ethnicities. In the former USSR, a region that was inhabited by more than 100 ethnicities, Russian was the primary language for interethnic communication. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a significant number of Russian-speakers remained in former Soviet countries, including the Baltic states.

According to data from national censuses collected for every Baltic state, the ethnic and linguistic compositions of each state is as follows: Estonia – Estonians 69.7%, Russians 25.2% / Estonian-speaking population 68.5%, Russian-speakers 29.6%; Latvia – Latvians 62.0%, Russians 26.9% / Latvian-speakers 62.1%, Russian-speakers 37.2%; Lithuania – Lithuanians 84.2%, Poles 6.6%, Russians 5.8%, Lithuanian-speakers 84.8%, Russian-speakers 7.1%, Polish-speakers 5.2%. As we see, the size of the Russian-speaking population is greater than that of ethnic Russians. Russian-speakers mostly immigrated to Baltic states as part of a spreading labor force during the Soviet era. Every Baltic state has cities with a high percentage of Russian-speakers, such as Estonia’s Narva, Latvia’s Daugavpils, and Lithuania’s Visaginas. Our interviews were conducted in these cities, as well. Ethnic Russians in these cities comprise 87.6 % (2017), 49.4% (2017), and 52.1 % (2011) of the total population, respectively.

Since Baltic states regained their independence in 1991 and agendas for nationalization have been established, they have been implementing a strict language policy to represent their multi-ethnic society based on the national language. What the Russian-speaking population

may have experienced as a result of such policies is described as a “double cataclysm,” since they had to sort through republican language laws in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union just two years later in 1991 (Laitin 1998, 85-104), creating a double post-Soviet identity crisis (Kolstø 1999, 610). Identifying as “Russian-speaking” emerged at the beginning of the 1990s and replaced the Soviet identity as an alternative to assimilating as titulars and mobilizing as Russians (Laitin 1998, 263-299). Faced by the need to know the local state language, ethnic Russians, who are the core of this Russian-speaking population, began to form their ethnic identity based on the Russian language (Apine and Volkovs 2007, 131). Other Russian-speaking non-Russians and non-titular ethnicities also bound themselves to this linguistic identity. In Estonia and Latvia, the most important issue after the regaining of independence has been citizenship, which was not granted to those who migrated to Estonia and Latvia after June 1940, when the Soviet occupation started. Thus, they remained non-citizens without the right to vote and with limited access to certain professions.

Our previous research has focused on the linguistic identity of Baltic Russian-speakers. It shows that the designation of “Russian-speaker,” which is often presented in local media in both the local language and Russian, tends to have negative connotations for informants in Latvia compared to those in Estonia and Lithuania. This negative evaluation is observed among those informants with a low proficiency in the state language and those who do not feel integrated in society (Horiguchi 2019a). Positive attitudes toward state languages vary among informants in that some still object to being compelled to learn it, others regard the state language positively as a symbol of loyalty to the state and a means of integration into that society (Horiguchi 2019b).

This paper investigates cultural identity of Baltic Russian-speakers as the linguistic minority, having been estranged from Russians in Russia and formed through interaction with local ethnic majorities from a discursive perspective. How they have formed these ethnic identities and mentalities and how they perceive Russian culture, as well as the local majority’s culture, are

of particular interest.

Methodology

The survey was conducted face-to-face in Russian with 81 Russian-speakers in Estonia (Tallinn, Tartu, Narva), Latvia (Riga, Daugavpils), and Lithuania (Vilnius, Visaginas) in 2017 and 2018. The informants (28 males and 53 females) were born between the 1920s and 80s. A semi-structured interview lasted for one to two hours for one or two informants. The total duration of interviews was 92.5 hours. The survey consisted of questions about cultural and sociolinguistic issues regarding both Soviet and post-Soviet periods. This paper examines informants' free-style statements about their mentality and culture as Russian-speakers compared to those of Russians in Russia and local titular nations (Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians). Further, figures in parentheses after each statement represent the informant's birth year and sex. For example, (Tallinn 75F) is a female informant born in 1975 living in Tallinn.

Ethnic identity – Who am I?

Of the 81 informants, 56 (69.1%) define themselves as Russians and 13 (15.1%) claim other ethnicities (Ukrainians, Poles, Belarussians, Jews). Twelve informants (14.8%) did not define their ethnicity due to having parents of different ethnicities, on the one hand, or a weak feeling of ethnic identity that mostly result from Russification during the Soviet period, on the other. In these cases, Russian-speaking linguistic identity is more explicit than ethnic identity.

The issue of nationality is very complicated for me. I am half-Finnish and half-Ukrainian. I was born in Estonia; my citizenship is Estonian. And my language is Russian; I think in Russian. (Tallinn, 75F)

I used to speak Polish when I was a kid, but now my language is Russian. My mother and son are more Polish than me. I don't feel myself as Polish, nor Russian or Latvian. I am kind of gruel. (Daugavpils 61F)

My father was Azerbaijani, my mother was Estonian. Diplomatically, I would say I'm Estonian, but I think in Russian and my culture is Russian, so I would say I am Russian too, though I don't have a drop of Russian blood. (Narva 54M)

I would say I am a Pole. My mother language is Russian, but my traditional festivals, cuisine, and inner culture are rather Polish. I separate language and culture. (Vilnius 73F)

A Russian female informant in Tartu, originally from Estonia's Narva, a city bordering Russia, defines herself as a Russian-speaking Estonian. Her statement shows the identity crisis experienced by people in Narva, where the main question was which country to bind oneself to – Estonia or Russia. By this designation, she prioritized her civic identity as a citizen of Estonia, and her ethnic and linguistic identities are secondary.

In Narva in the '90s, we started to talk about which society you belong to, how to draw a boundary, and to decide whether you are Russian or Estonian. My identity formation took me ten years, and now I am proud of being a Russian-speaking Estonian. (Tartu 80F)

When defining their ethnic identity, some informants designated themselves as *kosmopolit*, or 'cosmopolitan' (5 informants); *chelovek mira* or a 'worldly person' (3 informants); *evropeets/evropejskij chelovek* or 'European' (2 informants); *internatsionalist* or 'internationalist' (1 informant), and *chelovek*, meaning 'a man' (1 informant). These abstract, but positive, designations are used by ethnic Russians too, which allow them to situate themselves in more than one culture.

I consider myself a European person. I don't fully belong to Russian culture, nor I do feel attached to Latvian culture. (Riga 82M)

Though the greater part of informants were ethnic Russians, they tended to feel that they were different from both local majorities and Russians in Russia. Two informants described this feeling by citing the title of the Soviet movie, *Svoj sredi chuzhikh, chuzhoj sredi svoix*, or "A

friend among foes; a foe among friends.” Indeed in Russia, they tend to be considered as representatives of the local ethnic majority.

In Russia, they consider me as Estonian, not as Russian, but in Estonia, they treat me as Russian, not as Estonian. (Tallinn 79M)

During my Soviet military service, they used to call me Latvian and didn't treat me as Russian. The same happened to Russians from Lithuania. (Riga 58M)

I am Russian, or Estonian Russian, but in Russia, they said, “you are not Russian, you don't look like a real Russian,” and called me Balt (pribalt). (Narva 66M)

When defining their ethnicity, informants immediately emphasize differences from Russians in Russia, thus drawing clear boundaries between Baltic Russians and Russians in Russia. They are conscious that they don't share the same mentality as Russians in Russia.

I am Russian (russkaja), but not Russian from Russia (rossijanka). (Tartu 79F)

I am Russian, but I'd like to abstract myself from the world of Russia. (Riga 80F)

Localized mentality

The mentality of Russian-speakers in Baltic countries is formed by comparing themselves with Russians in Russia and those in majority nations. Informants, when describing their mentality, use the same adjectives as those used for Russians in Russia or the Baltics in both positive and negative comparisons: “We are more...” and “We are less...”

Our mentality is somewhere between Russians in Russia and Latvians. (Riga 45F)

Informants describe the local majority nation by the adjectives *spokojnyj* (calm) *zderzhannyj* (moderate), *zamknutyj* (reserved), *zakrytyj* (closed), *uravnoveshennyj* (even-tempered), *skromnyj* (humble), *pragmatichnyj* (pragmatic). Some informants felt that Baltic majority nations tended to be considerate of others and respect the time and space of others, in other words, not intervening in other's personal space.

Fourteen informants across all three countries referred to the Baltic qualities of

individualism and introversion, mentioning the word *khutor*. In European Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic countries, *khutor* can represent a settlement inhabited by several smaller farms under the direction of one owner, but it usually refers to an autonomous individual farm (Melvin 2003, 36). *Khutor* thus symbolizes individualism in opposition to collectivism, as practiced by bigger villages or *kolkhoz*, and has become one of the primary stereotypes used to describe the Baltic mentality.

Khutor is a house that stands alone. A Lithuanian is interested only in what happens in his house and its surroundings. He is ready to fight for it, but he will not fight for his neighbor's house. Russian society is collective; all come to visit each other and share their worries. (Vilnius 54M)

The Soviets united Estonian khutors into kolkhozes, which didn't please Estonians at all. Estonian mentality consists in that they want to fence themselves with their khutor; or live only with their families. Estonians joke amongst themselves that the main theme of Estonian literature is, "who will get his khutor?" One of the reasons why Estonians can't forgive Russians for Sovietism is that they were compelled to be united under the kolkhoz. In Russian villages, houses were located closer to each other. Once a fire broke out at your neighbor's house, it was a disaster for the whole village. If inhabitants don't help put out a fire, the whole village burns out. In Estonia, if you get out from under your khutor, all you see is only your gardens, fields, and no neighbors. (Tartu 84M)

Across the three countries, informants referred to the culture of *svat* (brother-in-law) that represents a sort of nepotism and is practiced by Baltic nations.

If they hire someone for work, they hire the uncle, brother, or brother-in-law of their khutor. Even when a poor worker, he can stay there because he is from the family. And, they tend not to hire persons of different ethnicities. (Riga 61F)

Contrasting emotionality, which is a primary characteristic of Russians, informants describe

Baltic nations in terms of rationality. An informant adapts the Russian saying, *Sem' raz otmer, odin raz otrezh* ("Measure 7 times, cut once' in an Estonian manner") – *Dvadtsat' sem' raz otmer', odin raz otrezh* ("Measure 27 times, cut once") (Tallinn 52M).

One informant comments on differences in Russian and Estonian academic fields. According to him, teachers in Russia are prone to self-admiration and self-authority while Russian-speaking teachers in Estonia behave much more humbly; it is not customary to talk about themselves, especially their own successes.

A teacher in Russia may say to his student, "I came back from the conference, you know, [and] they discussed my paper for 50 minutes." It is totally impossible to hear this [said] in Tartu. If someone talks about the conference in Tartu, he will say, "You know, I attended the conference; there were various researchers and they had interesting papers." (Tartu 84M)

Informants are conscious that they differ from Russians living in Russia in several aspects. Inspired by the local Baltic nation, they get embarrassed when they encounter openness and closeness from Russians in Russia.

For us it is totally impossible that when you get in a trolley bus and ask someone a question, the whole bus starts to answer you. Even if I know the answer, I won't say it. It's not my conversation; it's not my business. (Riga 45F)

A business partner in Russia once wrote an e-mail to my colleague named Ilona, addressing her with the diminutive form, 'Ilonochka.' We all were embarrassed over this much too familiar attitude. (Riga 83F)

Some informants have negative impressions of Russians from Russia that they have encountered abroad and do not want to be identified with them. Several informants commented on Russian tourists in Baltic states and abroad whose behavior they did not appreciate.

My first culture shock abroad was related to Russian tourists in the Czech Republic. A Russian lady was very rude and arrogant with the local staff, thinking that they should

know Russian. Since then, I have not spoken Russian there. (Riga 80F)

At international sport competitions, Russian spectators stand out the most. They always want to prove that “we don’t surrender,” “we won’t die,” or “we are the best.”

They always fight, they are aggressive. (Tartu 74M)

Even if informants feel attached to Russia, they have experienced discomfort in Russia due to everyday problems or the behavior of some people. No informant stated that they would like to live in Russia. This shows that they feel comfortable in Baltic countries where life is more organized and the level of lifestyle is higher than in Russia. Many informants note that compared to Moscow, Saint Petersburg is closer to them both geographically and culturally due to its “Europeanness.”

I always come back from Russia stressed. I wouldn’t like to stay even at a relative’s, since you have to register your stay. I stayed at a hotel to avoid this problem. So, you go to register and face such a queue! You are from the Baltics and line up properly, while they all rush to the reception, thinking they will be first. (Riga 51F)

Overall, Baltic Russian-speakers feel mentally closer to their local Baltic nation than Russians in Russia. They also point out a feeling of cultural superiority over Russians living in Russia and confirm an affinity with Western European values, as has been demonstrated in past research (Fein 2005, 343).

Cultural identity

Informants tended to name Russian literature as the core of Russian culture. They also see Russian culture in classic music, theatre, cinema, ballet, and the Russian language. Some informants understood peoples’ behaviors and traditional values through Russian culture, which can be regarded as stereotypical.

For me, Russian culture is a mixture of high culture, such as ballet, and simple daily culture. If we beautifully talk about Russian culture, it is ballet, Malevich, etc. One

poor aspect of Russian culture is that there are more Russian-speaking people who are socially removed. It's also Russian culture, it's also its aspect. (Riga 86F)

Commenting on the Russian language, informants said that they have been told while in Russia, or by Russians visiting from Russia, that they have an accent. Though not all informants are able to clearly demonstrate how their form of Russian language differ from that in Russia, they specify differences in intonation, expression, and borrowings from the local language. Interestingly, informants tend to beautify their own language for its conservatism, archaism, and politeness and criticize the Russian language as spoken in Russia for its abundance of neologisms, jargon, and borrowed words.

I am sure the Russian language here conserves the form used in the '70s or '80s. Though my mother language is Russian, and I graduated from a Russian school, I get Russian newspapers and see some words which I don't understand. (Riga 86F)

For many of us, Russian here is a dead language. We use it, but don't develop it. Maybe in Russia they invent new words, but here we use only words we already know. However, the language we speak is much cleaner than the Russian language in Russia. When I hear a Russian from Russia, sometimes I'm surprised at how incorrectly he speaks. (Tartu 74M)

Though Russian has no legal enforcement, it remains a popular foreign language in schools, after English. The labor market welcomes knowledge of Russian, though not all Estonians, Latvians, or Lithuanians of younger generations have command of it. Meanwhile, today's Russian youth has a strong command of state languages. In recent years, those with diverse linguistic profiles have gained an advantage in the competitive labor market. Many informants point out the linguistic advantage of Russian-speaking younger generations as compared to youth from the local majority population, whose proficiency in Russian has fallen. Russian is seen as a foreign language in the Baltics more than a native one.

Most Russian-speakers associate the local majority culture with their own, especially regarding the Song and Dance celebration. This is not only considered a musical event, but is a

social phenomenon, especially in Estonia and Latvia, where it has an almost 150-year tradition. For the local majority, this event today symbolizes national unity. However, one informant, who was a four-time participant during the Soviet period, regrets that after regaining independence, the event has become less accessible for the minority. For this informant, the feeling of cultural integration with Estonian culture was stronger during Soviet leadership than currently, though for the local majority, the Song and Dance celebration during that time took place at the cost of a pure national spirit.

During the Soviet era, it was multinational and multilingual. We sang songs in Estonian, Russian, Georgian... but now all songs are only sung in Estonian. Once the Celebration is nationwide, it should be open to everyone. If there were more non-Estonian participants, we would feel we belonged to the country more. (Narva 57M)

According to informants, Baltic people are more attached to nature and more likely to spend their free time in nature, pay more attention to ecology, and show refinement in gardening.

Latvians are very good at caring for flowers and they know how to please the eye. When you walk along the houses, you can tell whether the house belongs to a Latvian or a Russian. (Riga 55F)

For many informants, Baltic people were said to still practice pagan culture: for example, by celebrating summer and winter solstices, as well as other seasonal rituals. Whether Russian-speakers celebrated the summer solstice and how important it was to them depended on the individual; for example, some informants assign no significance to celebrating the solstice since it represents a pagan tradition. One informant pointed out the introversion of Baltic people in relation to opening their culture to others.

When I was a child, I knew little about Latvian culture. It was only around 1995 that I got to know that Latvians celebrate the summer solstice. They didn't let others into their culture. (Riga 80F)

This informant stated that many Russians lost aspects of their traditional culture during the

Soviet era, and seeing Latvians practicing their own traditions inspires her to promote a similar attitude in her family.

Some informants note Russian culture's supremacy over that of the majority nation that seems less attractive to them. However, many informants evaluate efforts made by the local ethnic majority overall as conserving their own culture.

Estonians are a small nation. They have less history and culture. (Tallinn 70F)

It is difficult to name in Latvian culture even 3-4 great persons who were alive 400 years ago. (Riga 55M)

When I wanted to teach Lithuanian to my kid, I found that they don't have cartoons in Lithuanian. I have to admit that Lithuanian culture doesn't match Russian culture. (Visaginas 82F)

Though Estonia is a small country, there are many prominent, world-wide conductors and composers. (Tartu 62M)

Maybe it has contributed less to the world overall, but Lithuanian culture is fantastic. (Vilnius 73F)

Responding to a question about the existence of culture, which functions to unite all people living in a country regardless of ethnicity, informants listed singers, actors, and athletes as those most representing the country internationally, in addition to domestic national festivals and international cultural and sports events in which the representatives take part. At the same time, many informants say that although national culture remains based on the local ethnic majority, the boundary between this local culture and Russian culture has become faded.

Conclusions

This survey shows that Russian-speakers in Baltic states have formed a localized mentality by differentiating themselves from Russians in Russia, under the influence of the local ethnic majority. One of the stereotypes about culture held by Russian-speakers from all three Baltic

nations is the concept of *khutor*, which typifies Baltic people as introverted, and this in turn influences the mentality of these Russian-speakers. As a practical aspect of culture, the fusion of Baltic and Russian cultures is not distinctly observed. Though these three countries do not have identical political, ethnic, or linguistic situations, in terms of the ethnic and cultural identities of Russian-speakers, no clear national tendencies were found. Further, whether cultural identity interacted with one's linguistic identity, particularly in regards to proficiency in the state language, is a crucial key to integrating oneself with local society in Baltic states.

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URL

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