

Latvians Reject Russian as Second Language

By DAVID M. HERSZENHORN
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MOSCOW — Voters in [Latvia](#) on Saturday overwhelmingly rejected a plan to adopt Russian as a second official language, defeating a constitutional referendum that underscored the [ethnic and political tensions](#) that remain more than 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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“The vote on a second state language endangered one of the most sacred foundations of the Constitution — the state language,” the Latvian president, Andris Berzins, said in a statement after the vote. “I would also like to thank everyone who, despite the emotions and impassioned atmosphere which were conjured up by the referendum, maintained a cool head and tolerance without yielding before provocations and attempts to foment hatred.”

Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, who actively opposed the referendum, said he was grateful to Latvian voters for resoundingly rejecting it, but he said some conciliatory steps would be needed.

“What we need to think now is what additional measures could be done on integration and naturalization policies, including more opportunities to study Latvian,” Mr. Dombrovskis said in a telephone interview. He added, “It is clear that we need to look at what more we can do.”

Supporters of the referendum, however, said the bid for official status for Russian was not the cause of fissures in Latvia but an outgrowth of longstanding divisions and historically unequal treatment for the country’s large minority of native Russian speakers.

Tensions escalated after a pro-[Russia](#) party, Harmony Center, [won the most seats in Parliament](#) in a snap election in September but was excluded from the governing coalition by the ruling Unity Party, which instead cut a deal with a Latvian nationalist group.

“I believe people wouldn’t really support this referendum if representatives of the Russian-speaking minority would have been part of the coalition,” said [Nil Usakovs](#), who is a leader of the Harmony Center party and the mayor of Riga, Latvia’s capital and largest city.

“This referendum is not creating problems,” Mr. Usakovs said in a telephone interview. “It is a reflection of existing problems.”

Latvia, like its Baltic neighbors Lithuania and Estonia and many other former Soviet republics, has de-emphasized the Russian language since becoming independent in 1991.

Although Russian is the native language for more than a quarter of Latvia’s 2 million

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people — percentage-wise, one of the largest linguistic minorities in the world — Latvian is the only state language and would-be citizens must pass a test in the Latvian language and the country’s history.

More than 290,000 non-Latvians who were living in the country when the Soviet Union collapsed, many of them Russian-speakers, still have “noncitizen” status, according to government statistics, meaning they cannot vote or hold government jobs, though they pay taxes.

Saturday’s vote clearly broke on ethnic and linguistic lines, with the tally closely mirroring the breakdown of Latvian and Russian speakers. Nearly 75 percent, or 821,722 people, opposed the referendum, while just shy of 25 percent, or 273,347 voters, were in favor.

A turnout of more than 70 percent underscored the extent that the language debate has stirred the public.

Officials on both sides predicted that the divisions would continue and that hard work would be needed to resolve them — adding to the challenges of the country, which is now part of the European Union but has faced severe economic trouble since the financial crisis of 2008.

“The referendum did not bring anything to an end,” President Berzins said. “All of those who wish to live in this country under an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding must immediately begin a discussion and dialogue on how to overcome suspicions, offenses or misunderstandings.”

In Moscow, where officials have lamented the decline of Russian in former Soviet territories, the effort to change the Latvian Constitution was applauded, and the high turnout was described as evidence that Russian speakers’ concerns would have to be heard.

Konstantin Kosachyov, a member of the Russian Parliament, told the Interfax news agency that the results were a success for those who advocated for the rights of the Russian language in Latvia. He called the vote “a serious signal to the Latvian authorities to resolve the problem.”

Mr. Kosachyov also noted that noncitizens, many of them Russian speakers, had been barred from voting and would have supported the referendum. Those noncitizens, he said, “will continue acting for their human and political rights.”

Prime Minister Dombrovskis, who speaks Latvian, Russian, English, German and some Spanish, said Latvia respected its minority groups but should only have one state language, and that opponents were playing politics with the nation’s identity.

“You can’t play political games with those kinds of fundamental questions,” he said. “It is really serious.”

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