

Looking for “Politics”

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Over the past two decades, Latvia has been approached as an exemplary site of ethnic politics in Eastern Europe. The conventional account of ethnic politics emphasizes the antagonism between ethnic groups. In the Latvian context, this account goes like this: In Latvia, there are two major groups – Latvians and Russians. As a result of Soviet demographic policies (deportations, genocide, labor migrations), by the time of Latvian independence in 1991, Russians and Russian-speakers accounted for 50% of Latvia's population. This presented an imminent danger to Latvia's sovereignty. To mitigate this danger, the Latvian government did not enfranchise a significant number of non-ethnic Latvians into the restored polity.

From the point of view of European institutions, this lack of enfranchisement is a challenge which ought to be overcome. The instrument thought to help in overcoming this challenge – i.e., in ensuring enfranchisement – is that of “minority rights.” This instrument rests on understanding ethnicity in terms of “groups” (c.f. Brubaker 2006) which are either “minority” or “majority.” The instrument of minority rights is quite problematic. First, it is unclear which rights should be a cause for pan-European concern. Second, it is unclear which groups are minority groups. This is true throughout Europe, since governments make fairly arbitrary decisions as to which group is a minority and which is not. This is particularly true in Latvia, where as Dace Dzenovska (2009) argues, minority status does not correspond to groups at all, but rather to certain forms of conduct.

In what follows, I will point to another problem with “minority rights.” I will do so by juxtaposing what, for the lack of a better term, may be called a “state logic” and a “political logic.” Like all other European nation-states, Latvia operates within the framework of minority / majority relations. It is, in fact, state logic which understands minority rights to be both a precondition for and a goal of political action. However, as other multi-party parliamentary democracies, Latvia is governed by a coalition of several parties. Political logic revolves around a possibility of entering the coalition government. In what follows, I will show how rights-based claims, supported by state-logic, contradict political logic.

I will do so from the perspective of youth political organizations. Over 2009-2010 I conducted fieldwork with two youth organizations loosely affiliated with what was often referred to as the “Russian” party in the Latvian parliament. I went to their meetings, observed and helped drafting letters and memoranda, helped with formalized discussions and debates, participated in demonstrations, rallies, and various volunteer projects. A number of these organizations' members wanted to have a political career; it was to this end that they maintained a loose association with so-called “Russian” party. As I will outline later, Latvian political parties are classified primarily into “Russian” and “Latvian”; where “Russian” comes to be associated with “the left” and “Latvian” with “the right”; despite the fact that economic policies advocated by these parties are fairly similar. (This is particularly true today, when Latvian economic policy is a subject of international regulation rather than domestic politics.)

About five months after I began fieldwork, I participated in a meeting between three youth organizations. The first two were based in Latvia: one was called the Humanists, the other the Loyalists.¹ These were the two organizations where I did the bulk of my fieldwork. The third one was from Lithuania; it was called The Lithuanian League of Russian Youth. The purpose of the meeting I attended was to discuss a preliminary program for The Forum which would bring

together Russian organizations from the three Baltic States. However, most of our conversation centered around the Forum's title rather than its program. The Lithuanians, represented at the meeting by Justinas, wanted to keep the same title that they used in the project proposal: "Forum for the Empowerment of Ethnic Minority Youth NGOs in The Baltic States." The Humanists, represented by Kristina, and The Loyalists, represented by Pavel, vehemently disagreed.

"You have to understand," argued Kristina, "if we keep this title, nobody will come to the Forum."

"Well, isn't there a State Registry which lists ethnic minority organizations?" asked Justinas.

Kristina nodded.

"Why are you then worried that people won't come? You can call the leaders of ethnic minority organizations and invite them personally."

"This will not help," Kristina responded. "They will consciously make a decision not to come. They will boycott the Forum because they do not want to participate in anything that labels them as an 'ethnic minority' organization."

"But aren't the Humanists a Russian organization?" Justinas asked Kristina.

"The Humanists organize multiple projects. A lot of them have to do with Russian culture and youth. But we are not on the registry," Kristina responded.

"There is only one organization on the registry," Pavel added.

"This cannot be true!" Justinas exclaimed. "I know for a fact that there are Russians in Riga who are subjects of European youth politics."

"What do you mean by politics?" asked Kristina, a novel note of gravitas in her voice.

Before Justinas got a chance to answer, Pavel interjected once again: "These are not political organizations," he said responding to Justinas's question.

Political Logic and State Logic

What is crucial about this interaction is that minority status is refused in the name of "politics." Given that one of the reasons that this status exists is to ensure effective participation in government, this is ironic. I was used to meeting people who refused to identify as ethnic minorities and who, simultaneously, refused to participate in the electoral process. I was very surprised to find people who refused to identify as ethnic minorities precisely insofar as they wanted to participate in the governing process; that is, precisely insofar as they wanted to escape political marginalization. To understand how minority status comes to be refused in the name of

politics, I suggest making a distinction between “state logic” and “political logic.”

Political logic revolves around the possibility of forming a coalition government. On the one hand, Latvia has been governed by coalitions since the early 1990s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a multitude of political parties emerged. No single party can ever attain parliamentary majority; the only way to form the government is through a coalition.

To participate in a coalition government, two stake-holders need to be satisfied: Latvian politicians and Russian voters. The latter are fairly easy to satisfy: the Russian electorate has consistently voted for Russian parties (regardless these parties’ inability to deliver on their promises). As for Latvian politicians, they have to be certain that their electorate would not punish them for forming a coalition with a Russian party. This means that Latvian politicians need to be certain that their would-be allies will not seek to expand their rights. This can be signaled by not identifying as an ethnic minority.

The compulsion to identify as an ethnic minority, to think of the place where one lives as populated by “minority” and “majority” groups, comes from various initiatives which go under the sign of “integration.” In fact, until recently, whenever the relationship between Latvianness and Russianness was discussed, “integration,” rather than “coalition” was the most frequently used term. One of the most important integration initiatives is a program titled “Integration of Society in Latvia.”

The document outlining this program works to establish new rhetoric (and institutions) to manage inter-group contact. It does so by relying on the minority / majority framework. This framework is one of the bases of (nation-)state logic. Let me provide a drastically simplified account of this document. (For a detailed account, see Silova 2006.) In the document titled “Integration of Society in Latvia,” the word “state” appears 200 times, which is about a dozen more times than the word “society” (which is ironic, both given the title of the program and the post-communist rhetoric of keeping the state and society separate). The word “government” is used exclusively to reference state institutions rather than the executive body in the parliament; the word “election” is used thirteen times; the word “party” – six times. In other words, inter-group contact is framed primarily in terms of minority / majority relations and the state.

Political logic, which revolves around the question of “coalition,” rather than “integration,” addresses the government rather than the state. It connotes parliamentary elections (a ritual event, if you will) rather than state institutions. Unlike the idiom of integration (and state logic), the idiom of coalition (and political logic) assumes that, in the foreseeable future, Latvia's electorate will be split along ethnic lines. However, insofar as the idiom of coalition is highly targeted (i.e., it addresses solely the electoral process) it does not assume that Latvia's electorate (i.e., voters who drop a ballot in the box every four years) is coincident with Latvia's society. All of my interlocutors were acutely aware of the fact that pretty much the only place in Latvia where you would find Russians and Latvians sitting on opposite sides of the same room was the parliamentary chamber. In other words, my interlocutors did not confuse electorate with society, society with the state, and the state with the government.

Conclusion

In a recent article, Zsuzsa Gille (2010) criticizes promotion of “political participation” in post-socialist states. Pointing to the importance of anti-politics during the period of Velvet Revolutions, Gille argues that contemporary emphasis on participation violates aspirations to

normality and authenticity that characterized late socialism.

In my paper, I tried to follow Gille's lead. I did so from the place which, according to European policymakers (and other stakeholders), is understood to have two ethnic groups (Latvians and Russians) involved in ethnic politics. This understanding promotes discourse of minority rights (particularly the right to effective participation), thought to be both the basis and the goal of ethnic politics. I argued that this understanding is myopic; that it runs counter to the idealization of politics which I traced in my field site. For my informants, "politics" means forming a governing coalition. They believe that this coalition can be formed only insofar as they do not draw on the category of minority.

I was very careful not to criticize my informants' understanding of politics, however narrow. Instead, I tried to delineate the contradiction which emerges in: (a) an emphasis on electoral politics; and (b) an assumption that minority rights are either the basis or the goal of this politics. This frame rests on a broad understanding of politics: of politics as something that happens between groups. This understanding of politics obscures distinctions between the government and the parliament, between the government and the state, between state power and state apparatus, between electorate and society, between what I referred to as "political logic" and "state logic."

Following my fieldwork, I have come to see the virtue of thinking about politics in a narrow sense. The idiom of "coalition" which is adopted in place of the idiom of "integration," addresses a very concrete site: the government. The parliament may reflect the electorate, which is split along ethnic lines. However, the government may reflect society in a larger sense, a society which finds Latvians and Russians living in the same neighborhoods, increasingly going to the same universities, and working in the same private companies.

¹ These organizations' names as well as personal names are pseudonyms.

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