

Efforts to integrate Russians in Latvia stoke tensions - Europe - International Herald Tribune

By Dan Bilefsky

Published: Wednesday, November 15, 2006

RIGA, Latvia — The last Russian tank rolled out of Latvia more than a decade ago. But Inesa Kuznetsova, 75, a resident here for more than 50 years, has little doubt where she calls home.

"My address isn't a city. My address isn't a town. My address isn't a street," says the dressmaker, who arrived from Leningrad during World War II. "My address is the Soviet Union."

Kuznetsova's address is, in fact, Bolderaja, a largely Russian-speaking neighborhood on the outskirts of Riga, where a former Russian naval barracks sits empty and signs in the supermarket are in both Russian and Latvian. Here, she inhabits a parallel universe that has little to do with Latvia. She watches a Kremlin-funded television station, eats Russian food, and has no intention of learning the Latvian language - "Why the hell would I want to do that?" - though she says her grandchildren are being forced to do so.

Kuznetsova calls it an "insult" that residents who arrived after 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied Latvia, must now take a naturalization exam to become Latvian citizens. She has not done so, instead pinning her hopes on a new "Russian occupation" of Latvia. This, she says, is gaining force due to the arrival of illegal workers from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, who have streamed into the country in recent months by the hundreds, if not thousands, to help fill the gap left by the nearly 100,000 Latvians who have left in search of a better life since the country joined the European Union in May 2004.

Kuznetsova may be a relic from an era that many Latvians would like to forget. But the invasion she speaks of is stoking fears in this tiny Baltic country of 2.3 million, which is still grappling with how to integrate more than 800,000 Russian-speakers left over from Soviet times. One recent newspaper headline captured the national anxiety when, using variants on the name "John," it bemoaned that Latvian employers were "Looking for Janis, but finding Ivan."

The anxiety is stoked by strong memories of the Soviet occupation, when tens of thousands of Latvians fled the country or were deported and an equal number of Russians were sent here by Moscow. By the time of Latvian independence in 1991, the country's Russian population had swollen from 10 percent before World War II to nearly half, with Russian the dominant language in large cities like Riga.

During the occupation, Latvia dreamed of breaking open its Soviet-guarded border and rejoining Europe. That dream was fulfilled; the country is now a member of the European Union and NATO. But there was a price. While economic growth shot up to 10 percent this year, about the same as China's, the large migration westward of Latvians has left a gaping hole in the job market. This has forced the country to make a difficult, sometimes wrenching, choice: to accept the economic necessity of immigration, or to hold on to deep and abiding historical resentments.

[TWITTER](#)[LINKEDIN](#)[SIGN IN TO E-MAIL](#)[PRINT](#)[SINGLE PAGE](#)[SHARE](#)

MOST POPULAR

[E-MAILED](#) [BLOGGED](#) [SEARCHED](#) [VIEWED](#)

1. [Opinion: Building Self-Control, the Ame](#)
2. [A Jewish Hockey Player at History's Inc Crossroad](#)
3. [60 Lives, 30 Kidneys, All Linked](#)
4. [How Companies Learn Your Secrets](#)
5. [Maureen Dowd: Where the Boys Aren't](#)
6. [For Women Under 30, Most Births Occu Marriage](#)
7. [Opinion: The Art of Distraction](#)
8. [Frank Bruni: Drinking and Drugging](#)
9. [John Fairfax, Who Rowed Across Ocean 74](#)
10. [Thomas L. Friedman: A Third Voice for](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)

"We already have had Russians invading us for 50 years and we don't need another invasion - it is too painful," says Liene Strike, 21, a museum guide at Riga's windowless Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, where a life-size model of a barracks in the Gulag shows the cramped conditions under which Latvians deported by Stalin froze and starved to death.

As part of its cultural self-assertion since independence, Latvia has introduced mandatory exams and an oath of loyalty for Soviet-era settlers who want to become citizens. To gain a Latvian passport, they must prove that they know Latvia's history and can speak Latvian.

Many of the nearly 400,000 Russian-speaking noncitizens from Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and elsewhere, are wary of taking a test, which includes questions like, "What happened in Latvia on June 17, 1940?" Answer: "The beginning of Soviet occupation." But failure to pass the exam means being unable to vote or hold most public posts, and requiring a visa to visit most other EU countries.

The issue of Russian minority rights in Latvia has taken on global importance because Moscow argues that the European Union and other Western bodies are in no position to challenge it on human rights as long as Latvia's ethnic Russians are treated as second-class citizens.

[More Articles in Europe »](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM

MUSIC »



[Enjoying the Sweet Pains of Success](#)

N.Y. / REGION »



[A Lonely Gaze on The Times and Its City](#)

SUNDAY REVIEW »



[The Strip: Campaign Comeback Advice](#)

TRAVEL »



[A Cool Glide Through Maine](#)

SUNDAY REVIEW »

The Download: Hugh Bonneville
Reading and listening with a star of "Downton Abbey."

TELEVISION »



[Life Lessons i Soapsuds](#)