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Securitizing minority rights: Reflections from Russian-speaking elites in Estonia and Latvia on public life participation

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Abstract

How do minorities come to be seen as security threats? This paper examines the case of the large Russian-speaking minority in Estonia and Latvia in the context of neighbouring conflict activities driven by the minority's alleged kinstate. The paper focuses on the trend of securitization experienced by the minority within the area of public life participation. This dynamic takes place through domestic laws linked to the decision-making sphere and self-governance opportunities. How this occurs is researched through primary fieldwork data from semi-structured interviews with Russian-speaking minority elites, whose perspectives are often overlooked in research addressing the particularities of the region. The fieldwork data complements the legal analysis and finds effects of securitization on public participation of minorities, regardless of whether they were successful in entering into governing coalitions or remained in the opposition within the State legislature. While some of those inefficiencies are caused by governing coalition agreements, other obstacles are created by divisions within the minority. Furthermore, the minority group experienced negative effects on their public participation opportunities through limited prospects facilitated by consultative bodies and self-governance arrangements. Finally, the perceived association with the alleged kinstate shapes the minority to the extent of essentially securitizing them.

Keywords

public participation, securitization, minorities, law, Russian-speakers, Estonia, Latvia

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, national and international political dynamics have been shaped by a robust and continuous trend of framing different issues and objects as security threats, thus drawing

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the focus away from the sovereign State as the primary force of instability in another State (Hitoshi, 2021). Scholars have referred to this trend as 'securitization' (Buzan et al., 1998) and recent contributions show that it lies in the growing acceptance of the existence of non-military means of instability, that leads to framing objects, such as social groups, as sources of threat to national security (Hitoshi, 2021). This growing trend is also visible in Europe. Scholarly contributions identify continued securitization of social groups, specifically those that are formed by individuals who do not exhibit national majority traits, such as migrant communities (Huysmans, 1998; Planas Gifra, 2024; van der Woude, 2023) and religious groups (Croft, 2012; Léonard and Kaunert, 2020). These and other 'minority' social groups have experienced increasing securitization of their rights, with rights pertaining to public life participation being more intensely treated as threats to national security (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2024a; van der Woude, 2023).

While this trend is affecting minorities across the different regions in Europe, this paper addresses two case studies located in the Eastern European region, Estonia and Latvia. The Central and Eastern European region once served as an important source for the theoretical inspiration of securitization studies developed by the 'Copenhagen School.' This research focuses on these two post-Soviet Baltic States located in this region and the large Russian-speaking minority that forms approximately one-third of the population in each State. The Russian-speaking minority in the two Baltic States has been studied by scholars across many disciplines since Estonia and Latvia have regained their independence. Academic accounts position the minority within many areas including: the Baltic States' history and democratisation processes (Agarin, 2010; Smith, 1996; Smith and Hiden, 2012; Steen, 2006), nationalism (Agarin, 2018; Brubaker, 1996; Galbreath, 2006; Smith, 2002), international law and minority rights protection (Brasington, 2011; Cilevics, 2015), influence of international organisations (Agarin, 2010, 2013; Galbreath, 2003; Galbreath and McEvoy, 2012; Hughes and Sasse, 2003; Kelley, 2004; Mole, 2012; Schulze, 2009), national security (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2017; Melvin, 1995, 1998; Schulze, 2017), and, most recently, due to Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine, effects of kinstate activism on minority policies in host States (Csergő et al., 2024; Schulze and Pupcenoks, 2025). At the time of writing, it has been over a decade since the start of Russia's kinstate activism in Ukraine. In this context, it becomes necessary to revisit the case of the Russian-speaking minority in the Baltic States and seek insights on how this kinstate activism in nearby regions might have affected the minority. The analysis specifically focuses on the area of rights that links to effective participation in public life. This paper aims to answer the following question: *How do minorities and their rights come to be seen as security threats?* To answer this overarching question, the analysis uses the case study approach and gathers empirical data to address several accompanying questions in corresponding subsections of this paper:

(1) How does securitization literature view minorities and their rights?
(2) How does the participation of minorities in public life come into the securitization discourse?
(3) By reflecting on the case study, how does securitization of the minority's public participation opportunities manifest itself in law?
(4) What are the views of the securitized minority on their situation?

While the first two sub-questions reflect on the current state of scholarly literature, the latter two analyse two sets of primary legal sources in the form of domestic legislation linked to minority public life participation and interviews with elites representing the minority. Domestic legislation is an important set of data, where securitization processes can be observed because law constitutes a

'speech act' as it creates the linguistic manufacture of threats. Securitization can be observed in a variety of ways, and typically 'speech acts' in the form of political discourse and statements from politicians were more commonly approached by securitization scholars (Balzacq, 2005). However, laws form one of the many ways speech acts manifest themselves in real life (Basaran, 2008). Interviews can play an important role in helping further the understanding of how securitization operates. The focus on minority elites' views addresses a large gap in existing research, that largely overlooks the views of the minority. Only a few scholarly works attempt to include the perspectives of the Russian-speakers and the minority's elites through qualitative and quantitative data collection approaches (see Agarin, 2010; Agarin, 2011; Cheskin, 2013; Csergő et al., 2024; Schulze and Pupcenoks, 2025; Smith, 1996). However, the current state of scholarly research across disciplines does not explore the in-depth perspectives of the Russian-speaking minority as it has not dedicated sufficient empirical investigation to reach rich qualitative data. Therefore, this study offers an informative case that presents how securitization processes occur in domestic legislation and shape public participation opportunities for minorities. It does so by reflecting on the empirical insights in the form of semi-structured elite interviews gathered during fieldwork in 2018 and 2019. By elite interviews, it is understood that the method is based heavily on the specific selection of interview participants because of the position they occupy (Hochschild, 2009). Robust participation in the public life of the State, that goes beyond the casting of votes, is inherently an elite activity as members of the el group interact with and within official governmental structures of power. This research has achieved 11 semi-structured elite interviews through snowball sampling with participants from three different categories of elites: two parliamentarians from each country (four parliamentarians in total), two non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives from each country (four NGO representatives in total), and one participant representing a consultative body institution at the national level from Estonia and two from Latvia (three consultative body representatives in total). The selected sample size proved to be sufficient as data saturation was achieved and no additional recruits for the study were suggested. The diversity of the groups of respondents in terms of the types of elite roles and their country of residence further achieved data triangulation in the study as the trends identified in the responses of one group were contrasted with the responses from another group. The timing of data collection is significant as it is positioned within the context of conflict activities in nearby regions conducted by the minority's alleged kinstate, Russia. The main contribution of this paper lies in the unique focus on an important underexplored issue – how minorities themselves perceive the realisation of their rights and their securitization.

The next sections provide an overview of the theoretical framework used in this paper that highlights the links between securitization, minorities and minority rights law. Then, the paper explores the relevant considerations on public participation of minorities in the securitization literature. The theoretical reflections are then applied to the selected case study to understand how securitization shapes public life participation opportunities for the minority in law and policies, and what the reflections from the Russian-speaking minority elites are. In the final sections, the paper offers some recommendations gathered from the fieldwork data before concluding.

Theoretical framework: Securitization, law, and minorities

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the understanding that securitization is 'a more extreme version of politization' (Buzan et al., 1998: 23). Securitization creates a type of shared understanding or assumption of an existential threat that warrants a response to the said threat, potentially in the form of emergency measures; thus, turning the issue into a matter of emergency politics instead of the normal politics of politization (Jutila, 2006). In this setting, the securitizing

actor - usually the government of a State - can present any issue, another State, institution, or a non-State entity or a social group, as a security threat, that leads to the general acceptance of the constructed threat (White and Davies-Bright, 2021; Jutila, 2006; Williams, 2003: 512-513). While securitization studies do not hold a monopoly over questions of how objects are framed as security threats, the advantages of using securitization theories in this study lie in the following two areas. Firstly, the process of securitization can be observed in the 'speech acts' that were previously described as a creation of shared understanding of threats through linguistic expressions (Balzacq, 2005). These expressions include a variety of sources, including law (Basaran, 2008). Within these sources, as securitization scholars argue, the three 'Ss' of emergency politics can be observed, specifically silence, secrecy and suppression tactics (Roe, 2006). In law, silence would signify that an issue or a social group does not have targeted legislation or specific provisions in legislation, while suppression would be exemplified in laws and provisions targeting the group in a calculated suppressive manner. Secrecy, by its nature, is more difficult to observe as one would need specific novel access to information and resources that are not available to the public. But all three securitization measures are directly opposite to the three 'Ds' of normal politics, that are the tactics used for non-securitized or normalised entities or topics, specifically: discussion, debate, and deliberation (Roe, 2006). Following this logic, in law, these tactics would result in explicit mention of referent objects, where they are not framed as security threats, and the legal provisions allocated to them encourage non-emergency discourse or a type of dialogue either with, for or on the concerned object.

Secondly, securitization studies, and its counterpart – desecuritization studies, have traditionally engaged with questions of minorities and their rights. A rich debate between Roe (2004, 2006) and Jutila (2006) explored how securitization processes affect ethnic, religious, linguistic, national and other minorities. Jutila (2006) notes that the issue needs to be considered with the most central and widespread ideology of the 20th century: nationalism. As our societies were, are, and will always be plural, Jutila (2006) explains that nationalism's goal of achieving 'each nation – its own state; each state – only one nation!' is unattainable. However, the securitization of minority communities, their identities and rights, is attainable. This is especially true if the minority has an external stakeholder, a kinstate, the link between which can lead to further perception of emerging conflicts (Jutila, 2006).

Prior to the Roe-Jutila debate, Brubaker proposed the 'triadic nexus' theory, that highlights the role of the minority's kinstate in the discourse between the host country and the minority community (Brubaker, 1996). Brubaker's theory was later expanded by Smith (2002) to highlight the existence of a 'quadratic nexus,' that adds the roles of international organisations to the roles of the kinstate, the host State and the minority. The addition of international institutions is important as these often have mandates on minorities and legally-binding and/or politically binding frameworks on minority rights protection.

In this complicated setting, the debate between Roe (2004, 2006) and Jutila (2006) questions whether minority rights are inevitably linked to the notions of security, and a 'management' approach of these diverse groups becomes the only viable solution to achieve some kind of normality. Here, as Roe (2004:293) reflects, law and policies may play an important part:

> The minority can feel secure when certain provisions/legislations/mechanisms are put in place that will guarantee its existence (in identity terms), while similarly the majority can also feel secure in the knowledge that the minority will thus work (politically, economically and also societally) within the existing framework of the state.

The quote above indicates that the management of minority rights accommodates and accepts minority identities, and provisions/legislations/mechanisms are put in place to ensure this accommodation. In terms of specific legislation, the legal norms that are addressed by Jutila (2006) and Roe (2006) in their debate are linked to the cultural and political autonomy of the minority that contributes to the maintenance of the State's structure.

From the theoretical and legal considerations above, it may appear that minorities and their rights are inevitably positioned within the realm of security, thus they are impossible to normalise or 'desecuritize.' However, even Roe (2006) writes that while minority rights are a matter of societal security, not all matters of societal security are inevitably securitized. Despite the difference in opinions between Roe (2006) and Jutila (2006), the latter contribution on the potential of desecuritization of minority rights involves the telling of new perspectives and stories that do not exclude the narratives of opposing groups.

The minority rights law on effective public participation and securitization: Inevitable link?

The previous section on securitization scholarship demonstrates that public life and several forms of participation in it are linked to the minority 'management' approach through specific legal provisions and/or political mechanisms within a State. Within minority rights scholarship, there have been several developments that shaped deeper understanding of public life participation for minorities, specifically through the right to effective public participation of minorities. This right or legal 'norm' is based on the understanding that public participation for minorities needs to be *effective* as it accounts for the numerical factor affecting the group and addresses the fact that the simple presence of minorities in public institutions is typically not sufficient unless this presence translates into meaningful influence over policy outcomes (Verstichel, 2010).

The most common approach to interpreting effective public participation for minorities is divided into three parts: participation in decision-making, self-governance arrangements, and guarantees (Alijeva, 2025: 63). Here, decision-making is focused on the representation of minorities at the different levels and structures of the State's legislature. It is concerned with the development of measures aimed at accommodating minorities within the State's decision-making processes, ranging from veto rights, reserved number of seats, allocation of cabinet positions to minorities, creation of consultative bodies and more. Self-governance arrangements aim to allocate some level of jurisdictional control to minorities, over matters of key importance to their communities, such as education, culture, and language. This is usually achieved through the development of the so-called 'territorial' and 'non-territorial arrangements' or autonomies (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Lund Recommendations, 1999). Guarantees protect the aforementioned elements of effective public participation as they set the arrangements in constitutional and legal provisions, policies, as well as conflict-resolution remedies, such as positions of ombudspersons and specific national commissions (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Lund Recommendations, 1999; Alijeva, 2025: 63). While in practice not all elements may have a separate piece of legislation or a provision within a legislation, having the basis for these opportunities in law provides certainty, stability and clarity in terms of the level of inclusion of minorities in the institutions and avenues pertaining to public life in a State.

Knowing the substance of the right to effective public participation is not sufficient, as one needs to position the development of this norm within the post-Cold War context. Since the 1990s, several international organisations on the regional and international levels started to shift their focus and explicitly require effective public participation opportunities and rights for national, ethnic, religious

and linguistic minorities. This occurred through the development of advice, gathering of expertise, and development of detailed guidelines and recommendations. The Conference for *Security* and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, later renamed to Organization for *Security* and Co-operation in Europe or the OSCE) initiated the recognition for the importance of public life participation of minorities in peace efforts and their maintenance. This was done through the inclusion of paragraph 35 in the 1990 Document on the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE that reads:

> The participating States will respect the right of persons belonging to national minorities to effective participation in public affairs, including participation in the affairs relating to the protection and promotion of the identity of such minorities.
>
> The participating States note the efforts undertaken to protect and create conditions for the promotion of the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of certain national minorities by establishing, as one of the possible means to achieve these aims, appropriate local or autonomous administrations corresponding to the specific historical and territorial circumstances of such minorities and in accordance with the policies of the State concerned.

This support for public participation of minorities took place because the 1990s were a distinctive decade that saw the escalation of ethnic tensions in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or the Soviet Union). In places such as Abkhazia and Transnistria, tensions arose due to factors linked to the under-representation of minorities in the State apparatus (Weller, 2010: lviii). In other parts of Europe, like the former Yugoslavia, some cases of inter-ethnic tension resulted in violent encounters, while in other States, such as the former Czechoslovakia, tensions were resolved peacefully (Interview with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, 2001: 24).

The recognition from the CSCE contributed to the existing set of international legal norms linked to the protection of minorities' identities and their existence, as well as the subsequently developed norms on effective public participation. However, the approach among different international organisations and the corresponding legally and/or politically binding document exhibits caution. For example, Article 2(2) of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities of 1992 clearly states that minorities have the *right* to participate in the public life of their State. This is in contrast to Article 15 of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of 1995 that encourages the State to create 'conditions' necessary for this participation. Some normative documents, like the 2008 commentary from the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention, dedicate the majority of their focus on cultural autonomy arrangements instead of territorial ones, while other documents would focus on both territorial and non-territorial autonomy arrangements, as seen in the OSCE Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life of 1992. Arguably, the lack of consistency contributes to the securitized perception of minorities and their rights within these mechanisms/frameworks.

Furthermore, the link between minorities and security considerations is arguably reinforced by the establishment of expert conflict prevention bodies, such as the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). Here, minorities and their rights are positioned within the realm of 'quiet diplomacy' where the HCNM would advise States on how to prevent conflicts emerging from minority-majority frictions (Romans and Ulasiuk, 2019: 3). While the mandate serves as an early warning mechanism and compliments the promotion of the application of the OSCE's national minorities' standards to enhance stability, particularly within more recent European democracies; the

normative developments alongside the creation of specialised mandates indicates a cautious approach to minorities. This approach links minorities to sensitive areas of conflict and societal tension that need to be 'managed' by the State through options offered in the normative framework. Reflecting on Roe (2004), management of minorities and their 'rights brings some degree of 'normality' into the situation, but the issue is still defined in terms of security.'

This paper proceeds to examine the case of the Russian-speaking minority and the securitization within the area of public participation. It provides an empirical case study that offers new perspectives on the trend of constructing minorities as security threats. This paper offers new stories by engaging with minority elites who reflect on the public participation structure in Estonia and Latvia, which inform innovative takes on effective public participation rights of minorities.

Securitizing the minority right to effective public participation: Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia

Since the dissolution of the USSR – a multinational political entity that covered 11 time zones - 15 States emerged on the global map. Both Estonia and Latvia, two of the 15 States, have adopted official state continuity based on their first period of independence during the interwar years. By establishing themselves in the declaration of legal state continuity and non-recognition of the Soviet period, the two Baltic republics adopted a range of citizenship and language policies that influenced a large minority group that was formed as a result of the Soviet period. This group is usually referred to as the 'Russian-speakers' or Russian-speaking minority (Cheskin, 2012; Cheskin and Kachuyevski, 2019; Laitin, 1998; Vihalemm et al., 2019). In terms of numerical data, the ethnically Russian minority makes up a sizable portion of the 'Russian-speakers,' along with several other groups connected to the former USSR member States. This can be observed through the available census data which demonstrates that, as of 2021 in Estonia and as of 2025 in Latvia, the ethnic Russian minority constitutes the biggest ethnic minority group, reaching approximately 24% in Estonia (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2024b: para 25) and 23% of the population in Latvia (Central Statistical Authority, 2025). However, the proportion of Russian-speakers was reported to be higher in the two States as when analysing the data for most spoken languages at home, it appears that the second most spoken language in Latvia is Russian, amounting to 36% of the population in 2017 (Official Statistics Portal, 2019). In Estonia, the 2021 census data reports that the share of those who speak Russian as their mother tongue is approximately 28% (Statistics Estonia, 2021).

Before proceeding to examine the state of the decision-making opportunities and self-governance arrangements in both States, it is important to note a few legal frameworks that influence the non-elite level of effective public participation. Firstly, the language of the Russian-speaking minority is not recognised officially through the domestic legislation in either State. Instead, the Official Language Law of Latvia of 1999 and the Language Act of Estonia of 2011 recognise the national majority language as the official state language, making any other language a 'foreign' one, apart from a small number of exceptions. There is a notable difference between Estonia and Latvia, as the Language Act of Estonia allocates some rights to use minority languages with national authorities operating in the territory where at least half of permanent residents belong to a national minority. No such provision exists in Latvia.

Another important factor is that the two States have a continuation of a special status termed 'person with undetermined citizenship' or 'non-citizen'. This status resulted from policies developed in the early years of regained independence of both States and is usually held by people who migrated to Estonia and Latvia during the Soviet Union period and had not undergone a process of

naturalisation. As of 2015, this policy left roughly six per cent of the Estonian population and 12% of the Latvian population with this status (Amnesty International Report, 2015: 147). In Latvia, non-citizens do not possess any voting rights, apart from joining a political party. In Estonia, until recently non-citizens and citizens of third countries, such as Russia, were permitted to vote in local elections and were not permitted to stand and be elected for local office or join a political party. However, from 1 March 2026, non-citizens do not possess this right as a result of legislative changes introduced in March 2025 that limited the constitutional right to vote to Estonian citizens and European Union nationals (LSM+, 2025; Radio Svoboda, 2025). The motion was reported to affect 60,517 so-called non-citizens of Estonia, as well as 79,623 Russian citizens and 2,667 Belarusian citizens. (Radio Svoboda, 2025).

The following subsections provide insights on how the Russian-speaking minority is written in the corresponding laws, if they exist, what the perception of the Russian-speaking minority elites was on public participation arrangements, and the potential effects of securitization.

Decision-making

Both Estonia and Latvia are unitary parliamentary republics, with unicameral Parliaments consisting of 101 Members of Parliament (MPs) in Estonia and 100 MPs in Latvia. In both States, no special electoral arrangements exist for parties representing minority communities and the share of Russian-speaking MPs in Estonia and Latvia is below their share of the national population. Since 1991, there have been usually six to eight Russian-speaking minority members out of 101 MPs in the Estonian Parliament (Regelmann, 2014: 11). In Latvia, until the October 2022 parliamentary elections, the representation of the Russian-speaking minority in the national legislature was better in terms of resembling more closely the country's share of the population. Since 2022, Estonia and Latvia have had a similar number of Russian-speaking minority MPs within their national legislatures.

There is a trend of non-inclusion of the Russian-speaking minority members in the governing coalitions in Latvia and non-minority orientated party lists in both States. In light of the recent full-scale invasion of Ukraine, during the latest national elections, the centre-left Concord Party that traditionally focuses on raising issues associated with the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia, did not reach the required electoral threshold. This is a significant setback as the party had managed to gradually increase the number of seats in the Latvian Parliament since the State regained its independence. Some expert takes report that this is due to the pro-Ukrainian stance that the party expressed from the start of the full scale invation in 2022, that led to a situation where the populist party For Stability! passing the electoral threshold during the most recent elections as one of the parties appealing to the Russian-speaking minority voters (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity, 2022). However, it must be noted that the pro-Russian party, the Russian Union of Latvia, also did not secure enough votes to reach the national legislature, which does not explain why the voters chose to direct their support towards the new For Stability! party. One theory that can be considered here is that the Russian-speaking voters who traditionally supported the Concord Party have not seen any improvement of the key areas important to the minority, specifically minority language education and use of minority language within the public sphere, during the time that the party had the most number of seats in the national legislature (Pavlov, 2022).

In Estonia, parties popular among the Russian-speaking minority with a centrist ideology managed to reach the governing coalitions, instead of parties that were based on the Russian ethnicity criteria. Until its absorption into the centre-left Social Democratic Party in 2011, a separate Russian Party of Estonia existed in Estonia, which was based on the Russian cultural/ethnicity criteria. The most successful efforts in being represented in the national legislature are exhibited by

the Estonian Centre Party, which emerged from the Popular Front of Estonia, who was a major stakeholder in the re-establishment of Estonia's independence. The party is frequently criticised for its pro-minority policies. Despite this, the Centre Party managed to be part of governing coalitions. The most recent example of Estonian Centre Party's successful inclusion into the governing coalition took place in 2016, when the leading coalition before that consisting of the Social Democratic Party, the conservative liberal Estonian Reform Party and the national-conservative Pro Partia and Res Publica Union (Isamaa), failed to hold on to power. As a result, the Estonian Centre Party formed a governing coalition with the Social Democratic Party and Isamaa. Here, Isamaa traditionally holds assimilationist views towards to the Russian-speaking minority (Jakobson, 2014: 9). Csergő et al. (2024) report that during this coalition, several Russophone politicians were appointed to Estonia's executive/ministerial positions for the first time in post-1991, albeit this success was short-lived. Nonetheless, this was the first time that the parties representing Russian-speaking minority views were included in a governing coalition for a stable amount of time, as previous governing coalitions with the Estonian Centre Party lasted approximately a couple of months. In 2022, a new coalition government formed that did not include the Centre Party. As of March 2025, the governing coalition is made of the Estonian Reform Party and the new liberal and pro-European Estonia 200 party.

National legislatures are not the only avenues for minority participation in the public life of their home countries. For example, national-level consultative body opportunities can establish meaningful participation and representation of minority views. However, in the fifth Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention's Opinion on Estonia, it was reported that no formalised national structure or mechanism for the consultation of persons belonging to national minorities exists (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2022: para 196). The promising Presidential Roundtable on National Minorities was dissolved in 2006 with 'no replacement foreseen' (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2022: para 195). Since 2008, the official responsibility for minority issues is held by the Ministry of Culture, through the Cultural Council of National Minorities, which was also found to be ineffective in earlier reporting (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2014: para 166). Furthermore, while Estonia does offer, at times, *ad hoc* opportunities for participation through different ministries, the opportunities were found to be non-structural or short-term in their nature, as well as strictly limited to cultural issues rather than all areas of public affairs (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2014: para 203).

Historically, Latvia has had more consultative bodies than Estonia. Until 2019, a Minorities Advisory Council existed under the authority of the President of Latvia to promote dialogue on ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity issues of national minorities. However, this practice was discontinued (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2023: para 177). Out of the three national-level consultative bodies, two bodies namely the Advisory Committee of Ethnic Minority Organisation Representatives under the Ministry of Culture and the Advisory Council for Ethnic Minority Education under the Ministry of Education had one representative each from the Russian minority (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2023: paras 178 – 180). In addition to the relatively low level of representation of the minority at the centre of this study, the existing platforms were found to be more representative of avenues for sharing information rather than for effective consultation on future policies (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2023: para 180).

Self-governance

The self-governance arrangements sphere is different to the elements discussed in the decision-making sphere, as legislation exists in both States. In theory, in Estonia, the absence of effective consultative opportunities theoretically leaves the Russian-speaking minority with the option of establishing a cultural autonomy body provided by the National Minorities Cultural Autonomy Act of 1993. As of 2003, a process for establishing such bodies was introduced and, subsequently, successfully used by the Finnish and Swedish minorities in Estonia. However, Article 1 of the Act does not include the non-citizen category in the 'national minority' definition. The Act defines cultural autonomy as a right of persons belonging to national minorities to establish specific autonomous bodies, and this right is allocated to persons belonging to German, Russian, Swedish and Jewish national minorities, and persons of other national minorities with populations of over 3000 citizens. To establish such body, the minority may submit a nationality list of at least 3000 citizens of Estonia to be considered. As for non-citizens, they can take part in the activities of these bodies, but they cannot participate in the elections of or be appointed to the directorship of these institutions.

In this setting, it is reported that all attempts to create a Russian cultural autonomy body have not been successful (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2015: para 93; Smith, 2020: 238). The first attempt was made in 1996 by the Union of Slavic Charitable and Educational Organisation, however, the application was not processed as none of the necessary legislation that would have established more clarity on how to successfully register such a body existed at the time (Lagerspetz, 2014: 466). The latest application was submitted in 2011 and refused because the situation created an administrative problem that had two parallel applications logged at the same time claiming to represent the minority community (Lagerspetz, 2014: 468). Some academic accounts trace other reasons for the lack of success in achieving cultural autonomy for the Russian-speaking minority, such as the expressions made during the parliamentary consideration of the Act that created fears of a 'state within a state' situation and a potential vehicle for external influence by Russia, especially given the numerical size of the Russian-speaking minority and its territorial concentration in North-Eastern Estonia (Smith, 2013: 39-40; Smith, 2020: 238). Other academic contributions identify further reasons for the ineffectiveness of the cultural autonomy opportunities, such as the lack of clarity on the status of such bodies as from the examples of the two successful attempts in creating cultural autonomy bodies by the Finnish and Swedish, minorities experienced a lack of clarity in regard to the 'legal provision governing the public-legal status or competences of these bodies' (Smith, 2015: 171). Therefore, the legislation on cultural autonomy in Estonia potentially securitizes public participation opportunities within the sphere of self-governance for the Russian-speaking minority, despite having a separate law and legal provisions governing the area. Arguably, this constitutes a partial silence strategy where, on the one hand, specific legislation provides for such arrangements, but, on the other, it is not clear on the parameters and the process for establishing such institutions.

In Latvia, the creation of cultural autonomy institutions for minorities is also ambiguous and cautiously worded in a separate piece of legislation. Under the Law On Free Development of Latvia's National and Ethnic Groups and Their Right to Cultural Autonomy of 1991, Latvia requires national authorities to support all permanent residents in developing their national societies as specified in Articles 5 and 10. While the legislation is more inclusive of the non-citizen category of the minority, it is less explicit in terms of who might qualify for this right and what the specific parameters might be for these opportunities in comparison to the Estonian case. It is reported that financial support is conducted by the Ministry of Culture, which allocates funding to minority

organisations and projects (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2016: para 48), but this support was reportedly limited to the cultural life of minorities rather than the promotion of civic understanding and participation in public life of the State (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2016: paras 47-62). Therefore, the self-governance opportunities in Latvia are potentially framed through partial silence strategies, similarly to Estonia.

Overall, the structure of public life participation opportunities presented in this section indicate limitations, exclusions and a cautious approach to self-governance opportunities in the two States. In the next section of this paper, this structure of public participation for minorities is further analysed to reveal further potential limitations and the impact of the securitized setting on the minority.

Analysis and findings from fieldwork

From the fieldwork data gathered in 2018 and 2019, it was identified that most participants noted dissatisfaction with minority rights realisation in Estonia and Latvia, when discussing effective public participation opportunities, specifically, nine out of 11 Russian-speaking minority elite participants noted problems with minority rights realisation. The interview data highlights key issues of (1) divisions and differences among the Russian-speaking minority elites in successful coalition government formation and opposition; (2) symbolic opportunities that exist for the minority outside of the state legislature in regard to consultative bodies; (3) ambiguous provisions governing cultural autonomy opportunities and (4) continued securitization of the minority due to Russia's kinstate interest and actions in nearby regions. The four findings are discussed in detail below.

Decision-making: Divisions and differences in governing coalitions and opposition

As highlighted previously, neither of the two states have special arrangements within domestic legislation for minority decision-making opportunities. While the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia can be seen as somewhat more 'successful' than the minority in Latvia, the presence in governing coalitions did not deliver the desired result for the minority and the elites. It was reported that the membership in the governing coalitions in Estonia did not guarantee support from other coalition partners, because the parties within these coalitions tended to have more restrictive views on questions linked to minorities.

In this setting, a Russian-speaking Estonian parliamentarian reflected on their time being part of the governing coalition and explained that 'it's impossible to agree on anything' with the coalition partners (Interviewee No.7, 2019). Furthermore, clear boundaries are set between coalition partners, which are not allowed to be breached, as it was reported that topics of minorities and their rights would constitute a potential breach of such boundaries. Another Russian-speaking Estonian parliamentarian explained, that topics that are in common among the political parties could be negotiated, explaining that these are usually limited to social matters, such as employment, national economy, and taxation (Interviewee No.10, 2019). Furthermore, an Estonian parliamentarian expressed that if a parliamentarian bound by the coalition agreement goes beyond the set boundaries, the individual will face difficulties from the leadership of the faction and potentially the leadership of the party that they belong to (Interviewee No.7, 2019). The coalition agreements between political parties with different views and priorities are not the only divisions reportedly faced by Russian-speaking minority elites. One of the two interviewed Estonian members of Parliament recalled one situation when the topic linked to minority issues came up during parliamentary discussions, and

there was a clear lack of support from other party members who were also from the Russian-speaking minority (Interviewee No.7, 2019).

Furthermore, governing coalition agreements have a potential impact on the collaboration between the parliamentarians and NGOs interested in minority issues. Both Estonian NGO representatives interviewed during the fieldwork reported that they used to work closely with the Centre Party when the party was in opposition to the government, but upon becoming part of the governing coalition, this support and collaboration became significantly weaker (Interviewee No.5, 2019; Interviewee No.6, 2019). Here, parliamentarian interviewees reported distrust of NGOs and new political actors who claim to represent the Russian-speaking minority, as one of the parliamentarian participants noted there are divisions and political tensions among civil society actors that could not be ignored (Interviewee No.7, 2019). The other interviewed MP noted the new actors on the political scene claiming to defend the minority's interests at the time of fieldwork, such as the United Left Party of Estonia, which split into two political parties and posed problems for the Russian-speaking electorate in terms of which party was the legitimate one during the 2019 parliamentary elections (Interviewee No.10, 2019).

Similar issues of division were reported in Latvia, as interviewees reported that within the Concord Party, the views on supporting the Russian-speaking minority issues were not uniform. For example, a parliamentarian from Latvia noted that there were divisions among the Concord Party members in terms of their perception on language policy issues, even though the overwhelming majority were in united opposition in respect to other policies, such as in the field of minority language education (Interviewee No.8, 2019). Both parliamentarian interviewees from Latvia noted the division among other parties and civil society actors claiming to represent the Russian-speaking minority (Interviewee No.2, 2018; Interviewee No.8, 2019). One parliamentarian participant emphasised that the division is a contributing factor to the limited participation opportunities of Russian-speakers in public life, as they explain:

> There were more than 200 non-governmental organisations registered in the official register with the word 'Russian' in its name. Therefore, in general, such quasi-representation cannot be considered constructive at all [...] (Interviewee No.2, 2018).

Therefore, the perspective of the Russian-speaking elites adds to the previous analysis on the lack of specific provisions for effective public participation in the decision-making sphere, as in this setting it was reported that multiple divisions were taking place.

Decision-making continued: Temporary and culture orientated consultative bodies

Consultative opportunities can serve as an important link for minority elites to be heard by the national legislature, if the traditional decision-making opportunities are not as effective. Within the two States this has primarily taken place through either the republics' Presidential roles or separate government ministries. However, as demonstrated previously, no laws exist that establish the way in which such bodies should be set up and the way they should function. The interview data highlighted, that in this situation, this results in the limited and temporary consultative opportunities. One participant from Estonia highlighted the negative experience of working in the now dissolved Presidential Roundtable on National Minorities, as it exhibited more of a symbolic consultation avenue or a 'lightning rod' for discussing problems where a division in opinions among the minority was observed (Interviewee No.10, 2019). This situation creates an environment where the only other

effective body for consultation operates under the Ministry of Culture, however it limits consultative dialogue opportunities to cultural issues (Interviewee No.5, 2019; Interviewee No.10, 2019).

The situation in Latvia was described to be similar at the time as the consultative bodies were perceived to be ineffective due to consisting of members who were reluctant to challenge government policies or provide a conflicting perspective to the dominant views expressed (Interviewee No.1, 2018; Interviewee No.2, 2018; Interviewee No.8, 2019; Interviewee No.11, 2019). Despite these statements, there was an agreement between the two consultative body interviewees in terms of the positive elements of the work with state bodies, specifically the President of Latvia through the opportunities provided by the now defunct Consultative Council on National Minority Issues (Interviewee No.9, 2019; Interviewee No.11, 2019). Here, the Latvian consultative body representative noted positive work under the leadership of President Vējonis, who took into consideration the proposals for abolishing the allocation of the non-citizen status for children born to non-citizen parents and urged the government to introduce an opt-out model like the one implemented in Estonia (Interviewee No.9, 2019). This initiative proved to be successful in 2019, when the Law 'On discontinuation of non-citizen status allocation for children' was approved by a majority of MPs. However, these consultative opportunities are not permanent and depend on the aims and political will of the President; most notably, the work of the consultative body was liquidated under the successors of President Vējonis. In its recent report to the Advisory Committe on the Framework Convention, Latvia did not report whether the activities of the Consultative Council on National Minority Issues are considered for renewal (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2021).

Overall, the silence on consultative bodies for minorities in domestic legislation created an environment of uncertainty and limited space for dialogue. The dialogue was reported to be restricted to specific themes and for short periods of time. The effect of securitization on this aspect of the minority's right to effective public participation led to the interviewees perceiving the dialogue as an unfavourable approach in the eyes of incoming and outgoing governments, despite the successes that previous consultative bodies have achieved in terms of building a more cohesive and integrated society.

Self-governance: Ambiguous and unpopular autonomy opportunities

As described previously, separate legislation exists on this area of public participation for minorities, but it is partially silent on the precise status of such arrangements and the extent of their activities. From the gathered fieldwork data, four out of 11 participants presented their opinions on self-governance opportunities in the two States. A parliamentarian from Latvia noted that establishing autonomy arrangements is a difficult task to fulfil due to differing identities within the Russian-speaking minority as well as the questionable level of usefulness of such arrangements for the minority (Interviewee No.2, 2018). An NGO representative from Estonia stated that while legal provisions exist within domestic legislation for the establishment of a non-territorial self-governance/autonomy body, the process and requirements for establish such a body are not clear (Interviewee No.5, 2019). Furthermore, the participant noted that decades had passed since the last attempt was launched by their community, which indicates that such an arrangement was not seen favourably by the Ministry of Culture and that the issue is highly politicised:

> We are trying to register cultural autonomy and always stumble upon these obstacles. They always say that you are missing something. This is impossible to prove, because there are no requirements which dictate

> clear criteria for cultural autonomy to be issued. […] And because there are no requirements, on this basis we cannot have our cultural autonomy; although by law it is theoretically permitted (Interviewee No.5, 2019).

Another NGO representative from Estonia stated that they do not see cultural autonomy bodies as necessary institutions for the minority as this mode will not solve the existing set of problems that the minority faces (Interviewee No.6, 2019). Similarly to the situation in Latvia, the participant noted that there is no mobilisation from the Russian-speaking minority for such arrangements to take place and all previous attempts in submitting claims for non-territorial autonomy recognition were not serious enough (Interviewee No.6, 2019).

From this subsection, the partial silence on the establishment and operation of cultural autonomy bodies forms part of the securitization dynamic. Arguably, the timeline, lack of certainty in the processes and the status of such bodies influence the minority's perception on the actual need for pursuing such arrangements.

Continued securitization and kinstate interests

This research views that the limitation of the Russian-speaking minority public participation is associated with the securitization discourse linked to Russia's interests in protecting the minority group. In this section, the 'Russia factor' is addressed and positioned with the views of the Russian-speaking minority elites, revealing a challenging picture that contests the securitized image of the minority. Despite Russia's intentions, some participants questioned whether the interest in the rights of the Russian-speaking minority in the Baltic States is genuine. When asked about the role of Russia in the dynamics of advancing minority rights in their home state, the overwhelming majority of the respondents explicitly stated that Russia has more of a negative impact than a positive one in influencing the policies directed at the minority in the two Baltic States. Members of the Russian-speaking elites representing the parliamentarian category of the interviewees stated that they do not rely on Russia politically (Interviewee No.2, 2018; Interviewee No.7, 2019; Interviewee No.10, 2019).

The non-reliance on the political support from Russia is further exemplified by the views from participants questioning Russia's actions in international dialogue platforms, such as the annual United Nations Forum on Minority Issues and the United Nations Universal Periodic Review. An NGO participant from Estonia expressed concerns in terms of the sincerity of these statements issued by Russia:

> [...] I don't know if these statements are good for us. Sometimes it even seems to me that they play the other side. What happens is that the Russian side speaks on behalf of the national minority, the Russian-speaking minority. And it turns out that they used us to realise their own geopolitical goals (Interviewee No.5, 2019).

During the fieldwork, in contrast to the views expressed by the NGO representative from Estonia, an NGO interviewee from Latvia noted that the role of Russia could be potentially viewed as a positive one, because there is no support coming from any other State in Europe and beyond (Interviewee No.3, 2019). In addition, the interviewees from Latvia stated that if the minority policies were to change, Western States are better placed to achieve this as they are more influential and better perceived by the State than Russia (Interviewee No.3, 2019; Interviewee No.11, 2019).

The worsening relations with Russia and the two Baltic States made it evident that the problem of Russian-speakers became a geopolitically charged one in Europe (Interviewee No.6, 2019) and, thus, securitized beyond the territorial boundaries of Estonia and Latvia. The view expressed by a

Latvian consultative body member described Russia's image as being negative in terms of its effects on the perception of other European States that act cautiously on issues linked to Russian-speakers:

> [...] this situation with Russia, which politically knocked Russianness out of the general discourse, led to dire consequences – all that is Russian has become such a 'red rag in front of a bull,' to which everyone reacts completely irrationally and emotionally (Interviewee No.11, 2019).

Final reflections: Recommendations

At the end of each interview during the fieldwork, participants were asked whether they would like to change the current situation and what their recommendations would be. Estonian and Latvian participants expressed the wish for improvement on issues experienced by the Russian-speaking minority ranging from naturalisation and non-citizen voting rights (Interviewee No.3, 2019; Interviewee No.10, 2019), language policy and education system for minorities (Interviewee No.3, 2019; Interviewee No.10, 2019), participation in existing governmental structures (Interviewee No.7, 2019) and creation of new opportunities, such as cultural autonomy specifically for minority education (Interviewee No.3, 2019). The overall focus of the recommendations aimed to meaningfully integrate the minority into the fabric of the state through better participation in public life.

The overall responses from participants reveal that the Russian-speaking minority elites wanted some efforts that constituted a move towards being seen as part of 'normal politics' rather than emergency politics of securitization. Many recommended actions that would contribute to the promotion of the three 'Ds' of desecuritization such as discussion, debate and deliberation. This call for a desecuritized approach was primarily revealed in the recommendations calling for dialogue opportunities that move away from depending on the changing political will of incoming and outgoing governments. Suggestions echoed that such forums for consultation could be facilitated through permanent consultation channels, rather than avenues of temporary nature. Furthermore, some participants recommended for Estonia to reintroduce the Presidential Roundtable on National Minorities that was dissolved, and potentially consider redeveloping existing consultative opportunities within the Ministry of Culture (Interviewee No.5, 2019). Similarly, a participant from Latvia noted that there needs to be a change in avoiding the limitation of consultative opportunities to ministries of States and the changing political will of governments (Interviewee No.2, 2018).

In this context, Russian-speaking elites reported that they tend to utilise international dialogue platforms, such as the previously mentioned United Nations Forum on Minority Issues, to compensate for the lack of effective consultative opportunities on the ground (Interviewee No.5, 2019; Interviewee No.9, 2019). While these international dialogue platforms are facilitated by international organisations, participants from Estonia and Latvia noted that that these international institutions need to acknowledge that there is a real need for promotion of the existing minority rights norms (Interviewee No.8, 2019; Interviewee No.6, 2019; Interviewee No.3, 2019).

Some reflections were offered on past activities of international organisations and what participants perceived as missed opportunities. For example, an interviewee from an Estonian civil society organisation noted an interesting point about the European Union's European Commission, which was powerful during the accession period of the two States and had the ability to change domestic legislation towards a more minority-friendly approach, but some critical junctures demonstrated that the Commission refrained from exercising adequate pressure for minority rights realisation:

> […] we had a time of absolutely fantastic opportunities. […] Indeed, with the support of (European) international organisations, laws and civil (rights) laws on language that existed in Estonia and Latvia were also changed. My main complaint is that I am very sorry that, in principle, the European Commission, when negotiating, could have achieve a lot, but it did not (Interviewee No.6, 2019).

Another international organisation was highlighted by an interviewee, the Council of Europe, that was reported to form part of an array of institutions who had significant power in changing Latvia's policies towards better accommodation of minorities; however, recently, there seems to be a lack of enforcement to comply with the established minority rights norms:

> Certain improvements have occurred in the process of negotiations on accession to the European Union [...], although these resources have not been used far enough. But now that Latvia is a full member [...], it is very clearly noticeable that the Council of Europe and especially the European Union have very few 'levers' at their disposal to influence a country that is already a Member State (Interviewee No.2, 2019).

Similarly, reflecting on the nature of international legally binding provisions on minority rights protection, NGO representatives from both Estonia and Latvia emphasised that these norms face issues of implementation (Interviewee No.1, 2018; Interviewee No.6, 2019). An NGO participant explained that the influence of these organisations remains on a diplomatic level, which has no punitive effects, without which potential violations of minority rights will continue to occur (Interviewee No.1, 2018).

On a final note, this section concludes with an observation made by one NGO participant from Estonia that highlights the general securitized nature of minority rights that is taking place beyond the borders of the two States as support for minority rights seems to be missing from the European region's agenda:

> […] I'm afraid that the pendulum swings in the other direction, and that we will have to wait a long time for a repetition of the situation that happened in the 1990s (Interviewee No.6, 2019).

Conclusion

This research focused on the Russian-speaking minority and the elements shaping participation in public life experienced by the minority in Estonia and Latvia that indicates trends of securitization. The article reflected on the legislation influencing the realisation of the right to effective public participation for minorities in the decision-making and self-governance spheres and complemented this reflection with the results from 11 interviews conducted with members of the Russian-speaking minority elite. The paper demonstrated that much of the securitization is manifested through full and partial 'silence' in law that impact on how decision-making and self-governance opportunities were realised for the minority. The reflections on domestic legislation highlight problems linked to further issues identified in the fieldwork data, specifically: (1) divisions in both successful governing coalitions and opposition parties; (2) limited consultative opportunities; (3) ambiguous provisions governing the establishment of cultural autonomy; and (4) the continued perception of the minority as a security threat in light of the activities conducted by the minority's alleged kinstate. By emphasising the significant and novel points for consideration in trying to understand the failings of public participation for the minority in the two States and the insightful pespectives of elites on the situation affecting their minority and its perceived kinstate, the research offers a new in-depth case study that adds to the securitization literature. The paper exemplifies how domestic laws have the

potential to securitize minorities through implementing different variations of silence strategies. It also contributes to the existing normative framework on the right to effective public participation for minorities that currently does not fully capture the nuanced issues that potentially result from approaching minorities as security threats.

The paper delivers a new perspective that further informs the agency of the Russian-speaking minority and presents the minority elite's calls for desecuritization at the time of fieldwork. The majority of the respondents expressed the wish to maintain a more meaningful dialogue with national authorities, but this desecuritization pathway is advocated by the minority and is only periodically taken on by governments in the two States. The reflections offered in this paper question the power of minority rights protection norms that are shaped and monitored by international organisations with relevant mandates on minorities. It demonstrates that in challenging contexts with geopolitical importance, such normative commitments from States can be sidelined. Here, international organisations need to find a way that makes their demands more meaningful and enforceable for States, even in challenging environments where normative pressures are not easily accepted. Finally, the insights from the Russian-speaking minority elites might be important for the national majority elites who dominate the political landscape and, thus, shape the securitized approach towards the minority. Understanding what the minority's needs not only through the traditional democratic processes, but also through effective dialogue channels, such as consultative bodies, could be a more efficient way in balancing the commitments made under the normative framework on minority rights protection but also in understanding the level and accuracy of real and assumed security threats.

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Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the School of Advanced Study (University of London) Research Ethics Committee. Approval reference number: SASREC_1718-228-PhD.

Consent to participate

The participants' informed consent was obtained in written form. The author confirms receipt of written consent from participants, who have confirmed their agreement to publish the interview materials.

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Author biography

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Appendix: Interview respondents

Country	Position	Participant number	Date of interview
Estonia	Consultative body member	4	08.01.2019
Estonia	NGO representative	5	09.01.2019
Estonia	NGO representative	6	09.01.2019
Estonia	Member of Parliament	7	12.01.2019
Estonia	Member of Parliament	10	21.01.2019
Latvia	NGO representative	1	13.06.2018
Latvia	Member of Parliament	2	13.06.2018
Latvia	NGO representative	3	07.01.2019
Latvia	Member of Parliament	8	14.01.2019
Latvia	Consultative body member	9	15.01.2019
Latvia	Consultative body member	11	22.01.2019