

Granting Local Voting Rights to Non-Citizens in Estonia and Latvia: The Conundrum of Minority Representation in Two Divided Democracies

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This paper analyzes the Estonian and Latvian policy-making process with regard to non-citizens' right to vote in local elections. While in Estonia the right of all permanent residents to vote in local elections was already enshrined in the 1992 constitution, in Latvia non-citizens are to this day completely disenfranchised, and this issue is still a source of heated political debate. Why did Estonia and Latvia take different courses with regard to their non-citizens' political rights? And, more crucially, what can this tell us about minority substantive representation in Estonia and Latvia? I approach the Estonian and Latvian cases through the method of process tracing and argue that, taken together, they reveal the existence of a *voice/polarization dilemma* which blurs the boundaries between competing theories of minority political representation.

Keywords: representation; minorities; democracy; Estonia; Latvia; Russian-speakers.

The Estonian and Latvian post-1991 citizenship laws that granted citizenship only to those who had been citizens of the inter-war republics of Estonia and Latvia and their descendants created a new category of permanent residents in these two countries: the non-citizens.¹ These are former Soviet Union citizens who did not qualify for Latvian or Estonian citizenship by birth and, over the years, were neither naturalized nor acquired the citizenship of a third country. Non-citizens are almost exclusively Russian-speakers and, largely because of pre-accession pressures from the EU, they were issued special “alien passports” by the Estonian and Latvian governments (Roots, 2012). In 2012 there were 93,006 and 280,584 permanent residents who fell under this category in Estonia and Latvia respectively.² In both countries, non-citizens

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enjoy a restricted set of rights compared to citizens, including restricted political rights. The question of voting rights is particularly controversial as it determines the degree to which a substantial portion of the minority population can take part in the democratic process of their country of residence.

Interestingly, despite their relatively similar historical contexts, Estonia and Latvia have followed different paths in addressing this issue. While in Estonia the right of all permanent residents to vote in local elections was already enshrined in the 1992 constitution, in Latvia non-citizens are to this day totally disenfranchised and this remains a hotly-debated question.

In this article I analyze the decision-making processes that brought these different outcomes and their implications for minority political representation in Estonia and Latvia and for the academic debate about the democratic representation of ethnic minorities. I use the issue of non-citizen voting rights as an entry-point into broader questions of minority representation, and argue that the comparison of the policy-processes in Estonia and Latvia testifies to its complex nature. My analysis shows how minority voice and ethnic polarization stand in a contradictory relationship, what I call the *voice/polarization dilemma*. Indeed, the case of Estonia demonstrates that the de-ethnicization of politics can mean both more favourable policies for the minority *and* minority political marginalization. The case of Latvia shows how ethnicized politics can lead to ethnic polarization *and* higher legitimacy and independence of the minority voice in the political arena.

These findings suggest that evaluating the openness of a country's minority policies is not enough to understand minority representation: more attention must be paid to the extent to which minorities and their representatives can effectively take part in the policy-making process. This paper builds on the existing debate on minority representation and is informed by Iris Marion Young's insights on democratic quality and inclusion (Young, 2000). It suggests that a methodological and theoretical shift from an outcome-centred to a process-centred understanding of minority representation allows for a deeper debate on the way inclusion/exclusion mechanisms can operate within the democratic processes of ethnically-divided democracies.

In this article, I will first set the theoretical framework of my analysis, making a case for focusing on the policy-making process in order to better understand minority representation. Then I will proceed to closely analyze the policy-making

process on non-citizens' voting rights in Estonia and in Latvia and to show how these two cases illustrate two faces of the same *voice/polarization dilemma*. Third, I will discuss the implications of my findings. Finally, the conclusions provide a summary of the main arguments of the paper.

1. Minority representation: from descriptive representation and conflict management to substantive representation and quality of democracy

In her seminal book on political representation Hanna Pitkin (1967) introduced the distinction between the number and role of elected representatives who belong to a defined group (*descriptive representation*) and the extent to which this group has a voice in the policy-making process and an impact on actual policies (*substantive representation*). While substantive representation and its relationship with descriptive representation have long been at the centre of US studies on black political representation (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Griffin and Newman, 2008; Mansbridge, 1999; Swain, 1993; Ueda, 2008), literature on minority representation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) tends to concentrate on descriptive representation, while references to substantive representation are rare.³ A popular strand in this literature is concerned with the impact of electoral rules on the emergence of ethnic parties and their electoral success (Bochsler, 2010; Friedman, 2005; Protsyk and Maticescu, 2010). However, this approach takes descriptive representation as its dependent variable, that is, as a goal in its own right; in so doing it fails to problematize the relationship between minority presence and the minority's actual political power.

Another typical approach is concerned with the effects of descriptive representation (especially through ethnic parties) on democratization and inter-ethnic conflict. Typically, one of two views is upheld in this literature with regard to the effects (and desirability) of ethnic minority representation. Roughly put, the politicization of ethnicity, especially in the form of minority representation through ethnic parties, is seen either as a potential trigger for conflict in ethnically-divided democracies, or as a positive factor for democratic stability and inter-ethnic peace.

Those who find that the politicization of ethnicity has mostly negative effects highlight the fact that it leads to ethnic polarization and the entrenchment of political positions along ethnic lines (e.g. Diamond and Gunther, 2001; Horowitz, 1985; Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972). This view, which we can call the *polarization paradigm*, sees ethnicity as an uncompromising, zero-sum issue, and politicized

ethnicity (especially in the form of ethnic parties) as dangerous for the peaceful course of democracy. Ethnic parties, which rely on constituencies defined by their ethnic attributes, have an incentive to radicalize their positions in order to avoid losing votes to more radical competitors—a phenomenon known as ethnic outbidding (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972). As a consequence, high minority descriptive representation in political institutions and electorally strong ethnic parties lead to ethnic polarization. Thus, the politicization of ethnicity is not conducive to compromise solutions, and ends up being counterproductive for the minority, as minority-friendly policies become less likely.

Authors that take the opposite view, which can be called the *presence paradigm*, point at the necessity for minority inclusion and participation, the democratic importance of minority presence in the political debate, and the trust towards state institutions that comes with inclusion (e.g. Chandra, 2005; Ishiyama, 2009; Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995; Stroschein, 2001). This paradigm considers ethnicity to be a flexible political cue and sees ethnic parties as positive for democracy (Birnie, 2007): ethnic parties peacefully articulate minority demands, include minorities in the political process, and institutionalize conflict. As Stroschein put it, '[ethnic parties] “domesticate” ethnic issues into institutional forms, allowing these issues to be resolved in parliament rather than through violence’ (2001: 61). As a consequence, minority political presence has positive effects on democratic stability and increases the potential for the minority to have an impact on policy-making and to reach compromise solutions.

Although both paradigms reveal important aspects of minority representation, they tend to take the absence of inter-ethnic conflict as the main measure of successful minority integration in the democratic process, thus pushing aside issues of the quality of democracy in ethnically-divided societies. However, if we follow Iris Marion Young’s claim that ‘the normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes’ (Young, 2000: 5-6),⁴ then it is clear that the absence of conflict cannot be the only measuring stick for ethnically-divided democracies. Young’s insight suggests that in order to study minority representation we cannot limit the analysis to policy outcomes only, but we must look into decision-making processes, tracing the way they develop and the actors, factors and interactions that shape them.

The method of process tracing allows for such an analysis. Process tracing is defined by David Collier as ‘an analytic tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence’ (Collier, 2011: 824), and consists in the intensive description of events that unfolded over time (in the case of this article the policy-making process), in order to construct ‘analytically organized narratives’ (Van Cott, 2005: 21) with the aim of uncovering causal mechanisms and patterns.⁵ By putting the focus on the decision-making process (and the power relations within it), process tracing enables a methodological and theoretical shift from questions of presence and conflict management to questions of substantive representation and quality of democracy.

This shift has two main advantages. Firstly, by privileging power dynamics in the decision-making process over policy output as the main focus of analysis, this method does not require the researcher to pre-emptively define a minority’s innate interests, and so avoids the pitfall of ‘groupism’ (Brubaker, 2004). This also leaves room for a flexible understanding of representation not simply as a one-way relationship (in which the representative represents the interests of the represented) but as a dynamic, two-way process in which the representative plays a role in the creation of the group it claims to represent (Saward, 2010). Secondly, by focusing on the interaction between the majority and minority within the policy-making process, this method does not take the minority as a mere object of policy, but as an actor in its own right.

Finally, it is important to note that my focus on minority representation assumes that domestic factors are central in determining policy-making dynamics and, ultimately, policy outcomes in ethnically-split democracies. Pressures from international bodies have often been identified as one of the major influencing factors in determining minority-related policy choices in Estonia and Latvia (Gelazis, 2003) and other CEE countries (Kelley, 2004). However, several studies have questioned the centrality of international pressures in explaining minority policies: scholars have observed that international pressures on minority policies are effective only insofar as domestic considerations allow them to be (Agarin, 2010: 118), and that formal compliance with international recommendations significantly differs from actual change in domestic attitudes towards minorities (Sasse, 2008; Schulze, 2010). My findings confirm the limitations of explanations for minority policies that are based primarily on international pressures.

2. Estonia: policy concessions and minority political marginalization

‘The aliens will stay in Estonia, they will not leave, and they will influence the Estonian political process. With this bill we are giving them the right to do so legally. If we take the right to run for local elections away from them, they will find other ways to do it.’
A. Ojasalu (Riigikogu, May 12, 1993)⁶

The 1992 Citizenship Act de facto disenfranchised most Russian-speakers in the very period in which the foundations for the newly independent, democratic Estonia were being laid. Most Russian-speakers did not have the right to vote in the constitutional referendum on June 28, 1992, nor in the general elections on September 20 of the same year (Järve, 2009). Not one Russian-speaker was elected in the first post-independence *Riigikogu* (the Estonian parliament) and the first laws passed by this mono-ethnic parliament aimed at reinforcing the ethnically-based understanding of the Estonian state enshrined in the national elite’s restorationist discourse (Melvin, 1995: 45; Mole, 2012: 98). No ethnic-Russian parties were present in parliament at that point.

Nevertheless, already in 1992, arguably at the peak of Estonian national restoration (Agarin, 2010: 99; Mole, 2012: 92–8), the constituent forces agreed on guaranteeing the right to vote locally to all permanent residents, regardless of their citizenship status. The 1992 Estonian constitution prescribes that ‘in elections to local government councils, persons who reside permanently in the territory of the local government and have attained eighteen years of age have the right to vote, under conditions prescribed by law’ (art. 156). It has been argued that the motive behind this was the conscious desire of the Estonian elite to be seen by the outside world as ‘Western, liberal and democratic’ after the ethnically-homogenous result of the 1992 general elections had ‘cast doubt on Estonia’s “democratic consolidation”’ (Mole, 2012: 99). However, the principle was already enshrined in the constitution, which was written and approved by referendum months before the first democratic elections of independent Estonia. The explanation for this early decision must therefore be found in the very process of drafting the new Estonian constitution and the subsequent Law on Local Elections.

The composition of the Estonian Constitutional Assembly (ECA) was the result of a compromise between the Estonian Supreme Council, elected by the entire

population before the boundaries of citizenship had been designed, and the Estonian Committee, elected only by pre-war citizens and with a more restorationist outlook (Järve, 1995: 19–30). Only seven of its sixty members were Russian-speakers and the proceedings were held exclusively in Estonian (Metcalf, 1996: 231). Notwithstanding the undeniable underrepresentation of Russian-speakers, the Assembly agreed already in 1991 that all permanent residents be granted the right to vote *and stand for elections* at the local level. However, the Assembly members were well aware of the political implications of any decision regarding Russian-speakers' rights, and thus consciously decided on a wording that left room for interpretation (ECA debate, March 27, 1992). The interpretation of article 156 was therefore left to then Estonian-only *Riigikogu*, during the discussion on the Law on Local Elections, adopted in May 1993.

The parliamentary debate on this law shows a clear divide between those who wanted to interpret article 156 in the most restrictive terms possible, and those who appealed to the more liberal intentions of the constituents. The 1993 government's draft law followed this second interpretation. Interestingly, this draft law was drawn up by the first elected government of independent Estonia, headed by the conservative prime minister Mart Laar, which was composed of a coalition of parties with an exclusivist approach to citizenship and that 'had benefited from the elections being dominated by nationalist issues' (Galbreath, 2005: 120).

No party was arguing at this stage for the political rights of the non-citizens and third-country nationals as a matter of principle. Those coalition MPs who defended the government's draft did so with purely pragmatic arguments: the impossibility to contradict the constitution; the risk that, had the law been appealed to the Constitutional Court, the upcoming local elections would have to be postponed; and the fact that non-citizens, if deprived of a legal way to influence politics, would do so by illegal means (Riigikogu, May 12, 1993). Nationalist MPs suggested restrictive interpretations of article 156 that would have reduced (or eliminated tout court) the number of non-citizens the article applies to.

In the end, the Law on Local Elections was passed in an amended version that scrapped any provision for passive voting rights and granted the right to vote in local elections to all non-citizens and third-country nationals who have been permanently residing for at least five years in the municipality where they wish to vote. Even so,

only 52 deputies (just one more than the minimum required) voted in favour of the law.

Different reasons have been suggested for the willingness of the Laar government to adopt a liberal approach. Certainly pressures from international organizations, which pushed for granting political rights to non-citizens (Galbreath, 2005: 164), were felt strongly by an elite that had enthusiastically adopted the rhetoric of the “return to Europe” (Smith, 2003: 9). But the outcome cannot be explained by the desire to “be Western” alone: after all Latvia, which was subjected to the same pressures, did not guarantee voting rights to its non-citizens.

We must therefore turn to domestic considerations to understand the policy outcome. Firstly, the fact that the first post-independence parliament was made up entirely of ethnic Estonians meant that the Estonian elite felt more safely in control of the state and, thus, could be more magnanimous towards non-citizens (Mole, 2012: 90). The input of the Russian-speaking elite was almost non-existent at this stage, and the Law on Local Elections was entirely drafted by the government without documented public consultations. Centrist MPs, who tended to take a liberal approach to minority issues, mentioned in the debate that they had discussed the issue with “Russian community leaders (Riigikogu, May 12, 1993). This—if anything—shows the intention of the moderate-liberal elite to find a solution that could be acceptable for all the parties involved. However, these “community leaders” were not elected officials or in any way designated representatives of the Russian-speaking minority. The Estonian moderate elite was therefore entirely free to choose which community leaders to consult and, if need be, to disregard their opinions.

Moreover, the government had reasons to fear unrest among the Russian-speakers, especially in the Russian-speaking northeast, where most of the population had been disenfranchised by the citizenship law (Melvin, 1995: 44–5). It was deemed safer for the government to provide a legal, and to a certain extent controllable, channel for the political participation of the non-citizens (Riigikogu, May 12, 1993). Indeed, in 1993, granting local voting rights to all permanent residents succeeded in defusing tensions in the areas where the Russian-speakers constituted a majority. At the same time, restricting the right to stand for local elections to Estonian citizens deactivated the radical section of the Russian-speaking political elite (who would not apply for citizenship) by excluding it from electoral competition (Daatland and Svege, 2000: 267). In the northeast, where this exclusion risked creating a political deadlock,

the government awarded citizenship for special services to the country to a number of Russophone candidates (Metcalf, 1996: 229). These candidates could thus stand for elections, but their participation was guaranteed as an exceptional measure by a decision of the national elite. In the local elections that followed, Russophone parties, which had initially been successful in municipalities with a large Russian-speaking electorate, lost most of their electorate to the Centre Party, a moderate Estonian party (Toots, 2006). The emergence of the Centre Party as the favourite party among the Russian-speaking voters both at the national and at the local level reinforced the tendency for minority co-optation.

After its approval in 1993, the Law on Local Elections was re-drafted in 2002 and amended in 2006. The 2002 version of the law left all the central provisions regarding non-citizens unchanged. One of the main reasons for the new law was the need to include the right for all EU citizens residing in Estonia to participate in local elections (both as voters and as candidates), a requirement for the 2004 accession to the EU. The Estonian United People's Party (EUPP)—a moderate Russian-speakers' party that at the time had six MPs in parliament—raised the issue of unequal treatment between (possibly newly-arrived) EU citizens and the non-citizens, who had lived in Estonia their whole lives and many of whom were actually born in Estonia (Riigikogu, January 23, 2002). However, these attempts to renegotiate non-citizens' rights did not gain the support of any other party. Not even the Centre Party, whose popularity among the Russian-speaking electorate was steadily increasing, showed any willingness to discuss passive voting rights for non-citizens.

The 2006 amendments lifted the five-year residency requirement and added article 5.1, which defined the meaning of the term 'alien' (*välismaalane*) as 'a person who is not a citizen of the Republic of Estonia or of a Member State of the European Union'. However, these amendments did not change much in practice: the five-year residency requirement was a hindrance only for a small number of aliens (Riigikogu, September 20, 2006), while the new article 5.1 simply reaffirmed the hitherto customary interpretation of the law. Notwithstanding the opposition of the nationalist parties *Isamaa* and *Res Publica* to lifting the five-year residency requirement on the grounds that the non-citizens' loyalty cannot be taken for granted (Riigikogu, September 20 and October 11, 2006), the amendments were approved with practically no debate and did not raise any interest in the media. It must be noted that at this stage no Russophone party was represented in parliament and the "Russian vote" was

gained mainly by the Centre Party, which also counted almost all of the (admittedly few) Russian-speaking MPs.

The virtual lack of parliamentary debate and media coverage on both the 2002 and 2006 amendments to the Law on Local Elections testifies to the fact that the aliens' right to vote in local elections is a broadly-accepted fact in Estonia. As is the fact that non-citizens cannot stand for elections. Indeed, even if there were an interest on the part of the non-citizens to be granted local passive voting rights, there would currently be no political force willing or in a position to advocate for such a right. On the one hand, the decline of the Russophone parties (which have not won *Riigikogu* seats since 2003) means that they do not have a valid platform to advocate for passive voting rights for all permanent residents. On the other hand, the party that currently represents most Russian-speakers and (locally) non-citizens, the Centre Party, has no interest in pursuing reform that could potentially favour the emergence of new competitors in local elections. With the question of active voting rights settled once and for all, passive voting rights for aliens is a non-issue in Estonia.

In conclusion, non-citizens acquired local voting rights as a result of a debate that took place almost exclusively within the ethnic Estonian elite. After that, the failure of the Russophone parties to establish a significant representative presence meant that ethnic-based demands were reabsorbed by the mainstream parties (predominantly the Centre Party). While, within the *polarization paradigm*, a de-ethnicized party system is seen as a positive development for a country's peace and stability (Mole, 2012: 99; Reilly, 2003; Stepan, 2001), it poses some serious questions about the quality of minority representation and the status of the minority voice in the political debate. Indeed, the Centre Party's success among the Russian-speakers did not always translate into coherent policy positions.⁷ Perhaps more importantly, it did not bring about a significant change of discourse with regard to the Russophone minority and its role in the Estonian state: a strong exclusionary discourse on ethno-linguistic lines persists both at the political level (Agarin, 2010; Lagerspetz, 2001) and among the general population (Heidmets, 2007: 58).

Therefore, the Estonian case illustrates one side of the *voice/polarization dilemma*. On the one hand, low polarization over the issue of non-citizens' voting rights created the conditions for the adoption of a liberal policy. On the other hand, this came at the price of an almost complete lack of effective minority voice in the policy-making process. Lack of polarization over minority issues is thus not

necessarily a good indicator of democratic quality in ethnically-diverse democracies; it can also be an indicator of minority exclusion from the democratic process.

3. Latvia: the other side of the voice/polarization dilemma

‘Clearly today the majority will reject the proposal, and clearly we will use other non-parliamentary means to reach the goal: we will collect the signatures for a referendum. Maybe that will fail but we will go as far as it takes. I am not sure this will be good for the state and society, though.’

J. Urbanovičs (FHRUL parliamentary group, Saeima January 27, 2000)

‘You see what happens when we give in? They have already taken fortress after fortress. They will not stop until they gain power!’

P. Tabūns (TB/LNNK, January 27, 2000)

The Latvian constitution reserves the right to vote and stand for election in the local government to Latvian citizens only, and, after EU accession, to all EU citizens who permanently reside in Latvia (art. 101). As a result, about 14% of the total population of Latvia—the non-citizens—are entirely disenfranchised

Three circumstances might explain the difference between the Estonian and Latvian constitutional provisions with regard to their permanent residents’ political rights. Firstly, in Latvia the 1922 constitution was reinstated after independence. Opportunities for bargaining and for pragmatic considerations, provided in Estonia by the Constitutional Assembly, were therefore decidedly more restricted in Latvia. Secondly, demographic considerations dictated a different strategy to the Latvian national elites (Pettai and Kreuzer, 1998: 171). While in Estonia the Russian-speaking population is concentrated in the northeast and in Tallinn (where ethnic Estonians still constitute a majority), in Latvia the Russian-speaking population is more dispersed and constitutes a majority or a substantial minority in all the largest cities, including the capital Riga. Finally, since inter-war Latvia had a bigger Russian-speaking community than inter-war Estonia, more Russian-speakers acquired citizenship by birth in independent Latvia. Already in 1993, year of the first post-independence elections, 16% of the *citizenry* was Russian-speaking (Agarin, 2010: 94). Therefore, unlike in Estonia, in post-independence Latvia there was a substantial Russian-speaking electorate and ethnic-Russian parties were competing in elections. According to the *Saeima* (the Latvian parliament) statistics, in the first post-

independence parliament there were 12 non-Latvian MPs and 20 MPs were elected with Russophone parties.⁸

The fact that the first Latvian post-independence parliament was not compactly “native” had an important implication. Having to compete in elections with the Russian-speakers’ parties, the Latvian national elite felt in a less safe position than the Estonian elite, and were less inclined to make concessions that would have favoured their competitors. This was especially so given that the control over Riga and the other four largest Latvian cities was at stake.⁹ Therefore, while in Estonia the question of granting voting rights to non-citizens was from the very beginning mostly internal to the Estonian national elite (that is, between the Estonian moderates and the Estonian nationalists), in Latvia it was principally an issue of contention between the Latvian national elite and the Russian-speaking political elite.

The de facto disenfranchisement of about a sixth of the population of Latvia attracted the attention of the international bodies that were monitoring Latvia’s democratization process and societal stability. The Council of Europe, the OSCE, the United Nations and the European Union all issued recommendations to the Latvian government to grant voting rights at the local level to non-citizens. However, fears over the survival of the Latvian nation inscribed in the national elite’s restorationist discourse (Agarin, 2010: 99) added to more pragmatic demographic and political considerations meant that there was no incentive for the elite to accede to external pressures on the issue of non-citizens’ voting rights.¹⁰

The proposal to grant local voting rights to non-citizens was advanced already in the first post-independence parliament (Saeima, December 16, 1993), and similar proposals were regularly presented by the Russophone parliamentary opposition.¹¹ The arguments put forward by the Russophone parties in favour of such a reform developed over time. While in the first years after independence the proponents of voting rights for non-citizens appealed to the fact that the nationalists’ exclusionary attitude was ungrateful towards those non-citizens who had fought for Latvia’s independence (Saeima, December 16, 1993), they progressively acquired more pragmatic and rights-based arguments. The non-citizens were presented as honest taxpayers who were being deprived, for mere political reasons, of the fundamental right to have a say about their municipality’s administration. International recommendations, which pointed to the fact that participation in local politics has a positive effect on integration, were also often mentioned, alongside examples from

“civilized Europe”, including Estonia (Saeima, June 29 and December 11, 2008). Similarly to Estonia, after 2004 the unequal treatment of non-citizens and EU permanent residents was also one major argument to promote voting rights for non-citizens (Saeima, October 21, 2004).

While the Russian-speakers’ parties kept the pressure on this issue high and the nationalists consistently opposed their proposals, moderate Latvian parties kept a more ambivalent attitude. A moderate argument against non-citizens’ voting rights is that such a provision would reduce the incentives for non-citizens to apply for naturalization. However, already in the seventh *Saeima* (1998–2002), the small centrist party *Jaunā Partija* (New Party) and some moderate personalities like the social democrat Jānis Ādamsons (who later joined the moderate Russophone party Harmony Centre) had showed willingness to look for a compromise. This forced the governing parties if not to approve the Russophone parties’ proposal at least to consider the question as legitimate (Saeima, April 6, 2000).

With the increasing electoral success of the Russophone party Harmony Centre, moderate Latvian parties seemed to consider the question more seriously. In 2002 the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS) suggested that granting voting rights to non-citizens was an EU requirement with which Latvia would have to comply sooner or later (LCHR, August 22, 2002). However, the ZZS deputies failed to vote accordingly in parliament. In 2007, the union Latvia’s First Party/Latvian Way (LPP/LC) proposed holding a referendum on the issue that would have settled it once and for all (Saeima, April 26, 2007). With this proposal LPP/LC broke the convention and became the first governmental party to open the debate on non-citizens’ political rights. The party’s strong results in the Russian-speaking region of Latgale in 2006 likely motivated this choice. Moreover, its declining electoral success compelled LPP/LC to change strategy and at the time the party was actively considering the creation of a centrist alliance that would have included the increasingly popular Harmony Centre (LCHR, January 26, 2007).

The 1998 referendum on the citizenship law had set an encouraging precedent: despite the nationalist rhetoric of the proponents of the referendum, the Latvian electorate had voted in favour of granting citizenship to the Latvia-born children of non-citizens upon their parents’ request, and of abolishing the window mechanism that had been slowing down naturalization (Södergren, 2000: 295–7). Indeed, on issues concerning the Russian-speaking minority, the Latvian general population has

shown to be more liberal than the political elite (Bottolfs, 2000: 99). Successive surveys suggest that the issue of granting more rights to non-citizens was not an exception (LCHR, December 27, 2005; Makarovs and Dimitrovs, 2009).¹²

In the event, the potential political utility of finding a compromise with what was becoming one of the major parties in Latvia (Harmony Centre) was overcome by the nationalist discourse. As an example of this rhetoric in parliament, the nationalist TB/LNNK maintained that it was ‘not normal’ for a Latvian party (LPP/LC) to ‘fraternize with the Russians’ and pursue policies that would hand all the major Latvian cities over to ‘the Russians’ (Saeima, April 26, 2007). The fear of losing the trust of the Latvian electorate to parties with stronger nationalist credentials, coupled with the taboo of creating governmental alliances with the “Russian parties”, convinced LPP/LC to abandon the referendum idea. The LPP/LC deputies kept voting against Harmony Centre’s proposals to amend the Law on Local Elections.¹³ According to a 2007 report on Latvian democracy, this was a missed opportunity for the development of an inclusive political agenda, while ‘the fast substitution of [LPP/LC’s] position with a less “difficult” one also indicates that the pressure against non-citizen participation in local level elections remains overwhelming’ (Rozenvalds, 2007: 14).

The reluctance of the governing parties to grant voting rights to non-citizens is not only (and not always) ideological. Undoubtedly, political considerations about the voting behaviour of those potential 300,000 new voters also play a role. This is especially true when considering Riga, the capital city, where over half of the non-citizens live and where they constitute almost a quarter of the residents. The expectation that the great majority of those votes might go to Russian-speakers’ parties is a disincentive for the governing parties to grant voting rights to non-citizens. In fact, both the example of Estonia and the results of surveys on non-citizens’ party preferences indicate that non-citizens’ voting choices might be more diversified than is usually believed (Berglund *et al*, 2004: 105–7; Makarovs and Dimitrovs, 2009; PROVIDUS, 2012; Volkov, 2009: 110). This point was also used—to no avail—by the Russian-speakers’ parties to try to convince moderate parties to support their proposals (Saeima, January 27, 2000).

Alongside the parliamentary activities of the Russophone parties, NGOs and civil society organizations have also promoted the political rights of non-citizens in Latvia. In order to achieve this goal, civil society organizations have so far usually

pursued one of three strategies: collecting signatures to launch a referendum to change the constitution, petitioning Latvian institutions, or lobbying international institutions to put more pressure on the Latvian government. In June 2013 the grassroots organization Congress of Non-Citizens organized community elections (open to both citizens and non-citizens) to elect a Parliament of the Non-Represented, with the aim of providing representation for Latvia's non-citizens. While the role that this alternative institution will play in the debate about non-citizens' voting rights remains to be seen, this initiative has so far succeeded in keeping the public attention on the issue of non-citizenship alive. The same can be said of the other civil society initiatives mentioned above.

Currently, the increasing activism on the part of the Russophone civil society corresponds to a diminished attention to this issue by the parliamentary parties. Indeed, the latter have reasons to prefer the status quo. Nationalist politicians can present their tough stance on the issue of non-citizens' voting rights as a success. The moderate mainstream parties can continue with their ambivalent policy on minority issues and avoid the political risk of granting voting rights to the almost 300,000 non-citizens whom they have contributed to leaving without franchise. Even Harmony Centre seems to have less and less of a reason to push for local voting rights for non-citizens. By positioning itself as a moderate party with an agenda that goes beyond solely minority issues, Harmony Centre managed to keep the bulk of the "Russian vote", while at the same time attracting a share of the Latvian vote.¹⁴ Harmony Centre's strategy of moderation was rewarded: in 2009 it won the municipal elections in Riga and produced the first ethnic Russian mayor of the Latvian capital, Nils Ušakovs. In the 2010 and 2011 parliamentary elections it registered impressive electoral results, and—although it eventually ended up in the opposition—in both cases there were serious talks about including it in the governing coalition.

In the same period, Nils Ušakovs became more cautious about granting voting rights to non-citizens, and went so far as to affirm that it would be better for non-citizens to 'pass the naturalization exam instead of doing nothing and complaining'.¹⁵ This was possibly the result of the fear that, were the non-citizens granted local voting rights, Harmony Centre would risk losing votes to the more radical Russian-speakers' parties (FHRUL and "For Native Language"). A more gradual process of acquisition of political rights through naturalization might therefore be electorally safer for Harmony Centre, at least in the short term. As Andris Tolmačevs (FHRUL) put it:

‘the granting of voting rights to non-citizens will end Harmony Centre’s monopoly’.¹⁶ However, the results of the June 2013 municipal elections reinforced Ušakovs’s position in Riga and possibly reduced Harmony Centre’s fears of being ethnically outbid. Not only was Ušakovs confirmed as mayor of Riga with an ample majority, but For Native Language—a more radical Russophone party that emerged after the 2012 referendum on Russian as the second state language—got only 0.3% of the vote and remained out of the City Council.

Two considerations can be drawn from the analysis above. Firstly, the negative policy outcome is only half of the picture and the status of minority representation in Latvia cannot be understood without taking into account the other half; that is, the lively debate on minority issues and the increasingly independent and legitimate role that the Russophone voice(s) play in it.

Secondly, the Latvian case shows the other side of the *voice/polarization dilemma*, equally confronted by minority parties and minority grassroots movements. The emergence early on of a strong Russophone party representation pushed the Latvian national elites into a defensive position and effectively polarized the Latvian party system. Polarization meant that—notwithstanding the strength of the Russophone voice in the political debate (or, rather, *because of it*)—it is difficult for this voice (which is by definition in a minority) to translate into a more liberal policy on non-citizens’ voting rights. The *voice/polarization dilemma* confronts Harmony Centre with a paradoxical trade-off situation that is not foreseen by the presence paradigm: Harmony Centre can have a real impact on policy-making and thus strengthen the Russian-speakers’ substantive representation only by being in government,¹⁷ but only by “diluting” its representation of minority interests it can have a chance to actually be included in a governing coalition and access power (Dudzińska, 2011: 99).¹⁸

However, although Harmony Centre’s moderate approach to ethnic issues might under specific circumstances become difficult to sustain before its minority electorate, assumptions of ethnic intransigence on the part of the minority electorate (implied by the polarization paradigm) might be off the mark in Latvia. Indeed, so far radical Russophone parties have failed to constitute a serious challenge to the moderate Harmony Centre and the latter has managed to acquire an increasingly higher political profile without losing its Russophone electorate. One of the defining features of ethnic parties, according to Chandra, is “temporality”, which means that they tend to

change together with the ethnic group they represent (2011: 155). The moderation of Harmony Centre's minority-based demands and its adoption of an inclusive, multi-ethnic rhetoric might indeed correspond to the progressive moderation and integration of the section of the Russian-speaking minority it represents.¹⁹

Political parties were the main actors in the events that determined the development of the voting rights policy in Latvia as well as in Estonia. However, while in Estonia no significant popular movement challenges the provisions of the Law on Local Elections, in Latvia an increasing activism on this and other minority issues is observable. On the one hand, the Russophone NGOs' activism has meant that there has been significant media attention on the issue. This can have an impact on the policy-agenda by prioritizing issues of civic and political rights (Rozenvalds, 2007: 34), and by proposing an alternative reading of minority-related issues to that of the governing parties. On the other hand, the emergence of Russophone protest movements with a strong mobilization capacity might antagonize the Latvian majority and scare it into more defensive positions (Muižnieks, 2010: 120–1). Therefore, the same *voice/polarization dilemma* existing at the party level holds true with regard to civil society initiatives.

4. Discussion: minority representation and the *voice/polarization dilemma* in Estonia and Latvia

By focusing on the dynamics of the Estonian and Latvian policy-making process, this article illustrates the complex relationship between minority descriptive representation (that is, the presence of minority representatives in political institutions), politicization of ethnicity in the party system, and minority substantive representation (that is, the power of the minority to influence policy outcomes).

First of all, my analysis of the policy-process regarding non-citizens' voting rights shows that the Estonian and Latvian national elites were the gatekeepers that defined access to the policy-making process and, ultimately, the policy outcome. This is unsurprising, especially considering the abundant literature on ethnic democracy and ethnic control in Estonia and Latvia (Pettai and Hallik, 2002; Smooha and Järve, 2005). However, there was a fundamental difference in the way this gatekeeping operated in the two countries. It is exactly this difference that is crucial in understanding the different structures of minority representation and minority voice in Estonia and Latvia.

In Estonia the titulars-as-gatekeepers arrangement extended to the whole political process and left little or no room for Russian-speaking voices to be heard in the political debate. The question of voting rights for non-citizens was not posed in ethnic terms, but was rather a pragmatic decision of the national elites. This highlights the two contradictory aspects of minority representation in Estonia. On the one hand, the de-ethnicization of the issue made it possible for the moderate national elite to take a liberal stance, which resulted in all Estonian permanent residents acquiring the right to vote in local elections. Following this decision, parties that want to compete in local elections in areas with a high proportion of Russian-speaking voters must take them into consideration, including non-citizens and third-country nationals. The de-ethnicization of the issue also meant that radical-nationalist statements usually failed to spark heated debate and tended to be fewer (and generally less abusive) in the *Riigikogu* than they were in the *Saeima*.

On the other hand, however, ethnic divisions in Estonia, although not politicized, ‘remain latent [...] in the sense of forming preferences but not party politics’ (Bennich-Björkman and Johansson, 2012: 17). Therefore, there is the risk that the de-ethnicization of policy-making in Estonia in fact means that the specific demands of the Russian-speaking minority do not find channels for representation in a party system that has reabsorbed the ethnic cleavage but has still not freed itself from an exclusionary discourse towards the minority. This is reflected by my analysis of the decision-making process with regard to Estonian non-citizens’ voting rights. While the policy outcome was favourable for non-citizens (and by extension for the Russian-speaking minority), this was not the result of a compromise but, rather, of a concession. The de-ethnicization of the issue (which was presented in purely pragmatic terms) made such a concession acceptable, but also meant that the Russian-speakers were reduced to policy objects and were not themselves recognized as actors in the policy-making process. Somewhat paradoxically, the Russian-speaking aliens acquired the right to vote (and, therefore, to be represented) locally not *in spite of* their lack of representation but *because of* it.

In Latvia the ethnic majority also acted as a gatekeeper in the policy-making process and determined its outcome. However, in contrast to the Estonian case, the issue of non-citizens’ voting rights was posed in explicitly ethnic terms from the very beginning, and the debate was mainly between the Latvian national elite and the Russophone representatives. This reflected the high level of politicization of ethnicity

in the Latvian party system and political debate. Russophone representatives clearly framed the issue as a question of minority rights, also appropriating the language of the international community.

The political representation of the Russian-speaking minority by ethnic parties had two major—and contradictory—implications in Latvia. On the one hand, the strong potential for political representation of the Russian-speaking minority justified and reinforced the Latvian national discourse of “defending the nation” (Bennich-Björkman and Johansson, 2012: 15–6). This polarizes the party system along ethno-linguistic lines and makes compromise politically risky, thus reducing the chances for the Russophone voice to be translated into policies. As a result, a consistent share of the Russian-speaking minority remains disenfranchised to this day. On the other hand, the strong presence of minority representatives in parliament gave them ‘clear agenda-setting powers’ (Muižnieks, 2010: 111). They encouraged debate on the issue of non-citizens’ political rights and managed to persuade part of the Latvian moderate elite, if not always to support their demands, at least to consider them as legitimate and worthy of discussion. The Russophone voice was strongly present in the debate, which gave it independence and (to some extent) legitimacy.

A comparison of Estonia and Latvia reveals the existence of what we can call a *voice/polarization dilemma*. Low polarization in the Estonian debate on non-citizens’ voting rights was not an indicator of inter-ethnic accord; rather, it reflected the low status of the minority’s voice in the political debate. On the other hand, the Latvian case shows that minority presence in a context of politicized ethnicity can lead to a polarized debate that is usually not conducive to compromise solutions, but at the same time legitimizes the minority voice in the political debate and—perhaps more basically—makes it possible for a majority/minority debate to take place.

The findings of this analysis have (interrelated) methodological and theoretical implications. At a methodological level, the analysis shows that taking policy outcomes as a proxy for minority representation can be highly misleading. Indeed, by looking only at the policies, we could conclude that Estonia (where the policy outcome was positive for the Russian-speakers) guarantees higher minority representation than Latvia (where the outcome was negative). However, a very different story emerges when we trace the decision-making process that led to those different outcomes. In Estonia, the positive policy outcome was the result of a pragmatic concession on the part of the majority. Far from reflecting a shift in

majority/minority relative power over policy-making, this shows the strength of the majority in its position of democracy gatekeeper that largely excludes minority voices from the democratic process. In Latvia, the negative outcome admittedly left non-citizens without any voting rights, but the outcome is part of a (on-going) lively democratic debate in which minority voices can emerge as legitimate and independent and—crucially—can question the majority elite’s position as gatekeeper.

In terms of theories of minority representation, this analysis builds on the debate between the *presence* and *polarization paradigms* and attempts to overcome some of their limitations. Indeed, in the cases of Estonia and Latvia these paradigms can reveal only part of the picture of minority representation. The presence paradigm helps to explain why there has been a more lively majority/minority political debate on non-citizens voting rights in Latvia (where Russian-speakers are represented by an ethnic party) than in Estonia (where there are no ethnic parties). However, it excessively discounts the effects of ethnic polarization and is not able to explain the different policy outcomes in Estonia and Latvia. The polarization paradigm explains the different policy outcomes by pointing out how ethnicized party systems can lead to polarization on minority policies and make compromise difficult. In so doing, it assumes that a lack of polarization *per se* is a goal of ethnically-diverse democracies, thus conflating the result with the process. However, in Estonia—where the policy result was positive—inter-ethnic ‘tensions, perceived threats and distance [...] were considerable and have been consistently higher than in Latvia’ (Bennich-Björkman and Johansson, 2012: 13). This shows that the de-ethnicization of the party system does not imply the de-politicization of ethnicity in society or in the political discourse, nor does it necessarily entail the equal representation of all sections of society in the policy-making process. In other words, policy outcomes alone are not sufficient to make judgements about the quality of the democratic process.

In addition to this, my analysis confirms findings that emphasize the limitations of the international-pressure perspective to understanding policy-making on minority issues (Agarin and Regelman, 2012; Brosig, 2012; Hughes and Sasse, 2003; Sasse, 2008; Schulze, 2010). The Estonian and Latvian governments were both subjected to strong international pressure to grant local voting rights to non-citizens but had markedly different responses. While the discourse of the “return to Europe” was strong among both countries’ leaderships, in Estonia the national elite was willing to compromise while in Latvia no governing political force seemed inclined to do so.

Domestic factors, rather than international ones, created the incentives and disincentives for the Estonian and Latvian elites to grant or deny voting rights to non-citizens. The impact of international pressure on the policy outcome was instead marginal: while it provided a framework for the Estonian moderate elite to justify their liberal stance and a basis for the Latvian Russian-speakers to demand local voting rights for non-citizens, it did not determine either the policy-making dynamics or the policy outcome.

Conclusion

The analysis of the non-citizens' voting rights policies in Estonia and Latvia reveals a conundrum, which blurs the boundaries between competing theories of minority political representation: namely, whether minority descriptive representation is necessary for (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995) or potentially detrimental to (Brace, Grofman, and Handley, 1987; Overby and Cosgrove, 1996) minority-friendly policy outcomes; and whether ethnic parties have a positive-representative (Chandra, 2005; Stroschein, 2001) or a negative-polarizing (Diamond and Gunther, 2001; Horowitz, 1985) effect on the political system of an ethnically-divided democracy. My analysis revealed that a binary understanding of the politicization of ethnicity (that it is bad in the *polarization* paradigm and good in the *presence paradigm*) is not sufficient to capture the complexities of minority representation.

The case of Estonia shows that low descriptive minority representation in parliament and weakness of ethnic parties might result in a more *favourable* policy outcome for the ethnic minority. However, favourable policy outcomes did not come as a result of compromise (since no major minority actor was involved) but, rather, in the form of a concession by the dominant “titular” elite. This reinforces the “ownership” of the state by the national elite, while reducing the channels for minority voice in the political system.

The case of Latvia shows that the minority voice (both in terms of ethnic party representation and minority grassroots mobilization) can be successful in keeping minority-related issues on the agenda. It shows how the minority voice can emerge as an independent and legitimate component in the political debate, creating clear channels for minority grievances and demands to enter the democratic policy mechanism. However, this does not necessarily translate into more liberal policies—at least not in the short term. On the contrary, the polarizing effect of the Russophone

parties' electoral success meant that their proposals, although discussed at length in parliament and in the media, were never approved, and Latvian non-citizens are to this day disenfranchised. Moreover, the confrontational tone of the debates might in fact end up benefiting radicals on both sides, rather than fostering compromise.

Interpreted in this way, the Estonian and Latvian cases illustrate two sides of the same *voice/polarization dilemma*. Strong ethnic party representation and minority capacity for grassroots mobilization (that is, a strong minority voice) do not necessarily guarantee a policy outcome that is favourable for the minority. On the contrary, they can hinder or delay such an outcome. However, lack of polarization cannot be taken as a goal in its own right: far from necessarily indicating inter-ethnic accord, it might in fact reflect the minority's exclusion from the democratic process of decision-making.

By shifting the focus from the minority policies as such to the policy process that produced them, this article makes two interrelated arguments, one methodological and one more strictly theoretical. In terms of methodology, this article argues that minority substantive representation cannot be overlooked if we want to understand how democracy works (or fails to work) in ethnically-divided societies. Moreover, it suggests that a process-based approach to the study of substantive representation might provide stronger bases for the evaluation of democratic quality in ethnically-divided societies than outcome-based approaches.

In terms of theory, this paper builds on the existing debate on minority representation and politicization of ethnicity, and reveals how minority representation and policy-making stand in a complex, often counterintuitive relationship that the existing paradigms are able to catch only in part. Whether, in the long term, policy concessions within de-ethnicized party dynamics (like in Estonia) or a legitimate minority voice in a polarized environment (like in Latvia) are more beneficial to democracy and inter-ethnic peace remains a matter for debate. However, it is important to understand the complexity of the picture in order to have this debate, which is, fundamentally, a debate about democracy and the way it can accommodate and represent diversity.

Notes

1. It must be noted that the Estonian legislation does not use the term “non-citizens” but refers to “people with undetermined citizenship”, who are considered “aliens” in the same way as third-country nationals. In Latvia, this category of former Soviet citizens is officially recognized under the separate category of “non-citizens of Latvia”. For simplicity, and following the common usage of the term, I will refer to both the Estonian “people with undetermined citizenship” and the “non-citizens of Latvia” as “non-citizens”.
2. Unless otherwise specified demographic figures for Latvia and Estonia are drawn from Eesti Statistika (www.stat.ee), Latvijas Statistika (www.csb.gov.lv), and the Welcome to Estonia website (www.estonia.eu).
3. An early example of this tendency can be found in Benoît-Rohmer and Hardeman (1994), who looked at the representation of ethnic minorities in post-communist democracies in terms of number of minority MPs in their parliaments.
4. A very similar normative position is reflected in Arend Lijphart’s consensus model, which is based on Arthur Lewis’s principle that ‘all who are affected by a decision should have the chance to participate in making that decision either directly or through chosen representatives’ (Lijphart, 1999: 31).
5. This qualitative research method has been alternatively called “process tracing” (Collier, 2011; Steinberg, 2007), “systematic process analysis” (Hall, 2008) and “causal-process observations” (Collier, Brady, and Seawright, 2010).
6. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Estonian, Latvian and Russian are mine.
7. For example, in 2001 the Centre Party voted against amendments to abolish state language requirements for election candidates ‘stating that it would jeopardize the position of Estonian as the state language’ (Galbreath, 2005: 170).
8. Statistical information on the Saeima composition can be found on the Saeima official website. <http://www.saeima.lv/lv/saeimas-struktura/statistika-1>.
9. Non-citizens are 23.3% of the population in Riga and between 17 and 20% in the other bigger cities (Latvijas Statistika, data from 2011).
10. International pressures on the Latvian government to grant voting rights to non-citizens decreased decidedly after Latvia’s accession to the EU (LCHR, November 23, 2010). This is in keeping with what many observers have noted: after accession, the EU loses its main bargaining chip (accession conditionalities), and its influence on its new member states’ policies on matters where the EU bodies cannot impose decisions decreases (Kelley, 2004).
11. Up to 2010 there had been 37 such proposals (Buzaev, 2010).
12. This might have changed after the 2012 referendum on the status of the Russian language, which had a polarizing effect on society. Reportedly, after the referendum the share of Latvian-speakers opposed to non-citizens’ voting rights rose from 26 to 71.6 %. News of this survey was reported in: ‘50% zhitelei khotiat razreshit’ negrazhdanam golosovat’ [50% of the population wants to allow non-citizens to vote], *Telegraf*, March 25, 2012. <http://www.telegraf.lv/news/50-zhitelei-za-razreshenie-negrazhdanam-vybiraty-municipality>. Retrieved: October 20, 2013.
13. Eventually LPP/LC did enter a governmental coalition with Harmony Centre in the Riga City Council in 2009. However, at that point the party had practically disappeared nationally.
14. In principle, an increase in naturalized Russophone voters or a higher-than-average Russophone turnout could explain Harmony Centre’s extraordinary success in the last two rounds of elections. However, no significant increase in Russophone electorate occurred between 2006 and 2011. Moreover, turnout remained stable in Daugavpils and decreased in the Latgale region (both with a high share of Russian-speaking population), which does not suggest a higher-than-usual turnout among Russian-speaking voters.

15. 'Ushakov: luchshe sdat' na grazhdanstvo, chem sidet' i zhalovat'sia' (Ušakovs: it's better to sit the citizenship exam than do nothing and complain), *Delfi*, May 29, 2012. <http://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/politics/ushakov-luchshe-sdat-na-grazhdanstvo-chem-sidet-i-zhalovatsya.d?id=42391186>. Retrieved: October 20, 2013.
16. 'Tolmačevs: Pilsonības piešķiršana nepilsoņiem izbeigtu SC monopolu' (Tolmačevs: granting citizenship to non-citizens would terminate Harmony Centre's monopoly), *Diena*, August 1, 2012. <http://www.diena.lv/latvija/viedokli/tolmacevs-pilsonibas-pieskirsana-nepilsoniem-izbeigtu-sc-monopolu-13960437>. Retrieved: October 20, 2013.
17. Parties in opposition have few chances for direct impact on policy outcomes in Latvia: the majority of the laws discussed and approved in parliament are of governmental initiative, and factions usually vote strictly following party lines (Rozenvalds, 2007: 56–7).
18. Bernd Rechel (2007: 353) reached a similar conclusion about minority politics in Bulgaria.
19. Indeed, since non-citizens are disenfranchised, Harmony Centre relies on the votes of Russophone citizens, who are generally more integrated (Muižnieks, 2010: 121; Smooha and Järve, 2005: 104), participate more in public debates (Muižnieks, 2010: 118), enjoy a higher socio-economic status, feel less alienated from the general society (Šūpule, 2005: 29–30), and tend to speak the state language better than non-citizens (Smooha and Järve, 2005: 99).

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