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Professional article

HISTORY AND MEMORY IN EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRAUMAS¹

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Abstract: This paper is based on sixty in-depth interviews that took place between the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013 in two major towns in Latvia – Riga and Daugavpils – within MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement), a project with young people aged from 16 to 25. In Latvia's case, a very important data collecting and analysis issue is the language used by the respondents in the interviews. On the whole, interviews were held in two languages - Latvian and Russian. The data and detailed analysis of the narrative fragments about history show that contradictions between Latvian-speaking respondents and Russian-speaking respondents remain troubling and traumatic and both parties (Latvian-speaking respondents and Russian-speaking respondents) seek arguments to justify their opinion. All that essentially affects everyday life and the interpretation of historical events. Significant aspects of contemporary youth identity searching are studied in the project (and partly in this paper): 1) the understanding of contemporary Latvian youth about politics, political process and its impact on the society as well as the opinion about political systems and culture in Europe and Latvia are analysed; 2) particular attention is paid to history and memory concepts within everyday life; the importance of the identification of historical events in the growth of youth identity; 3) the relation between political issues and the everyday life is closely connected to the process of development of young people as individuals, their leisure activities, and system of values. This paper emphasizes the youth understanding of history and memory in society, its influence on their everyday life and in what way different historical events and places construct their identities.

Keywords: Youth, historical places, historical events, everyday life, political, historical and national identity.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on sixty in-depth interviews that took place between the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013 in two major towns in Latvia – Riga and Daugavpils – within MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And

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Civic Engagement), a project with young people aged from 16 to 25. In Latvia's case, a very important data collecting and analysis issue is the language used by the respondents in the interviews. On the whole, interviews were held in two languages (Latvian and Russian). The majority of respondents were fluent in both Latvian and Russian, though in interviews they gave preference to the language they use in everyday situations and in their families and could express their opinions more precisely. Some of the respondents could use only one of the languages. National identity essentially affects respondents' attitude to the more significant questions of MYPLACE project.

Our hypothesis is that national identity determines respondents' attitude to the political and social issues, to how historical memory and political heritage are transmitted, the sources of respondents' views and the level of their involvement in political and social processes.

2. Political Heritage and Transmission

How does transmission of political and historical issues take place? What are the main sources of political and historical identity among Latvian youth? It is difficult to answer these questions on the basis of the interview materials because respondents rarely indicated the sources of their opinions and, arguably, it is hard for young people to be wholly aware of the sources of their worldview and political attitude. Many respondents claimed they had no key sources of influence and that their personality had been formed independently: 'I think that there are no such people. I myself look, well, show interest and make conclusions from what I see. Other people do not influence me.', (Eda, Daugavpils). This argument is not compelling, however, since, reading the whole interview, makes clear that an essential role in the formation of the respondent's views is played by their belonging to a particular Latvian cultural tradition, in this case the Russian language including, for instance, the role of the Russian mass media in the interpretation of historical events. Soviet festive traditions that are living traditions for the respondent's family members and close relatives are noted also as very significant for the respondent.

However, the greatest influence is that of school. It is during school that pupils visit museums and local history places, monuments, conduct research projects, participate in public debates, discuss, and defend their views:

'I participate, of course, now this happens more seldom than previously, a year ago, I participated in the European Youth Parliament, maybe you know this institution that is like joined to the European Union and is financed by the European Union, depending on each country, of course. Well, and young people come and discuss serious things - the economy, the green movement and so on, and this happens in a serious atmosphere. I

think this is the best example that I could give, that people really know what they are talking about, there is nobody who has nothing to say – it is a good atmosphere where you can discuss all that.’ (Saivis, Riga).

Local politicians also visit schools and, if pupils wish, they may spark a discussion and listen to different views.

Ethnic relations, i.e. relations between Latvians and Russians (including all ethnicities that identify themselves with the Russian language) for all respondents, without exception, are the main source of tension and conflicts in Latvia. No other inequality – religious, sexual, generational – affects them as much as the relations between Latvians and Russians. This is acknowledged by Russian-speaking respondents. For instance:

‘Well, the most telling example is Russians and Latvians. As they have nonstop arguments, never-ending divergences, say, Russians and Latvians, they have different opinions on politics, society, life in general and this often gives rise to arguments, disagreement. Probably this is the clearest example.’ (Kate, Daugavpils).

The situation is characterized similarly by a Latvian speaking respondent:

‘The biggest conflict yet, despite the fact that Latvians and Russians live in one country, is that they are constantly arguing. Well, who said that one nation is good and another one bad? There are murderers among Latvians as well as among Russians, also thieves may be both Latvians and Russians – we are all human, we are all similar. Not that Latvians are better or Russians are better, or the other way round – worse.’ (Ada, Riga).

The major and most fundamental conflict in Latvian society is related to language, identification with different ethnicities and their culture, contradictions in the interpretation of history and different political opinions.³

A segment of Russian speaking residents of Latvia (both citizens and non-citizens) consider that they are not respected in Latvia and that their rights to use their native language are violated. Nationalist politicians are to blame for

³ „One of the main questions in this context is the language issue. The demands of the most radical Russian politicians for the introduction of two state languages, which is echoed in the statements of some politicians in Russia, is unacceptable to the majority of Latvians, who would see it as reinforcing their own minority status. Latvians want to reach a situation where the inter-ethnic lingua franca is Latvian. However, a large proportion of Russian speakers see this as an attempt at assimilation.” (Bleiere et al. 2006: 477-478).

this, as it is perceived that policies towards the Russian speaking residents of Latvia have had a counterproductive effect:

‘Yes, this is the fault not so much of the system of education as that of our ruling parties that in the course of 22 years, unfortunately, were doing everything possible so that Russian people would have a negative attitude towards the Latvian language, so that they would not be willing to learn it. Unfortunately this is the case.’ (Denis, Daugavpils).

Every threat to the Russian language is perceived as a threat to the Russian identity in Latvia.

Notwithstanding the political visibility of the question of Russian language usage, in practice, in everyday life, Latvians and Russians can communicate quite well. Of course, both parties can find many different incidents of abusive or discriminatory use of language towards one another but generally there has been no bloodshed related to ethnic conflicts in the history of independent Latvia as has been the case with other territories of the former USSR:

‘I previously lived in Imanta and I could hardly find a Latvian there. When I lived in Āgenskalns, yes, that was mostly a Latvian area but there were also Russians living there. And then it’s usually like this. The moment when Latvians meet Russians, Russians think that is their area or something like that. They start sort of attacking Latvians. And Latvians, like Latvians, they are usually peaceful and try to sort of settle things in a peaceful way.’ (Irbe, Riga).

One cannot deny that more and more people whose native language is Russian willingly use Latvian and the understanding of the dominant role of Russian in society handed down from the Soviet period is not so typical any more:

‘Well, I think you can normally communicate always. It’s nothing special. I talk to Latvians at college, I have a Latvian friend, nothing really special. No conflicts ever. I understand both Russian and Latvian, whatever language, it doesn’t matter.’ (Niks, Daugavpils).

Many Russians know and can speak Latvian and willingly use it while preserving their Russian identities and subjectivities. Russian-speaking respondents associate the problem of nationalism and ethnic conflicts with the older generations who have deeper-rooted mutual hatred and resentments:

‘Well, there are those old, old, nationally preoccupied, generations of grannies. Besides this, the generation of grannies is divided into those who are nationally preoccupied, with nationalism in Latvia, and those who - absolutely wrongly in my opinion - are preoccupied with the downfall of the Soviet Union. They want the Soviet Union back. Well, this is impossible, get used to the fact that you live in Latvia, you must somehow respect this, too. Well, Latvians are also a nation, this is their land, which has to be respected. Nothing doing with this and no point yelling that you want back into your Soviet Union, the rule of Russians and so on. Well, this is their land. It’s not right to yell and divide the land like that. Well, you must understand it. You can’t go to America and claim it as your land.’ (Liba, Riga).

Different understanding of a number of historical events still affects young people’s attitudes and are projected onto ethnic relations. Obvious manifestations of Russian nationalism, e.g. the language referendum or small Russian flags on private cars, public transport, some private enterprises or the mass celebration of the 9th of May increase the popularity of Latvian national parties. Both Latvians and Russians make blunders that do not facilitate mutual trust and respect. Paradoxical as it may be, the mistakes of both conflicting parties are similar: language ignorance, misunderstanding the political subtexts of public festival celebration, ignorance of the culture and history of the other nation:

‘Yes, my Latvian is very poor. Because I grew up and was born in Daugavpils, our town has a reputation of a Russian town, 90% are Russians as far as I know the numbers. It just happened that I never had any Latvian acquaintances. They appeared only three years ago; I have just started to communicate with Latvians, before that I didn’t. That is, I went to school where everybody was Russian, my parents are Russians. I never even watched Latvian programmes on TV, because Latvian television is very boring and dull, in my opinion. I watch basically Russian programmes, Russian comedy shows, Latvian programmes don’t make any sense to me. It is a completely different mentality, they simply seem dull to me. So it turned out that, but for the Latvian language lessons at school, I would not understand Latvian at all.’ (Denis, Daugavpils).

The statements of this respondent in fact indicate the main cause of the conflict as well as the solution to it; understanding each other, understanding the mentality, traditions, the significance of history and festivals is crucial.

3. History and Memory in Everyday Life

Characterizing the most important and interesting points in Latvian history, respondents talked about a small number of key events: the restoration of the independence of Latvia in the early 1990s (also including the collapse of the Soviet Union); the independent Latvian state in the 1920-30s; World War I and World War II; the Soviet period; and accession to the EU.

‘Well, in general I think that our country is unique and interesting. Well, probably everybody says this, that we have experienced such great changes in the political system, issues of power, ethnicity, and occupation. We are interesting in this respect, and the most interesting thing is that we had one independence and now we are having another. And I think that people still compare the present with what happened in the past. And the further we move away from the times of Ulmanis, the more we associate, everybody idealizes that time. But the number of people who really know how it all was has diminished. So I would certainly say that there was independence, then we had a break, and now we are having it again. This was what affected our thinking, the main thing.’ (Ulla, Rīga).

In the context of these ‘great’ events other important and interesting historical events and processes are mentioned as well. For instance, World War I and the foundation of the independent Republic of Latvia are linked to the subsequent flourishing of economy in the 1930s:

‘Many people like to look back because the Golden Times are in the past, and in Latvia there was Ulmanis⁴, real Latvia, where Latvia was for Latvians and so, and this image for many politicians is the source to draw on, it is especially characteristic of Latvian parties. They always use history to support something and one can’t ignore that, because history is what we are learning from, something like that.’ (Saivis, Rīga).

In turn, World War II is associated with the loss of independence, Soviet occupation, deportations to Siberia, the damage inflicted by the war and its evil

⁴ “Many countries in Europe were affected by the tendency to shift from democracy to dictatorship between the wars. The struggle against dictatorship suffered gradual losses, and across Europe the failures of rule of law and democracy were many – at the end of the 1930s, out of 29 countries, only 12 still retained a democratic system. The events in Latvia can be organically included in European political developments: Latvia took the road to authoritarianism in 1934 and was the last of the Baltic States to do so. Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis and his followers’ coup on the night of May 15 was doubtlessly an expression of the weakness of parliamentary democracy in Latvia, and democracy was put to death by men who had played a decisive role in the creation and development of the Republic of Latvia.” (Bleiere et al. 2006: 170).

Holocaust and concentration camps. The significance of these events in contemporary Latvian society is heightened in a particularly active and radical way annually on May 9 when World War II veterans who fought in the Soviet Army are commemorated. Joining the EU - according to the respondents - is associated with positive and also negative changes, yet there is more of the positive, more freedom and opportunities for mobility, for instance. Like in the interpretation of other historical issues, the opinions of Russian and Latvian young people differ, if not radically, then in significant details and emphases. A Russian speaking respondent points out:

‘I think that it is a special moment in this country now - I mean joining the Euro Union. This has given people an opportunity, well, to choose where they wish to be, where to work, and there seems to be lots of opportunities for the young people I know who have gone to study there. The borders were opened, and more opportunities appeared. Probably in this respect exactly this moment is so easily remembered. However, this is bad for the country as a whole, because, as they say, young brains leave, someone must take up all this, develop it, but in fact all normal, well, not all, but the majority, of people with common sense have left.’ (Jurijs, Daugavpils).

A Latvian speaking respondent talks similarly:

‘Yes, also a wider vision. There seems to be awareness that you have broader experience. You have opportunities. You may actually go, within Europe, wherever you wish. You don’t have to think about visas or passport arrangements. I mean, just more freedom.’ (Ella, Riga).

The most important and interesting event that has significantly affected the modern history of Latvia mentioned by the majority of respondents is the regaining of independence by Latvia and many positive historical moments related to it that have created a sense of stability: the Baltic Way⁵, Singing Revolution⁶, The January Barricades in Old Riga in 1991 (Blūzma et al. 2009: 558-598), people’s enthusiasm, sense of being united, and patriotism.

‘Well, probably we really became independent, but, like, independent from this or that nation, like. We are not pulled here

⁵ The ‘Baltic Way’ was a peaceful political demonstration consisting of citizens of all three Baltic States linking hands to form a human chain that took place in August 1989 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the ensuing Soviet annexation of the Baltic States.

⁶ The period in the history of the Baltic States between 1986 and 1991 that ended with regaining of independence.

and there, now subject to one order, now to another, now there is a kind of stability, more or less, stability, for the time being, well, and attraction to the country, though I'm not a Latvian, but, like, well, I was born in Latvia and I love my country. And I seem to, well, I like it being an independent country, well, that's probably what I mean.' (Vera, Daugavpils).

Though not all respondents have direct memories about those events, some have childhood memories of their parents' participation in the reconstruction of Latvia's independence in the early 1990s. Concerning the Baltic Way, respondents emphasised their connection (through their parents) to these events, they demonstrate understanding about the course of the event, its participants and goals: 'My Dad participated in it. Well, I know that simply Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians came together, joined hands from Vilnius to Tallinn, to protest against all that, well, the ruling system of that time.' (Aksels, Riga) Similarly also another respondent noted: 'I was two years old at that time and I know that my parents were standing there. But precisely – where and how, how many people – I don't know about that time. I know only the shots of the film that they are standing along that way.' (Auce, Riga).

Some Russian-speaking respondents consider that regaining independence was Latvia's greatest error; one that brought about a rapid economic recession, industrial crash and poorly controlled privatization that allowed individuals to exploit the collective lack of understanding of economic, financial, and property related processes in the country. Many people, especially the elder generation, lost their savings as a result of the monetary reform (and devaluation). Unemployment increased, which mostly affected the agriculture in Latvia, as big collective farms collapsed. As a consequence, agriculture was effectively moved back to the form of individual and small farms, thus causing rapid reduction of the number of inhabitants in the rural territories in Latvia and their economic activity.

Politicians at that time adopted laws that created a large number of non-citizens⁷, which not only evoked criticism within the country but also activated Russian foreign policies towards Latvia; Russia (regularly, through international organizations) criticizing the violation of non-citizens' rights of Latvia and the unacceptable situation in the realm of non-citizenship. The majority of Latvian politicians emphasised the fact that Latvia had been subject to occupation as a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which divided Europe into zones of influence between Germany and the USSR. The restored Republic of Latvia was considered a lawful continuation of the previous independent state, and those residents who had settled in Latvia during the Soviet period (Latvian SSR) were no longer considered citizens. In fact the details of the arguments are not as

⁷ Bleiere et al. 2006: 459-463.

important as the fact that, according to some respondents, they triggered irreconcilable arguments between Latvians and Russians.

Notwithstanding the difficulties associated with the immediate post-independence period, young people appreciate the positive aspects of independence, balancing the economic drawbacks with democratic political gains:

‘Everyone had jobs but what I think is characteristic of communism – everybody was granted employment but at the same time there was a strict order and a severe regime and no one could leave the country, there were shortages of goods. People had money but there were no goods. I don’t think life was better then. I can’t agree with that, although I didn’t live through that time, still I can’t agree with all the grannies who say that at that time life was better, because I don’t think it could have been better.’ (Auce, Riga).

Nowadays young people appreciate the opportunities for free travel, to study abroad, work and make careers not only in Latvia but also abroad.

Notwithstanding the appreciation of the significance of positive changes, respondents have a poor idea of contemporary history, the key actors and the opponents of the independence of Latvia. The majority, 90% of respondents, were unable to elaborate in greater detail the process of the reestablishment of independence during the early 1990s, usually limiting themselves to some general statements picked up at school or heard from their parents, seen on television or read in headlines on the Internet.

A good indicator of how Latvian youth characterise history is how they perceive the occupation of Latvia on 17 June 1940 (Šneidere 2005; Bleiere et al. 2006; Lumans 2006). Although it is a historical issue, it is also closely related to contemporary politics, politicians’ rhetoric, relations between Latvia and Russia and perceptions of it are deeply rooted in the family history, and the notions transmitted through it, of almost all residents of Latvia.⁸ If we collate respondents’ replies according to whether they were from Russian or Latvian speaking respondents and categorise them according to three main positions articulated (*‘Latvia was occupied’*, *‘Latvia was not occupied’*, *‘Don’t know, no*

⁸„The minority problem is often presented both within and outside of Latvia as if only two ethnic groups exist in Latvia – Latvians and so-called Russian-speakers. Such an approach ignores the fact that there is a range of significant ethnic groups with their own specific conditions and cultural needs. The Russian and Russian-speaking group is very large and influential, and no doubt its integration in Latvia (by this, their political integration - not assimilation - is meant) is one of the main issues, with an important political dimension. Various ethnic groups in Latvia have differing views of the country’s past, the Soviet Union, as well as the main differences are between Latvians on the one hand and Russians and Russians-speakers on the other.” (Bleiere et al. 2006: 476).

clear notion of occupation'), a clear pattern emerges of the segmentation of society in two radically opposed camps buffered by a significantly large group of those who are 'neutral' (see Table below). It is the existence of this latter group that explains why the opposed opinions seldom develop into aggressive confrontation, but it is social trauma:

- at assessing the question of Latvia's occupation by the USSR in 1940, two thirds of Latvian-speaking respondents stated that Latvia had been occupied, whereas none of the Russian-speaking respondents acknowledged this fact; half of the respondents considered that it had not been an occupation, the other half did not have any definite opinion concerning the events in 1940 and their impact on everyday life.
- The data and detailed analysis of the narrative fragments coded show that this issue remains troubling and traumatic and that both parties seek arguments to justify their opinion.

Similar, yet not so radical, is the issue of World War II. Respondents do not have many memories handed down by their grandparents or other relatives and, although the majority of young people consider it as one of the most important events in the history of Latvia, respondents' views on World War II are captured only in individual fragments in a few interviews. Narratives about World War II partially relate to people's suffering and the horrors of the war:

'In my opinion, this is the most terrible thing possible. The cruellest – Holocaust, camps, fascism, communism. My personal attitude is that it would have been better if nothing of this kind had happened. I don't know how such things could have been, without the Second World War, generally the situation in the world, but I find it really horrifying and, I don't know, even undesirable, you want to escape it, as if it had never happened, because now, even to this day many people have negative emotions about Germans, about Russia, and I think that it has left behind many negative consequences.' (Kate, Daugavpils).

4. Conclusion

Having analyzed respondents' views about the importance of history and memory in everyday life, we can mention such key findings:

- history and memory affect our everyday life essentially and in many ways;
- the attitude of Latvian-speaking and Russian-speaking respondents towards major events in the history of Latvia are similar. The differences lie in understanding the significance of historical events;

- for Latvian-speaking respondents the major historical events are World War I and the establishment of the Republic of Latvia in 1918;
- for Russian-speaking respondents the major historical events are World war II and the victory of the USSR over fascism;
- all that essentially affects everyday life and the interpretation of historical events:
 - 1) Latvian-speaking respondents respect more memorial places and events relating to World War I, Latvia's independence, its economic achievements in the 20-30s of the 20th century, events that led to the loss of Latvia's independence (e.g., the occupation of the Republic of Latvia by the USSR, deportations of people, Latvian soldiers in Latvia's army and armies of other countries);
 - 2) Russian-speaking respondents respect more memorial places and events relating to World War II (e.g., annual celebrations on May 9, Victory Monument in Riga, achievements in Soviet time);
- at characterizing knowledge concerning Latvia's recently regained independence, we established that:
 - 1) Latvian-speaking respondents are better informed about this event, they know more about how independence was gained, can mention people who fought for independence, emphasize the importance of the independence for further existence of the Latvian nation, language and culture. Several respondents had their parents' experience, stories about the events of that time;
 - 2) Russian-speaking respondents, on the whole, were well-informed about the events of that time'. However, they did not have stories from their parents' experience, and they put greater emphasis on the negative consequences following the regaining of independence (e.g., collapse of industry, unemployment, devaluation, ethnic tensions);

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Sources

The paper describes and analyses a part of the data (interviews) collected during the project MYPLACE fieldwork in two cities of Latvia – Rīga and Daugavpils – in 2012/2013. All interviews are anonymous; all the names of respondents are pseudonyms. The paper contains quotations from 14 interviews:

1. Interview with Saivis (Rīga, Latvia).
2. Interview with Ada (Rīga, Latvia).
3. Interview with Irbe (Rīga, Latvia).
4. Interview with Liba (Rīga, Latvia).
5. Interview with Ulla (Rīga, Latvia).
6. Interview with Ella (Rīga, Latvia).
7. Interview with Auce (Rīga, Latvia).
8. Interview with Aksels (Rīga, Latvia).
9. Interview with Eda (Daugavpils, Latvia).
10. Interview with Kate (Daugavpils, Latvia).
11. Interview with Denis (Daugavpils, Latvia).
12. Interview with Niks (Daugavpils, Latvia).
13. Interview with Jurijs (Daugavpils, Latvia).
14. Interview with Vera (Daugavpils, Latvia).

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ИСТОРИЈАТА И МЕМОРИЈАТА ВО СЕКОЈДНЕВНИОТ ЖИВОТ И ОПШТЕСТВЕНИТЕ ТРАУМИ

Гатис Озолинш

Айсџиракџи: Овој труд е базиран на шеесет длабински интервјуа кои беа спроведени во периодот од крајот на 2012 година и почетокот на 2013 година во два главни урбани центри во Летонија – Рига и Даугавпилс – во рамки на MYPLACE (Меморија, Младина, Политичка оставштина и Граѓански активизам), проект за млади луѓе на возраст од 16 до 25 години. Во случајот на Летонија, како многу значаен проблем за собирање на податоците и нивна анализа е јазикот на учесниците во интервјуата. Во целина, интервјуата беа спроведени на два јазика – летонски и руски. Податоците и деталната анализа на наративните фрагменти за историјата покажуваат дека контрадикциите помеѓу учесниците кои зборуваат летонски и оние кои зборуваат руски остануваат мачни и трауматични и, и двете страни (учесниците кои говорат летонски и учесниците кои говорат руски) бараат аргументи да ги оправдаат нивните мислења. Сето ова во суштина влијае врз секојдневниот живот и интерпретацијата на историските настани. Проектот (и делумно овој текст) истражува значајни аспекти на современиот идентитет на младината: 1) сфаќањата на летонската младина за политиката, политичките процеси и нивното влијание врз општеството, како и анализа на мислењата за политичките системи и културата во Европа и Летонија; 2) особено внимание е посветено на концептите на историјата и меморијата во секојдневниот живот; значењето на идентификацијата на историските настани во растот на младинскиот идентитет; 3) врската помеѓу политичките прашања и секојдневниот живот е тесно врзана за процесот на развој на младите луѓе во индивидуи, нивните активности во слободното време и системот на вредности. Овој труд става нагласка на разбирањето на младината за историјата и меморијата во општеството, нивното влијание врз секојдневниот живот и на кој начин различните историски настани и места го конструираат нејзиниот идентитет.

Клучни зборови: младина, исторски места, историски настани, секојдневен живот, политички, историски и национален идентитет.