

Communication of Ethnic Groups in the Public Space: The Case of Daugavpils

VLADISLAV VOLKOV
University of Latvia, Riga

OKSANA RUZHA
Daugavpils University

Formulation of Scientific Research Problems

Interethnic communication is viewed as a form of social communication that happens “between people of different cultures”. Researchers associate the importance of studying such communication with the need to analyse the possibilities for mutual understanding of effective interaction between people of different cultures (Rogers, Hart, Miike 2002, p. 5, 7). Communication between people of different cultures can encompass a wide range of characteristics and goals – from the desire to put forward legitimate claims of ethnic identity to bias against other groups, from the establishment of associative relationships between groups prior to their dissociation (Kim 2006, p. 284, 291), from imposing the dominant culture’s standards and exclusion of non-dominant cultures from public life to the positive recognition of ethno-cultural minorities in the common cultural space (Young 1996, p. 29), etc.

For Latvia, as a traditional multi-ethnic country, the question of influence of different ethnic groups’ identities on the common sphere of public communication, including disputes surrounding issues of the state’s ethnic policy, is extremely relevant. Interethnic communication is a very complex social phenomenon. On the one hand, it is an important way of achieving mutual understanding between ethnic groups when these groups communicate as equal partners. In order to ensure such equal dialogue, ethnic groups are guided by the principles of political equality and universal moral norms (Anderson 1999, pp 302-310; Gordon 2017; Rawls 2005, pp. 60-61, 84, 126-134). Moreover, the appeal to universal moral norms in interethnic communication reflects the interests of socially less protected groups. (Rawls 2005, pp. 395-396)

But on the other hand, interethnic communication expresses the status differences between ethnic groups and institutionalized differences; between the ethno-national majority and ethnic minorities. The expressed ethno-social stratification stimulates the fragmentation of civic culture and enhances the relativity of morality depending on the

evaluation of “us” and “them” (Gert 2016; Freeman, Littlejohn, Pearce 1992, R. pp. 311-329; Harman 1975, pp. 3-22; Waldront 1989, p. 561; Wong 1984, pp. 23-36). However, interethnic communication does not fully reflect these fixed statuses of various ethnic groups. It is dynamic and selective, facilitating only part of the content of the institutional differences between ethnic groups (Barth 1996, pp. 75-82).

This article presents some data on the reproduction of status differences between Latvians and ethnic minorities at the level of interethnic communication between these groups.

Description of Research and Analysis of Empirical Data

The purpose of the article is to show the attitude of different ethnic groups in Latvia (Latvians and some ethnic minorities) to the parameters of the space of public communication that can be used for resolving ethno-political issues. The opinions of respondents from multi-ethnic Daugavpils, the second largest city in Latvia, have been used as the object of analysis. The sociological research was part of the project: “Patterns of Dispute and Dispute Resolution as Elements of Popular Legal Culture” (2014) by Professor Jacek Kurczewski (University of Warsaw).

The number of respondents was 602. The research was aimed at the three largest ethnic groups in Daugavpils – Latvians, Russians and Poles. It should be taken into consideration that the respondents could indicate more than one ethnic identity. As a result, 220 respondents indicated “Latvian” as their only ethnic identity; 202 respondents indicated “Russian” as their only ethnic identity; 180 respondents indicated “Pole” as their only ethnic identity. The inhabitants of Daugavpils in 2014 numbered 87,500 (Russians – 43,900 (50.2% of population), Latvians – 16,500 (18.9%), Poles – 12,200 (13.9%). (Centrālas ... 2016) The overlapping of ethnic and linguistic identities is typical of Latvians and Russians, which is revealed in the absolute dominance of their ethnic group’s mother tongue as a spoken language within the respondents’ families: 85% of Latvians speak Latvian at home on a daily basis, 89.6% of Russians in Russian. 67.5% of Poles speak mainly Russian at home, 13.5% - in Latvian and Polish. (Table 1). The overall majority of respondents in all groups were Latvian citizens (Latvians – 97.7%, Russians – 88.6%, Poles – 88.5%).

People in Daugavpils really value their ethnic identities. Among the types of identities such as territorial (Daugavpils and Latgale residents), ethnic, ethno-linguistic (Slavs), state (a Soviet citizen), and territorial-political (Europeans) offered to the respondents, ethnic identity was ranked as the most important among all ethnic groups. It was ranked the highest for Latvians (52.3%), while ethnic minorities ranked it at approximately the same level (Russians – 44.6%, Poles – 42.5%) (Table 2). The data on the higher level of ethnic identification of Latvians, as compared to ethnic minorities’ identification, correlates with data obtained by other researchers in Latvia, in general. It is also important to note that territorial and ethnic identities of all groups of people in

Daugavpils in total comprise from 70% (Poles) and 80% (Russians) to 90% (Latvians). This provides evidence of the strongest degree of dependence of the collective ethnic identity of citizens in the spheres of their direct daily contacts. However, identification with ethno-linguistic identity (Slavs for Russians and Poles), with the former state identity type (a Soviet citizen), or with the modern type of territorial and political community (Europeans) play almost no significant role.

Table 1.

Language of Daily Communication in the Family. (%)
(Respondents could choose no more than two languages).

Language	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
Latvian	36.2	85.0	9.9	13.5
Russian	58.2	12.7	89.6	67.5
Polish	4.0	-	1.5	13.5
Belarusian	0.5	-	1.0	0.5
Other	0.0	1.4	-	-

Table 2.

Identification of Respondents (in the first place). (%)

	Daugavpils resident	Latgale resident	Latvian	Russian	Pole	Slav	Soviet citizen	European
Latvians	20.5	16.8	52.3	3.6	0	0	1.4	3.2
Russians	35.2	1.0	1.5	44.6	2.5	3.0	2.0	7.9
Poles	22.0	4.5	3.5	5.5	42.5	3.5	1.5	7.5

Positive emotions towards people of different nationalities absolutely dominate in relations between people. It refers to all groups under survey in relation to many other nationalities (Table 3).

Table 3.

Emotions towards people of different nationalities. (%)

Emotions	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
Towards Latvians				
Antipathy, hostility	3.6	1.8	5.5	3.5
Anxiety	4.6	2.3	8.9	2.0
Shame, guilt	3.1	3.6	2.5	3.0
Sympathy, benevolence	67.2	70.9	64.9	68.0
Indifference	12.8	11.8	11.9	15.5

Emotions	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
Towards Russians				
Antipathy, hostility	1.7	4.1	0.5	0.5
Anxiety	4.2	7.3	0.5	4.5
Shame, guilt	0.6	1.4	0.5	0
Sympathy, benevolence	74.6	63.2	87.6	75.0
Indifference	11.5	15.9	5.0	12.5
Towards Belarusians				
Antipathy, hostility	0.5	1.0	0	0.5
Anxiety	1.2	1.8	0	1.5
Shame, guilt	0.3	0	1.0	0
Sympathy, benevolence	72.0	61.4	79.7	76.0
Indifference	18.0	26.8	12.9	14.0
Towards Poles				
Antipathy, hostility	0.9	1.4	1.0	0.5
Anxiety	1.1	1.4	1.0	1.0
Shame, guilt	0.5	0	0.5	1.0
Sympathy, benevolence	67.3	58.2	69.8	78.0
Indifference	21.8	30.0	20.8	11.5
Towards Jews				
Antipathy, hostility	1.4	2.3	1.5	0.5
Anxiety	2.6	2.7	1.5	4.0
Shame, guilt	0.8	1.0	0.5	1.0
Sympathy, benevolence	57.7	48.6	64.9	62.5
Indifference	28.6	35.5	25.2	23.0
Towards Lithuanians				
Antipathy, hostility	1.1	2.3	0.5	1.0
Anxiety	1.2	1.8	0.0	2.0
Shame, guilt	0.6	0.5	1.0	0.5
Sympathy, benevolence	63.6	59.1	67.3	66.5
Indifference	24.9	27.7	23.8	21.5
Towards Estonians				
Antipathy, hostility	0.6	1.0	0.5	0.5
Anxiety	1.2	1.8	0.5	1.5
Shame, guilt	0.7	0	0.5	0.5
Sympathy, benevolence	59.8	55.0	64.4	62.5
Indifference	29.6	33.6	26.7	26.5

The research revealed a rather high degree of the respondents' interest in the use of public communication for emphasizing and resolving ethno-political issues. Latvians, as well as ethnic minorities, expressed this kind of interest. The majority of respondents (50-75%) expressed a desire for this kind of discussion in the public sphere (for example, discussions with representatives of different ethnicities, or politicians) as well as in the private sphere (for example, with relatives or friends). This desire seems more explicit among Russian than among Latvian respondents. Especially large differences can be observed in the desire to discuss inter-ethnic issues with representatives of the government and politicians (74.5% of Russians and 50.5% of Latvians consider it important); in the media (74.5% and 58.2% respectively); with members of political parties that respondents voted for (66.3% and 46.4%, respectively) and even among their friends (73.9% and 58.6%, respectively) (Table 4).

Table 4.

Most Desirable Discussion Types of Ethno-Political Issues in Latvian Society (%).

Kind of discussions and participants	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
within discussions with representatives of different ethnicities	73.8	75.9	77.2	68.5
with relatives	68.9	67.3	72.8	70.5
with friends	66.7	58.6	73.9	70.5
in the media	66.1	58.2	74.5	66.0
with representatives of the government and politicians	59.8	50.5	74.5	57.0
with members of the parties the respondents voted for in the election	55.0	46.4	66.3	54.0
in anonymous comments on the Internet	30.7	25.9	31.0	32.0
not worth to discuss all these issues with anybody	10.7	9.5	7.1	14.0

However, the respondents expressed desires for public communication on the issues of ethnic policy turned out to be more explicit than the real practice of these kinds of discussions. Less than half of respondents have a personal experience with regards to discussing the outcomes of the referendum on providing Russian language the status of the second official language and the initiative of transitioning all education in Latvia to Latvian, as the only language of instruction (Tables 5 and 6). Nevertheless, the index of 30-40% for those who discussed extremely acute issues of Latvia's ethno-political life in their private, as well as public lives, in general reflects the level of political involvement in Latvia and the EU. According to Eurobarometer data, the share of the population who publicly express their opinions on socially significant topics comprises 30% in Latvia and the EU. Eurobarometer recorded these expressions on the Internet and on social networks. (Flash Eurobarometer 2013, pp. 27-29; 2014) Latvian political scientists mention contradictory tendencies in citizens' political participation; mainly its low level and since the mid-2000s, the increased need for mechanisms of direct democracy tied to

the explicit distrust of politicians at the same time. It is especially notable that more than a third of respondents took part in discussions of these issues with Latvians, as well as with Russians, taking into consideration that the mass media discussed these problems only either with Latvian-speaking or Russian speaking audiences separately. (Ijabs 2014, p. 213-214; Nikišins et al. 2014, p. 241; Zepa 1999, pp. 8-10) Therefore, the level of recognition of the need for communication between Latvians and ethnic minorities is similar to the level of discussion on significant social issues in Europe.

Table 5.

Personal Experience of Discussing the Outcome of the Referendum on Giving Russian Language the Status of Second Official Language (%).

Personal experience of discussing	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
with relatives only	47.2	51.8	47.3	42.5
with friends only	39.0	41.4	39.1	35.5
with Latvians and Russians	38.9	36.8	34.8	40.0
with different people, also with colleagues at work	37.3	28.6	42.9	38.0
only within the respondent's ethnic group	13.0	13.6	13.0	11.5
have not discussed with anyone	36.1	38.2	30.0	42.5

Table 6.

Personal Experience of Discussing Outcomes of the Initiative of Transitioning all Education in Latvia to Latvian, as the only language of instruction (%).

Personal experience of discussing	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
with relatives only	35.5	37.7	34.2	35.0
with friends only	34.1	30.0	41.8	31.0
with Latvians and Russians	32.4	29.1	33.2	32.5
with different people, also with colleagues at work	32.2	33.2	34.2	30.5
only within the respondent's ethnic group	13.3	11.8	11.4	17.0
have not discussed with anyone	42.0	45.5	34.2	47.0

In general, these data correlate to the respondents' attitude towards manifestations of xenophobia in relation to their ethnic group that are exposed in mass media. Half of respondents (50.6%) stated that when they come across these facts they just ignore them. This is definitely a kind of habitual response to the state of ethnic hate exaggerated by some mass media. Discussion on this topic in a narrow circle of relatives and friends is characteristic of less than two-thirds of respondents (61.8%). Less than a third of respondents (28.5%) dare to openly debate this issue with representatives of the nationality who often express negative assessments of a national group the respondent belongs to. The share of Russian respondents is even smaller – 23.3%. Respondents tend

to sub-delegate these issues to the political parties they are going to vote for in the next election (58.5%). Russian respondents tend to do this even more often (in 66.8% of cases). What is especially unpleasant is that the negative ethno-political background of part of Latvia's mass media directly negatively affects interethnic relations, and provokes the self-isolation of ethno-linguistic communities from each other. The position: "I try not to communicate with the people of the nationality that expresses negative assessments towards the national group I belong to" was supported by more than a third of all respondents (36.8%), including more than two-fifths of Poles (42.5%) and Russians (41.1%) (Table 7). These figures also give cause to significantly adjust the real level of interethnic feelings in Latvia.

Table 7.

Attitudes towards the manifestations of xenophobia in relation to their ethnic group that are exposed in mass media (Answer: "Yes") (%).

Attitudes	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
discussing with friends and relatives	61.8	57.7	67.3	62.0
I will vote for the party that protects my nationality	58.5	58.6	66.8	49.5
I try not to communicate with people of the nationality that express negative assessments towards the national group I belong to	36.8	28.6	41.1	42.5
debate with representatives of the nationality who often express negative assessments of a national group the respondent belongs to	28.5	31.4	23.3	29.0

Comparing the data from Tables 5, 6 and 7 shows that about one third of respondents participate in all debates between Latvians and ethnic minorities on the issues of the referendum, transition of education, and xenophobia in the mass media. Apparently, this is the part of Latvia's population that finds the issues of preserving and protecting the collective ethnic identity very significant in their behavioural practices. Moreover, this kind of emphasis on ethnic identity within this part of the population has remained unchanged for a long period.

These data speak not only of the fact that society in general (both ethnic minorities and Latvians) is concerned about the state of interethnic relations (despite the authorities' rhetoric) but also about the fact that beliefs about the need for public debates on these issues are incorporated into the respondents' beliefs about the level of the existing fairness of ethno-political values and institutions, towards Latvians and ethnic minorities. Attitudes towards the opportunity to use the public sphere of communication between Latvians and ethnic minorities, and between them and the state, the main subject of ethnic policy, depends on to what extent these groups consider such public communication to be a prerequisite for the achievement of a fair consensus on ethno-political issues. The research assumed that the attitude of representatives of

the ethno-national majority and ethnic minorities towards issues of ethnic policy reflect their beliefs concerning the degree of fairness of existing legal and political institutions, and – above all – the legal system. The survey data proved this hypothesis.

Respondents think that issues which directly affect the institutionalization of their collective ethnic identities should be resolved by a mechanism of direct democracy such as referendum. The mechanism of referendum turned out to be far more important than court or parliamentary authority. For example, when answering the question on which way of resolving the collision (people's opinions on the issue of providing one of the ethnic groups' mother tongue with the status of second official language alongside Latvian) is more acceptable, the majority of respondents (59.5%) found it important to hold a referendum (Table 8). The data for this research were obtained after the 2012 referendum on making Russian the second official language. Although, the outcomes of the referendum resulted in a considerable split between the Latvian part of society and ethnic minorities, Latvia's population still deems this method of resolving ethno-political issues the most important. A symbolic presentation of their collective identity by means of mechanisms of direct democracy is much more important for different ethnic groups, than the ability of the authorities to resolve ethno-political issues. It is also notable that this opinion was expressed by Latvians in Daugavpils, comprising about one-fifth of the city's population; hence recognizing the possible outcome might be the opinion of the majority that they do not belong to.

Table 8.

Acceptable Ways of Resolving the Collision (the issue of providing the mother tongue of one of the ethnic groups with the status of second official language alongside Latvian). (%)

Ways of Resolving the Collision	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
the issue should be resolved by the court	5.6	3.2	8.9	6.5
find a compromise between parties of collision	16.1	17.7	16.3	16.5
we must wait for new elections for a change in power	2.9	1.8	5.4	2.0
the parliament should decide it	8.7	15.0	4.5	5.5
local authorities should resolve the collision	2.5	1.8	1.5	4.0
hold a referendum in the region	23.4	21.4	24.3	23.0
hold a referendum in the territory	36.1	36.8	39.1	29.5

Compared to Latvians, ethnic minorities more often mention the imperfections of the legal system; 48.4% of Russians and 38.5% of Poles, as compared to 27.7% of Latvians, think that "Latvia's legal system requires dramatic changes". Statist beliefs about the purposes of the existing legal system are more typical of Latvians than ethnic minorities. 55.9% of Latvians, 44.6% of Russian and 38.5% of Poles recognized the primary purpose of the legal system as "the law must provide order and discipline within the state". And vice versa, among Latvians there was a smaller group of respondents,

compared to Russians and Poles, who considered the primary purpose of the legal system to be “to provide people with the opportunity to realise their needs and interests” (12.3%, 22.8 and 28.5% respectively) (Tables 9 and 10).

Table 9.

Assessment of the Legal System in Latvia (%).

The assessment	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
legal system requires dramatic changes	38.2	27.7	47.5	38.5
mostly good, but not actually used	20.6	21.8	17.8	20.5
the situation with the law and its application is good	17.6	21.8	14.9	17.0
it's hard to say	23.4	28.6	19.3	11.5

Table 10.

Primary Purpose of the Legal System (%).

Primary purpose	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
to ensure the change and development of our society	20.3	18.2	19.8	21.0
to resolve quarrels and conflicts between people	12.4	13.6	11.4	12.0
to provide order and discipline within the state	46.1	55.9	45.5	38.5
to provide people with the opportunity to realise their needs and interests	20.9	12.3	22.3	28.5

For the most part, ethnic minority respondents perceive the Latvian public environment as open for realising their collective ethnic identities. It refers not only to the real assessment of existing rights for realising collective ethnic identity, in general. A significant number of the respondents attribute their collective rights with more possibilities than they have in reality. A major portion of respondents (78.9%) is well aware of the guaranteed right for the functioning of mass media in the languages of ethnic minorities. There is approximately the same level of awareness of the existence of private education in the aforesaid languages (76.0%). The level of awareness of the right for a portion of state-financed basic education to function in these languages turns out to be lower (68.2%). However, a relatively large share of respondents (approximately 20-30%) was unable to provide a positive answer to these questions. This points to the underestimation of real possibilities that ethnic minorities have for preserving their identity in Latvia. On the other hand, a relatively large share of respondents is almost sure that “higher education financed by the state can function” in ethnic minority languages (38.4%), and among Russian respondents – almost a half (48.0%). The number of respondents that believe “the names of places where national minorities reside can be duplicated” in these languages is strikingly similar (37.9%); Russian respondents (48.0%). Exactly half of all respondents (50.0%) are sure that “it is possible to make complaints and applications to local authorities” in ethnic minority languages, with

more than a third (38.2%) – that “it is possible to make complaints and applications to state authorities” in ethnic minority languages (Table 11).

Table 11.
Rights of National Minority Languages in Latvia (Answer: “Yes”) (%).

The rights	All	Latvians	Russians	Poles
the existence of mass media	78.9	80.0	82.7	74.0
the existence of a portion of basic education financed by the state	68.2	64.6	76.7	61.5
the existence of private education	76.0	75.5	78.2	75.0
higher education financed by the state can function	38.4	39.6	48.0	25.0
names of places where national minorities reside can be duplicated in the minority language	37.9	35.0	48.0	32.5
it is possible to make complaints and applications to local authorities	50.0	48.2	60.9	40.5
it is possible to make complaints and applications to state authorities	38.2	34.1	51.5	30.0
if officials do not answer to requests in languages of national minorities, you can sue these officials	19.7	17.7	22.2	18.0

People in Daugavpils apparently overestimate the framework of ethnic minority rights. However, it is impossible to evaluate this situation without additional research. Nevertheless, a more optimistic view of the capabilities of ethnic minorities in Latvia than is the case in reality, encourages a decrease in the potential for ethno-political conflict and stabilization of the ethno-political situation. This fact might be interpreted as approval of the enhancement of the role of ethnic minority languages in Latvia’s society by a significant share of respondents; as legitimate expectations of part of Latvia’s society. The existing misinterpretations of real ethnic minority rights in Latvia that occur in the public consciousness, apparently reflect the situation within society, where there have been almost no discussions regarding issues concerning these groups of people in recent years. Moreover, even the “Harmony” political party, which the majority of ethnic minority representatives usually vote for in elections, distances itself from these types of discussions.

Conclusions

Democratic multi-ethnic states set themselves a particularly challenging goal: to ensure the integration of society based on the culture of the ethnic majority, all the while respecting the cultures of ethnic minorities. This implies the structuring of ethnic identities. At the same time, Republicanism protects the principle of the equality of citizens with different ethnic identities in all spheres of public and private life. The

functioning of the common public space of inter-ethnic communication without hard barriers is an important criterion for the recognition of multi-ethnic diversity and the equality of all citizens, irrespective of their ethnic origin and cultivated ethnic identity. The study in Daugavpils has confirmed the relevance of this approach. This study has shown the existing untapped reserves of liberal values to create an open space of public communication for all ethnic groups.

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to show the attitude of different ethnic groups in Latvia (Latvians and a portion of ethnic minorities) to parameters of the public communication space that can be used for resolving ethno-political issues. The opinions of respondents from the multi-ethnic city of Daugavpils, the second largest in Latvia, have been utilised as the object of analysis. The sociological research was part of the project: “Patterns of Dispute and Dispute Resolution as Elements of Popular Legal Culture” (2014), led by Professor Jacek Kurczewski (University of Warsaw).

Keywords: ethnic groups, ethnic identity, public communication, ethno-political life.