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July 2020

# *Not so different as one thinks*

Attitudes of Latvians and the Russian minority  
in Latvia on threat perceptions



**FRIEDRICH  
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in Europe



## Introduction

In the context of dramatic challenges for the European security architecture, including new emerging cold and hot conflicts, an annexation and intensifying cyber-attacks, the “Security Radar 2019 – Wake-up call for Europe!” analysis aims to shed light on the public opinion in Europe regarding security issues. The survey was developed by the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe and conducted by Ipsos Global. It examines the opinions and attitudes of the respondents in five dimensions:

- Perception of the current threat situation
- Trust and attitudes towards institutions
- Attitudes towards foreign and security policy
- Attitudes towards national identity
- Prospects for the development of security policy in Europe

Seven countries were chosen to participate in this representative public opinion poll. These are France and Germany, two founding members of the European Union; Latvia and Poland who joined the EU in 2004; Serbia, which has full candidate status for EU membership since 2013; Ukraine, which signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU in 2016; and lastly, Russia.

Latvia was chosen because the country symbolizes the ups and downs of European history in an extraordinary manner. It was once part of Sweden, then of the Russian empire, became independent after WW I, was invaded by the Soviet army in 1940, occupied by German troops in 1941 and again incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1944/45. Finally, Latvia and its people gained independence in 1991.

But the turbulent times of Latvia did not stop with the newly gained sovereignty of the country. Since it was once part of the Soviet Union, Latvia was a welcomed destination of residence for many non-Latvians. As a result, Latvians now make up for about 60% of the population, while ethnic Russians account for over a quarter of it. They thus constitute the country’s largest minority. Other minorities are Belarussians, Poles or Ukrainians.

Given the tensions in and around Ukraine, there is widespread fear in the region that Russia might again carry out an annexation like that of Crimea. Gaining understanding of the different attitudes regarding these fears of Latvians and the Russian minority in Latvia might be of great importance to policy-makers. The survey analysed the opinions of Latvians in general and the different perceptions of security and foreign policy between different ethnicities.

There is a general perception that a certain segregation between Russian minorities in Latvia and Latvians persists. Among other things, previous studies pointed out that this segregation might be explained through certain social conduct such as marriage among minority members<sup>1</sup> and different language preferences (Russian minorities prefer speaking Russian over Latvian)<sup>2</sup>. Some older statistics even claim that the Russian minority is oriented explicitly towards reproducing as a social and ethnic group.<sup>3</sup> In addition, since the Russian minorities in Latvia are widely immersed in Russian media, some sources notice that they tend to be more in line with common Russian opinions.<sup>4</sup>

Naturally the question arises, whether these differences in behaviour and potential differences in mindset generate marked differences of opinion on foreign and security policy issues between Latvians and the Russian minority in Latvia. In the following paragraphs we will address this matter.

The results of this study are based on the representative public opinion poll we conducted in Latvia<sup>5</sup>.

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1 Ilga Apine Et. al., Requirements of National Minorities of Latvia to Guarantee the Preservation of Ethnic Identity in Respect of the Framework Convention of the Council of Europe on the Protection of National Minorities, Council of Europe Information Office, 2005, p. 9.

2 Dr Ammon Cheskin, Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States: A Framework for Analysis, Central and East European Studies, University of Glasgow, pp. 4.  
URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17449057.2014.933051#U8EwofldWSO> (last accessed 3 April 2020).

3 Ilga Apine Et. al., Requirements of National Minorities of Latvia to Guarantee the Preservation of Ethnic Identity in Respect of the Framework Convention of the Council of Europe on the Protection of National Minorities, Council of Europe Information Office, 2005, p. 9.

4 Ieva Birka, Integration and Sense of Belonging – Case Study Latvia, Bertelsmann Transformation Index, Country Report Latvia, 2018, p. 10.

5 For the methodology see: Security Radar 2019, p. 7-8



In order to determine the social group of the polled, we asked them the following question: “Please tell me your nationality.” The composition of the sample is very similar to the official population statistic,<sup>6 7</sup> (see table 1).

Sample (n=1,000)	Latvia (Total population=2,095,549)
704 (70.4%) Latvians	1,263,894 (60.3%) Latvians
214 (21.4%) Russians	538,361 (25.7%) Russians
82 (8.2%) other nationalities/ no answer	293,294 (13.9%) other nationalities

Table 1

One must keep in mind that the above-mentioned question can also evoke an answer which refers to subjective affiliation. However, the goal of the poll is to gain insights into the different attitudes of social groups, rather than administratively defined status groups. Regarding the research aim, this limitation is therefore negligible.

The main differences in the attitudes concerning foreign and security policies can be found in the perception of Russia (see 2.), of the Latvian military, as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (see 3.). Despite all differences, we still find central commonalities in the attitudes of both social groups (see 4.) on which policy-makers could build on (see 5.).

## 2. Perception of Russia

Both social groups fundamentally disagree in their perception of Russia regarding security issues. In the eyes of the Latvian population, the Russian Federation poses a threat to Latvia and Europe. When asked whether there is a country which poses a threat to Latvia, **52.3%** of Latvians identified one or more countries. **92.6%** of them pointed out Russia as a threat. However, only **19.6%** of the Russian minority could name a country which, in their opinion, poses a threat to Latvia. **54.8%** of them identified the U.S.A. and only **16.7%** the Russian Federation.

This difference in attitudes becomes even more ap-

parent when the polled got asked directly, whether Russia is a security threat to Europe. **64.7%** of Latvians somewhat or strongly agree with this statement. Conversely, **85.8%** of the Russian minority somewhat or strongly disagrees with this statement (see figure 1).

Furthermore, **59.2%** of Latvians, but only **22.2%** of the Russian minority somewhat or strongly agree with the statement that tensions between Russia and the West could lead to new wars in Europe. Correspondingly, **77.8%** of Latvians but only **44.6%** of the Russian minority somewhat or strongly agree that incompatible values and mindsets influence the relationship between Russia and many European states.

However, there are many areas in which opinions do not diverge and where we can observe a kind of consensus. When it comes to the relationship between Russia and many European states, both social groups conclude that it is characterized by a lack of cooperation. **82.7%** of Latvians and **85.3%** of the Russian minority somewhat or strongly agree with this statement. A bit less obvious, but still remarkable is the attitude towards a stronger collaboration with Russia: **50.9%** of Latvians and **87.1%** of the Russian minority somewhat or strongly agree that Latvia should collaborate more with Russia than before. These findings tend to correlate with previously conducted studies in which most Latvian residents believe that “good relations with Russia are needed.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Distribution of Latvian population by nationality, Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia [in Latvian], 2019.  
URL: [https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISVN\\_Latvija\\_pec\\_TTB\\_VPD.pdf](https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISVN_Latvija_pec_TTB_VPD.pdf) (last accessed 25 April 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Population of Latvia in municipalities, Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia [in Latvian], 2019.  
URL: [https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISPV\\_Pasvaldibas\\_iedzivotaju\\_skaitis.pdf](https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/backup/ISPV_Pasvaldibas_iedzivotaju_skaitis.pdf) (last accessed 25 April 2019)

<sup>8</sup> Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2019, p. 116.  
URL: <http://www.liia.lv/en/publications/latvian-foreign-and-security-policy-yearbook-2019-770> (last accessed 3 May 2020).



## Russia is a threat to security in Europe

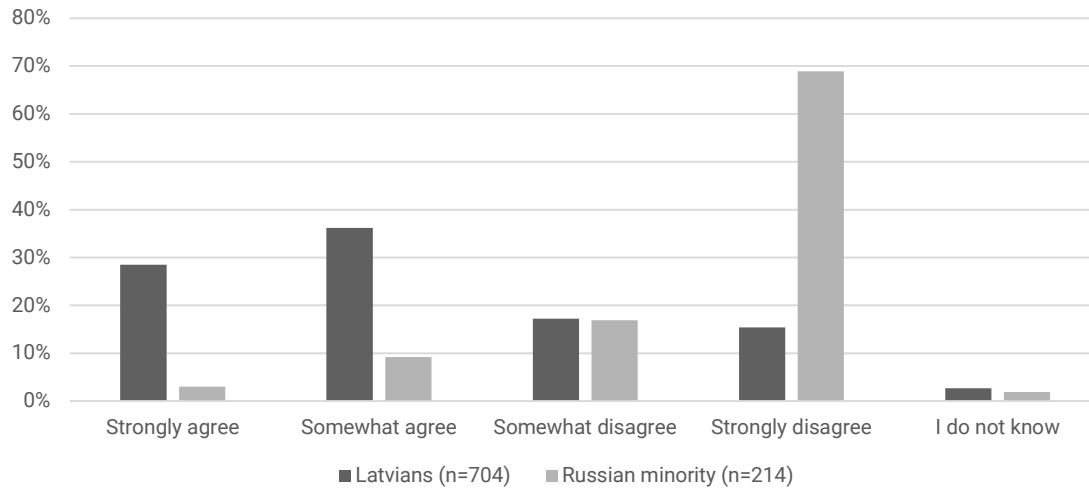


Figure 1

When it comes to the conflict in Ukraine, the opinions of both groups diverge again. **70.0%** of the Russian population somewhat or strongly disagrees with the statement that Crimea was illegally annexed by Russia, while **71.2%** of Latvians somewhat or strongly agree with this statement. Furthermore, only **9.0%** of the Russian minority somewhat or strongly agrees with a widening of sanctions the sanctions against Russia, but **46.3%** of the Latvians do.

### 3. Perception of NATO and the Latvian military

Subsequently, **73.1%** of the Russian minority are somewhat or strongly opposed to the proposal that Ukraine should become a member of NATO. However, **59.7%** of Latvians somewhat or strongly agree with this proposition. Therefore, it is not surprising that **48.1%** of Latvians and **65.4%** of the Russian minority interpret a potential approximation of NATO towards the Russian border as a threat to security in Europe.

NATO is widely known by **91.9%** of the members of the Russian minority and **96.2%** of the Latvians. On a scale from 0 to 10 the Russian minority rates the influence of NATO on average with 6.27, the Latvians slightly higher with 7.55. **72.7%** of the Latvians who are familiar with NATO state, that this organi-

sation should play a bigger role in the future. Only **36.5%** of the Russian minority agree with this statement (see figure 2).

Accordingly, it is not surprising that both social groups have different opinions regarding their attitudes towards the Latvian military. **80.0%** of Latvians trust or completely trust this institution. In addition, **54.6%** are in favour of increasing military spending. However, within the Russian minority, only **47.8%** trust or completely trust the military and only **18.3%** are in favour of increasing military spending.

### 4. Commonalities in attitudes

Despite the pronounced differences concerning the perception of NATO, the Russian as well as the Latvian military, we can find some central commonalities in the attitudes of the two groups.

Latvians and the Russian minority are equally concerned on a personal level about wars and conflicts. **68.1%** of the Russian minority and **74.7%** of Latvians are somewhat or very worried. **65.7%** of the Russian minority and **70.9%** of Latvians even expect that wars and conflicts will affect Latvia. Both population groups are also highly concerned about potential economic crises: **72.2%** of the Russian minority and **72.5%** of Latvians are somewhat or very worried.



## NATO should play a bigger role in the future

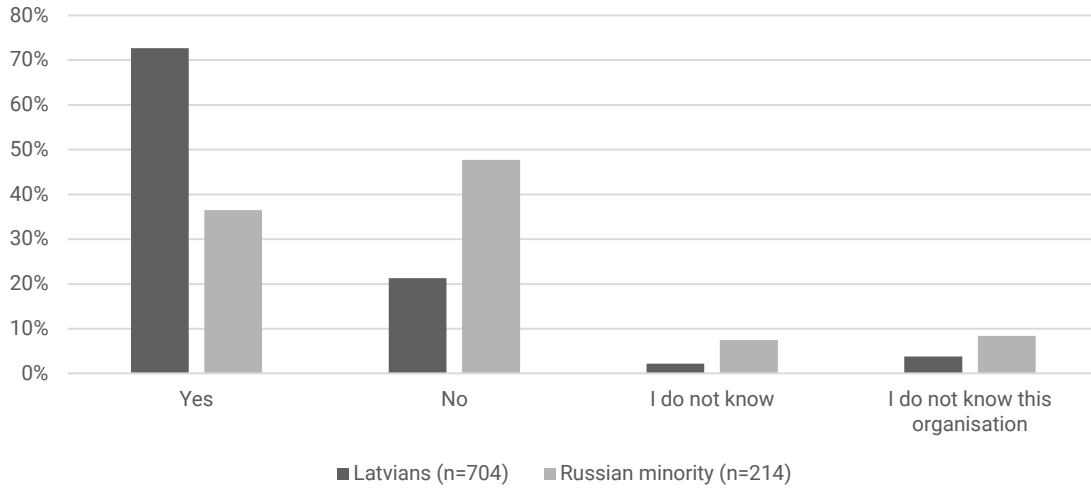


Figure 2

Unfortunately, they also coincide in the fact that they do not trust the central actor to counteract root causes of the feared phenomena. Only **32.3%** of the Russian minority and **31.9%** of Latvians fully or rather trust the Latvian government. While both population groups disagree on whether the NATO should play a bigger role in the future, both believe that the CSTO should do so. **68.5%** of the Russian minority agree with this statement as well as **64.6%** of Latvians. However, the data shows that the CSTO is largely unknown: **66.7%** of Latvians and **52.8%** of the Russian minority do not know the organisation.

But we can also find uplifting commonalities. Both social groups highly identify themselves with Europe as a so-called "Kulturkreis". **83.9%** of the Russian minority and **82.9%** of the Latvians somewhat or strongly agree with the statement that Europe has its own culture area and should grow closer together as a community (see figure 3).

In a similar way, both social groups are in favour of Latvia intensifying its collaboration with the European Union. **80.9%** of the Russian minority and **82.9%** of the Latvians somewhat or strongly agree with the statement (see figure 4).



### Europe has its own culture area and should grow closer together as a community on this basis

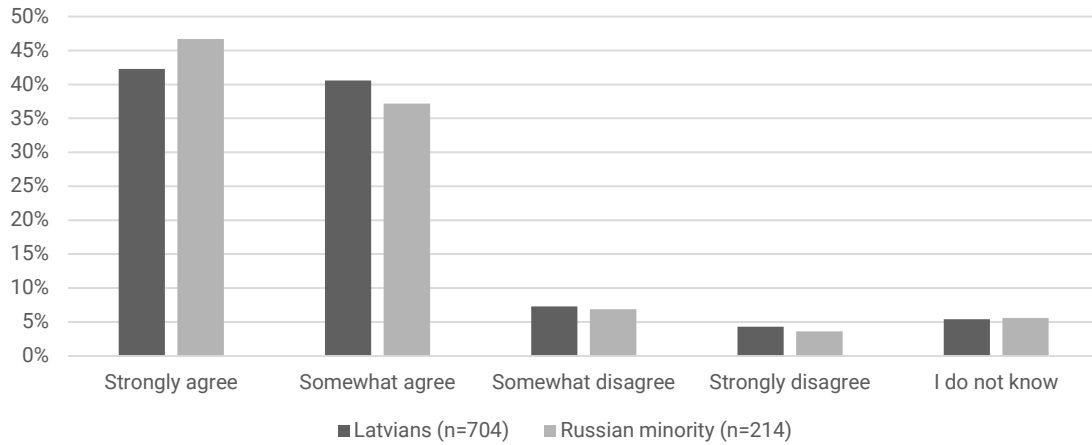


Figure 3

### Latvia should collaborate more with the European Union than before

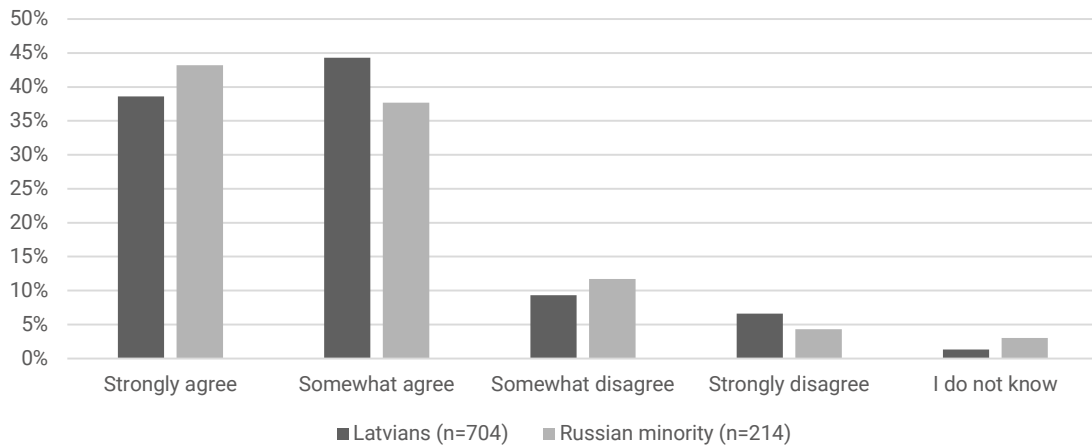


Figure 4



## **5. Conclusions**

In the general political discourse, a certain social division between the Russian minority and the Latvians is very often pointed out. However, when it comes to security policy issues, we can only partly notice this division. Although there are clearly diverging opinions in certain areas, we can observe that both sides pursue very similar interests. Our results show that both sides want to avoid war, conflicts and a negative economic development. In order to strive for these objectives, both sides embrace strengthening the economic and cultural cooperation with the European Union.

While there is a certain consensus for a rapprochement to “the West”, both social groups disagree when it comes to the future relationship with Russia. The perception of Russia and its role as a political actor varies between Latvians and the Russian minority. Differences in opinions can also be observed regarding concrete political issues such as the Ukraine crisis, as well as the role of NATO and the Latvian military. They are polarising ideas.

On the other hand, while both social groups coincide in the fact that the relationship between Russia and many European states is characterized by a lack of cooperation, there is at the same time a considerable amount of support inside both groups for intensifying the collaboration with Russia. In other words, there is a basis for détente-driven policies. Perhaps, politicians should be advised to change the current trajectory from absolute deterrence to pragmatic cooperation.

But such an endeavour can only succeed, if it is accompanied by Russian efforts. If these efforts fail to materialise, the institutionalised idea of Russia being an enemy will further govern the opinions of the Latvian population and continue to alienate them from the Russian minority. Another major hurdle to overcome is the shared distrust of both social groups towards the government. Improving the trust in the Latvian government is a key element in overcoming Latvian foreign and security challenges.

## ***FES ROCPE in Vienna***

The goal of the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (FES ROCPE) of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Vienna is to come to terms with the challenges to peace and security in Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union a quarter of a century ago. These issues should be discussed primarily with the countries of Eastern Europe – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – and with Russia, as well as with the countries of the EU and with the US. The security order of Europe, based until recently on the Helsinki Final Act (1975) and the Paris Charter (1990), is under threat. This is, among others, a result of different perceptions of the development of international relations and threats over the last 25 years, resulting in divergent interests among the various states.

For these reasons, FES ROCPE supports the revival of a peace and security dialogue and the development of new concepts in the spirit of a solution-oriented policy. The aim is to bring scholars and politicians from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US together to develop a common approach to tackle these challenges, to reduce tensions and to aim towards conflict resolution. It is our belief that organisations such as the FES have the responsibility to come up with new ideas and to integrate them into the political process in Europe.

We support the following activities:

- Regional and international meetings for developing new concepts on cooperation and peace in Europe;
- A regional network of young professionals in the field of cooperation and peace in Europe;
- Cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions: the politico-military, the economic and the human.

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**ISBN: 978-3-96250-553-0**

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