



The Russian ambassador in Riga has a new view from his office.

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Cancelling Russia

The situation for Russian speakers in Latvia following the invasion of Ukraine

by Emma Rönngren

abstract

Many who grew up speaking Russian in independent Latvia do not associate themselves with Russia or what one could call the Russian world, nor the values and aggressions carried out in Ukraine in the Russian language. A recent survey shows that the Russian speaking residents aged 18 to 34 years were more likely to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet, many Russian speakers in Latvia are experiencing an emotional crisis over Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war has securitized already divisive issues in the country, such as historical memory and access to media in one's preferred language.

KEY WORDS: Latvia, Russian speakers, Russian invasion of Ukraine

On August 25, 2022, the central obelisk of the Soviet Victory monument in Uzvaras Park, Riga, was demolished. Having caused decades of tension in Latvian society, residents could now watch in real time as the 79 meter tall obelisk fell into the pool; the demolition was livestreamed by Latvian Television. The Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders, unofficially known as the Victory Monument, was erected in 1985 to commemorate the Red Army soldiers in the liberation of Riga from Nazi Germany at the end of World War II. It featured statues of soldiers and a woman surrounding a central obelisk and was – up until August 25 – the biggest Soviet-era monument in the Baltic states. It had been the subject of tensions in Latvian society for decades, since ethnic Latvians do not regard it as a symbol of liberation but rather as a symbol of the Soviet occupation which lasted until 1991. Russian speakers usually gather by the monument each year on May 9 to celebrate the victory over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War. Over the years, the event has transformed from a day of commemoration of those who fought in the war into a bombastic celebration with military parades and fireworks, primarily used to boost nationalism and patriotism in Russia.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Latvian authorities announced that May 9 this year would be a commemorative day for the victims of the Ukraine war. Residents were further discouraged from visiting the monument as it would be seen as an act supporting Russia's war and therefore could be used by Russian propaganda to justify the war in Ukraine. The monument was cordoned off with yellow police fences and the photo exhibition "Glory to Ukraine" was set up, depicting the reality of war on stands of images from Bucha and other Ukrainian cities destroyed in the Russian invasion. Traffic and public transport were restricted and the park full of police officers. Nevertheless people went to lay flowers at the monument throughout the day and did so in a quiet manner. No major incidents were reported. What happened overnight, however, angered a great part of Latvian society as it was found out that the flowers were directly taken away by bulldozer. Footage of the operation spread quickly around social media and caused a wave of negative emotions of disrespect. The following day the situation escalated: people continued bringing new flowers to the monument and celebrated together. The celebration was no longer a memorial, but had turned to a protest event. In the evening hundreds of people gathered, displaying pro-Russian symbols and flags, and Latvian television observed that several people were aggressive and did not hide their support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Several people were arrested and the footage from the square on May 10 caused outrage among those who oppose Russia's actions and feel negatively towards the Soviet Union. The bad handling of the whole situation led to that the resignation of interior minister Marija Golubeva.

“ALL SOVIET-GLORIFYING MONUMENTS IN LATVIA MUST BE DEMOLISHED BY NOVEMBER 15 AND UP TO 300 MONUMENTS AROUND THE COUNTRY ARE SET FOR REMOVAL.”

LATER A DECISION was made to remove all Soviet monuments in Latvia, including the Victory Monument in Uzvaras Park. According to the law adopted this year in June 16, by the Saeima,¹ "On the prohibition of exhibiting objects glorifying the Soviet and Nazi regimes and their dismantling in the territory of the Republic of Latvia", all Soviet-glorifying monuments in Latvia must be demolished by November 15 and up to 300 monuments around the country are set for removal. Controversy

about the continued existence of Soviet memorials on Latvian territory has existed for years, but intensified following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Similar removals are also under way in Lithuania and Estonia.² The decision to remove the Victory monument was met with anger in Russia where the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanded compensation for the monument as well as threatening counter measures. Protests were held outside the Latvian Embassy in Moscow and a survey conducted by the research center SKDS in June 2022 showed that 70% of Russian speakers in Latvia were against the demolition.³ The Latvian Russian Union, a controversial political party with close ties to the Kremlin, tried to organize a protest on the streets, but this was not allowed. The Riga City Council and the State Security Service (VDD) regarded the suggested protest march as a possible threat to the democratic state and liable to cause divisions in society. Meanwhile an anti-Soviet monument march on May 20 entitled "Getting Rid of Soviet Heritage" was allowed and attracted around 50 000 people, which led to further frustration among the Russian-speaking minority.

THE ACTUAL TIME for the demolition was not announced officially for security reasons. The fact that Russian speakers did not protest the demolition of the monument has puzzled local experts. There are different possible interpretations according to local experts. Professor Deniss Hanovs says that there is no culture of mass protests and demonstrations in Latvia and that after the 2012 language referendum that rejected making Russian a second official language,⁴ there has been a breakdown of Russian speakers' confidence in democratic structures in Latvia: "They have gradually since lost interest in political participation as many experience that their voices are not heard".

From professor Mārtiņš Kaprāns' perspective, the war has probably also had an effect and the ideological confusion and vacuum created by the war among Russian speakers in Latvia cannot be overlooked.⁵ Many Russian speakers are still experiencing an emotional crisis over Russia's invasion of Ukraine as many Russian speakers in Latvia had seen Russia as a liberator, which has now turned into an aggressor attacking another Slavic nation, he explains. The monument had less significance for the younger generation of Latvian Russian speakers. They are more willing than older generations to admit that there was an occupation and for them the actual monument is therefore not that important. That said, many among the younger generation of Latvian Russian speakers still think that the monument should not have been demolished. For some, May 9 is no different than any other day, for others it is a day to remember the relatives who fought in the war that made it possible to bring peace to the next generation.

A recent survey shows that the Russian speaking residents aged 18 to 34 years were more likely to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, the same

survey shows that the number of people in Latvia who view Russia negatively has increased from 37% last year to 66% this year.⁶

The blocking of Russian media in Latvia

The change of public opinion in Latvia is not only connected to the war but also to the ban of Russian media, which has reduced Russia's information influence. Latvia has had a long and complicated relationship with Russian media outlets and its media watchdog, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP), has a history of banning Russian state-controlled media, particularly since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. As of June, all Russia-based television channels are banned in the territory of Latvia according to the law which stipulates that channels registered in a country threatening the territorial integrity and independence of another country should not be operational in Latvia. Hundreds of websites including social networks such as *Vkontakte* and *Odnoklassniki* are also blocked, in accordance with sanctions imposed by the European Union. According to NEPLP these channels will be allowed back in Latvia when Russia withdraws its troops from Ukraine and frees occupied territories, including Crimea. The ban is also connected to Russia's information war throughout Europe, including in Latvia, adding risks to Latvia's national security. The NEPLP said that restrictions are necessary to achieve the legitimate objective of protecting people's rights, the democratic state, public security, welfare, and morality. The NEPLP decided to block these sites due to "a Russian narrative blaming Ukraine for causing the war, justifying terrorism, justifying hostilities, blaming Ukraine for war crimes" and distributing similar content.

While the ban can be seen as a currently justified short-term solution, it also raises critical questions about freedom of speech and equal access to information. Reporters without borders have criticized Latvia for lacking transparency regarding the motives for the measures taken against pro-Kremlin media and NEPLP has previously received criticism for being vulnerable to political influence. Historically, media policy makers in Latvia have been enthusiastic in restricting the presence of Russian television in Latvia. In contrast, efforts to provide alternative content to what has been offered by Russian television have been limited. For a long time there was no pro-active or consistent long-term media policy for the development of Russian-language public

broadcasting. This, however, changed in 2021 when Latvia's political elite granted Latvian public radio and television organizations extra funding to provide Russian-language news and current affairs content. However, they rejected the idea to launch a fully-fledged Russian language public TV channel. This was a decision contrary to Estonia, where, in 2015, the Russian language public service TV channel, ETV+ was launched.

It is important to keep in mind that Latvia inherited a bilingual media landscape which contributed to linguistically divided

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PHOTO: PETER FORSBERG/EUROPE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The obelisk in Victory park before it was demolished.



PHOTO: ALISTAIR POLICIAZENGER

The image shows the demolished 80-meter-high obelisk from the Soviet era in Riga in Latvia on Thursday, August 25, 2022

audiences in the country. Regular audience statistics and other survey data show that both the Latvian-speaking majority and the Russian-speaking minority prefer media in their first language: A pattern that has been inherited from the Soviet period when Latvia's Russian speakers had little interest in domestic Latvian-language media. Closing down channels without offering alternatives in Russian risks irritating residents as well as creating a piracy boom, given the information vacuum for the Russian-speaking audience. Professor Anda Rožukalne is critical of the decision and together with media representatives, she raises concerns about whether the decision does not compromise freedom of expression in Latvia as law amendments have been adopted in haste. The decisions were not as transparent as one could expect in a democratic state. Blocking information is associated with authoritarian states, Rožukalne notes, and in any regard, it is misleading to believe that blocking all propaganda sites means that we are no longer reached by propaganda and disinformation.⁷

THE WAR HAS SECURITIZED already divisive issues such as historical memory and access to media in one's preferred language. For years there has been a tendency to view Latvia's Russian-speaking minority as a vulnerable group needing protection from Russia's manipulation. The depiction of Russian speakers as pro-Russia is only partly justified, however, and their media consumption patterns are far from uniform.⁸ One problem with

viewing media and information as weapons is that a heightened fear of propaganda can call for stronger state regulation of information and the internet and drive a propaganda arms race as each side tries to outdo the other. Amplifying the propaganda threat without offering transparency and non-dominative solutions to the problem is also likely to deepen public distrust of media. Even before the war, both audiences in Latvia tended to be suspicious and critical towards media. The current discussion drives policy responses and public reactions that prioritize an empowered state and disempowered citizens as both sides tend to see propaganda simply as an external-only threat and represent it through conflict-related language.⁹ Censorship, it is further argued, can also have a counterproductive effect on audiences who follow the banned media and make them more prone to access such media.

We should also keep in mind that limiting access to content in the internet era is more difficult in practice. Most people know that it is possible to bypass restrictions using VPN. For a younger audience of Russian speakers, circumventing restrictions is no challenge as they get their information online and from social media. Just because television channels are blocked in Latvia does not mean that they do not stumble upon this content online. Clips from Russian state-controlled media oftentimes circulate on *TikTok* and *Telegram* as memes. One Russian speaking 22-year-old woman from Daugavpils for example says that even though she does not watch Russian state-controlled media, she



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There are also newspapers in Russian and from Russia.

sees clips being shared on social media where independent bloggers and journalists highlight the absurdity of Russian state propaganda. She also adds that among her peers the term “foreign agent” has become something good; if one angers the Russian authorities, it usually means that one is doing something right.

Amid discussions about replacing the banned Russian television channels and websites there are now more than 200 Russian journalists and 23 Russian media organizations that have emigrated to Latvia since the war in Ukraine started. Independent Russian media *Meduza* is now joined by *Novaya Gazeta* and *Dozhd*. As such there is a possibility to replace Russian state-controlled media with independent Russian channels, who are now also targeting a Russian-speaking audience in Latvia. The Latvian State Security Service (VDD), however, is not overly optimistic, stating that accepting Russian journalists and media comes with risks considering what is happening in the information space in the context of the current geopolitical situation and Russia’s war in Ukraine.¹⁰ Meanwhile newspapers such as *Argumenty i Fakty Europa* (which is an adapted version of the popular Moscow newspaper) and *MK Latvija* (local version of *Moskovskij Komsomolets*) as well as news portals such as *Baltijas balss* are still operating in Latvia. The latter was previously part of the Russian newspaper *Vesti Segodnya* and is known for republishing content from state-controlled Russian media. So-called informa-

tion laundering, where false or deceitful information is legitimized through a network of intermediaries, is prevalent in the Latvian information sphere. Even though such behavior is being monitored by authorities, media literacy among residents in Latvia becomes crucial. From a media perspective it is troublesome that survey findings show that most Latvian teenagers are not taught media literacy at school. A third of children and young people in Latvia face false information on the internet and nearly half say that they face such information sometimes. 62% said that they sometimes checked the information before sharing it and 10% said that they never did.¹¹ As a result, many initiatives are being made to help boost media literacy among the Latvian audience: among others, the creation of the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence in Riga.

Speaking Russian does not equal Russia

Compared to their parents and Latvian peers, Russian speakers who have grown up in independent Latvia access both Russian and Latvian language versions of news. There is also a gap developing in the Russian-speaking environment in Latvia. Research conducted by *Spektr* and SKDS in July 2020 found that the younger generation had very different ideological values than older generations. The young generation is in general pro liberal freedoms, EU values and NATO membership. They have a better command of the Latvian language than other generations and more than 40% speak English at a good level. This may be one of the reasons why reading books and watching films in Russian is no longer as important for them as for older generations. They are also more on the internet and are therefore perhaps not as influenced by Russian state-controlled media. There are however also indirect influences of both public sentiment and the information flows in which families live. In general, the difference between generations in Latvia is little studied and as for Russian-speaking youth, very little is actually known about them so far.¹²

Many who grew up speaking Russian in independent Latvia do not associate themselves with Russia or what one could call the Russian world nor the values and aggressions carried out in Ukraine in the Russian language. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine where Putin’s justification for invading the country was that the Donbass region was home to Russian speakers who needed Russia’s protection, many Russian speakers in Latvia fear that he could use the same logic in the Baltics. This fear is shared by the Latvian authorities and NATO has doubled the size of its force in Latvia since the war started. When walking in Riga it is not uncommon to see military officers on the streets. While some think about what they would do if war came to Latvia, there are also conflicts between different generations and families as views differ in the conflict. Only 40% of Russian speakers condemn Russia’s action in Ukraine and 28% are neutral. Many also have relatives in Ukraine and Russia where opinions differ as to who is to blame for starting the war. Russian speakers often mention that they are experiencing an information war in Latvia and as such they are consuming news from different news outlets and first-hand sources in order to find the truth somewhere

in between, as well as talking to their friends in Russia, Ukraine, and other parts of the world.

Prior to the war, the Covid-19 pandemic has also contributed to changing Russian speakers' media consumption. Following the outbreak, many Russian speakers turned away from Russian state-controlled media in favor of following local media in order to keep updated on new restrictions in society and to access reliable information from local experts. As such, the pandemic served as a unifying force but also as an eye-opener as it became obvious for many how media on both sides reproduce the common myths and stereotypes that exist in their target audience. Young Russian speakers who read the news in Latvian and Russian oftentimes claim that they notice a difference between for examples *Delfi's* Latvian and Russian content. The fact that not just editorials are different but journalists also fail to reflect the views of all sides in an argument, stressing certain information over other information or just disregarding some information, creates suspicion among audiences that media are not telling the whole story. Many Russian speakers I have talked to oppose a total ban of Russian media and emphasize that one should be allowed to choose what media one consumes but they also understand why propagandistic content is prohibited.

TO CONCLUDE, it is clear that Latvia is going through several societal changes which have accelerated following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Following years of tension, Russia's information influence in Latvia is severely restricted and monuments glorifying the Soviet regime will soon be a thing of the past. Important steps have also been taken to strengthen public service media in Russian as well as housing Russian independent media outlets now operating in Latvia. In times of war where everything can be used as propaganda, it is important to continue to promote openness and unity in a world of tension and polarization, however. Many young Russian speakers feel loyal to Latvia but feel excluded by the Latvian authorities. A critical aspect lies in perceptions of belonging to the state. As such the Latvian authorities should more visibly embrace and praise the multiculturalism that already exists within the country and work to include all residents of Latvia in the public sphere. ❌

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