Representing the Unrepresented: Alternative Minority Institutions and the Legitimacy of the Russian-Speaking Minority's Political Voice in Estonia and Latvia

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Introduction

In recent years, in both Estonia and Latvia, Russian-speaking minority activists experimented with alternative political representation. Starting from the premise that the Russian-speaking minority is not adequately represented in state institutions, activists in both countries held informal, within-community elections with the aim to select legitimate minority representatives and create new representative bodies. These experiences and the reactions they elicited offer an illustration of the role of minority voices in the Estonian and Latvian democratic debates. Through an analysis of news coverage (both in Russian and in the state languages) and of interviews with state officials and Russophone activists, this paper explores the relationship between the minority's political voice, its capacity to challenge dominant nation-state discourses, and the constructed nature of radicalism in the Estonian and Latvian contexts.

In both countries, the national elites are widely seen as holding the symbolic power of defining the conditions of acceptability of minority-led political demands and movements; that is, of defining the border between healthy civil society participation and unhealthy radicalism. This is in keeping with studies of the Estonian and Latvian regimes that categorize them as ethnic democracies or control systems (Commercio, 2008; Järve, 2000; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Pettai & Hallik, 2002; Pettai, 1998; Smooha & Järve, 2005). However, although the Estonian and Latvian national elites deploy very similar discourses in defining minority mobilization as radical, the efficacy of their labeling cannot be taken as a given. While models of ethnic democracy suggest a static relationship between the (labeling) national elites and the (labeled) minority, I argue that the dynamics of party politics and the minority's capacity to mobilize politically can challenge the national elites' ethnocentric discourse. Rather than concentrating on the evidence for national elite's univocal labeling, we should look at the majority/minority relationship as one of classification struggle over the definition of the boundaries of acceptable civic activism.

In the cases of Estonia and Latvia, there were marked differences in the extent to which the “radical” label was successfully challenged. However, the different “stickiness” of the label did not depend on a difference in the intrinsic “radicality” of the two initiatives; nor it was a consequence of different
strategies being used by the national elites and the minority activists in the classification struggle. Rather, this difference strictly mirrors the divergent trajectories minority voice has taken in the Estonian and Latvian democratic debate. In Estonia, a politically marginalized and demobilized minority has very few tools to successfully challenge the national elite’s ‘symbolic power of classification’ (Bourdieu). In Latvia, the minority has a higher capacity for mobilization and can count on the ascending influence of a Russophone party; this creates more room for questioning the automatic labeling of minority initiatives as radical. The Estonian and Latvian cases offer an illustration of how looking at the classification struggle around the definition of radicalism can be a fruitful approach to understanding the relative status and legitimacy of minority and majority voices in the democratic debate of ethnically divided societies.

1. Studying ethnic relations in Estonia and Latvia beyond the ethnic democracy model

The relationship between Estonia’s and Latvia’s ethnic majority and their sizeable Russian-speaking minority has attracted much academic attention. The nationalizing tendencies of the Estonian and Latvian elites during the state-building period following independence – especially with regard to citizenship, education and language policies – have been thoroughly analyzed (Agarin, 2010; Mole, 2012; Muižnieks, 2010; Poleschuk, 2009; Södergren, 2000). The impact of EU accession conditionalities and other international pressures on Estonia’s and Latvia’s minority policies have also been extensively explored (Adrey, 2005; Birckenbach, 2000; Van Elswege, 2004).

One particularly influential strand of research applies Smooha’s model of ethnic democracy to Estonia and Latvia. An ethnic democracy is defined as a ‘democracy that contains the non-democratic institutionalization of dominance of one ethnic group’ (Smooha & Järve, 2005, p. 21), and Estonia and Latvia are deemed to be an exemplary, although imperfect, form of it (Smooha & Järve, 2005). Alternatively, Estonia has been defined as a “control system”, where the ethnic minority is politically fragmented, dependent on the majority for social, economic and political benefits, and integrated into state institutions only through assimilation and co-optation (Pettai & Hallik, 2002); and both countries have been categorized as “systems of partial control”, where the ethnic majority dominates the political sector but control over the economic sector is shared (Commercio, 2008). These different definitions all point to the same finding: that minority exclusion in Estonia and Latvia has been institutionalized within the forms of a regime in which elements of participatory democracy are combined with ethnocentric elements aimed at guaranteeing disproportionate political dominance to one ethnic group (see also Järve, 2000; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Pettai, 1998).

The model of ethnic democracy is very useful as a framework to understand and explain the logics of state-building in Estonia and Latvia, and the discursive and factual appropriation of state structures by the ethnic majority. However, it is a rather static model. First of all, it does not account for internal, minority-led challenges to the status quo, and so it makes it difficult to capture change or the potential for it. Indeed, while it offers a very valuable
perspective onto the constrictions that politically active minority members encounter, the ethnic democracy model risks brushing internal challenges aside as mere “imperfections” of the system of control. Moreover, the fact that Estonia and Latvia are usually put together under the same label usefully highlights similarities between them, but at the same time excessively discounts important differences. My paper tries to go beyond this static understanding of inter-ethnic relations in Estonia and Latvia by exploring domestic challenges to the ethnocentric understanding of the state through the prism of the classification struggle around the definition of what is “radical”. My analysis of similar grassroots initiatives to create minority alternative representative bodies in Estonia and Latvia reveals that there are marked differences between the two countries with regard to the possibility for the minority to negotiate the borders between unhealthy radicalism and healthy civil society participation.

2. Who is a radical? The classification struggle around the definition of radicalism

The term “radical” is widely used (both in scholarly texts and in the media) to define certain group-based demands or certain grassroots organizations. This understanding of radicalism associates it with specific demands and specific practices. So, for example, radicalism has been defined as a political project that is in opposition to liberalism and capitalism (Bonnett, 1993). When applied to political and civic movements, “radical” is also widely used interchangeably with “extremist”. For instance, in a study of migrants’ political mobilization, radicalism was defined as a ‘destructive [form] of politicization’ (Simon, Reichert, & Grabow, 2013, p. 252).

However, “purist” understandings of radicalism – that imply that certain claims and certain actions are inherently radical – have been criticized as essentialist (Dean, 2008). Alternative definitions of radicalism have been proposed that take into account its contested, political nature. Since radicalism stands in opposition to the fundamental norms and practices of an existing regime and envisions ‘new ways of seeing and understanding the world’ (Dean, 2008, p. 293), it cannot be understood without reference to those fundamental norms and practices. As a result, there is no position or practice that is radical per se: “radicality” (the quality of being radical) depends on the context in which a certain action is performed or a certain understanding of the world is championed. Something that is radical in a certain geographical or historical context might be commonplace in a different context (Dean, 2008, p. 293; Ferree, 2003, p. 306). In his discussion of social movements, Ferree talks about this in terms of discursive opportunity structures. These are institutionally anchored ways of thinking that provide a gradient of relative political acceptability to specific packages of ideas [...] at the extremes making some ideas “unthinkable” and others “common sense”” (Ferree, 2003, p. 309). Understood in this way, radicalism is not a set of specific demands or of (violent, controversial) actions, but a relationship between a movement, action, or idea and the context in which it exists (Ferree, 2003, p. 339).

This non-essentialist definition of radicalism challenges the automatic labeling of certain movements or certain group-based demands as inherently radical.
Moreover, and most crucially for the aims of this paper, by recognizing the contextual nature of radicalism, this definition prompts questions regarding the process of attaching the “radical” label onto a specific movement, idea or demand. Indeed, labeling something as radical is not an objective fact but has a clear performatie dimension: ‘when we describe something as radical, we in effect constitute it as radical’ (Dean, 2008, p. 297). Thus, defining a certain organization or a certain demand as radical is not politically neutral, but it can (and often does) serve specific political purposes. Labeling a movement or a demand as radical places them outside of the political mainstream. This can be a way of cancelling out the claims of those to whom the label is attached: radicals, by definition, are positioned at one extreme of the debate and are not expected to take constructive part in it. In the same way, the “radical” label can relegate a certain demand or a certain idea to the margins of public discussion. Moreover, radicals are also potentially dangerous to the social order, and therefore their marginalization is not perceived as being at odds with democratic practices.

In a passage of Language and Symbolic Power, Bourdieu argues that ‘[the dominant] discourse is a structured and structuring medium tending to impose an apprehension of the established order as natural (orthodoxy) through the disguised (and thus misrecognized) imposition of systems of classification and of mental structures that are objectively adjusted to social structures’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 169). This process of classification and its fundamental role in defining the boundaries of public debate are at the basis of what Bourdieu calls classification struggles. These are ‘symbolic struggles over the power to produce and to impose the legitimate vision of the world’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 20). This symbolic power of naming social reality is, according to Bourdieu, at the very center of the political struggle (Bourdieu, 1984, 1989). However, social and political actors are not all equally placed within these symbolic struggles; indeed, ‘[in] the symbolic struggle for the production of common sense or, more precisely, for the monopoly over legitimate naming, agents put into action the symbolic capital that they have acquired in previous struggles and which may be juridically guaranteed’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 21).

Bourdieu’s concept of classification struggle can be fruitfully adapted to the discussion over radicalism. Indeed, labeling as “radical” – that is, the discursive representation of certain groups, movements, ideas or demands as radical with the (more or less deliberate) consequence of delegitimizing, marginalizing and cancelling them out of the mainstream political debate – is at the center of a political (symbolic) struggle to define what voices can legitimately take part in the democratic debate. This is particularly consequential in ethnically divided democracies, where the ethnic majority might be at an advantage in terms of symbolic capital and therefore tends to be better placed to impose its classifications over social reality. In an ethnic democracy – if we follow the definitions given by its theorists – the superior symbolic power of the ethnic majority is consecrated and normalized by law.¹

In the specific cases of Estonia and Latvia, this means that these countries’ national elites tend to describe the status quo (in which they control the main

¹ Although in the different context of class relations, Bourdieu also talks about the ‘legal consecration of symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 22).
levers of power) as natural and just, and to label any demand or movement that challenges it as radical. The understanding of Estonia and Latvia as ethnic democracies brings with it the assumption that not only it is in the national elites’ habitus (and interest) to define minority political mobilization as radical, but that they also have a virtually unchallenged symbolic power to impose their definition as the norm. However, this labeling – by its own nature of being a political process – is always open to contestation and challenge. The strength of this challenge depends on the level of legitimacy that minority voices enjoy in the public debate; in Bourdieuan terms, it depends on the symbolic capital the minority can count on.2

3. Trajectories of minority voice in Estonia and Latvia

After they regained independence in 1991, both the Estonian and the Latvian elites adopted an ethnocentric view of the state that tended to exclude their sizeable Russophone communities (about one third of the resident population) from political power (Agarin, 2010; Mole, 2012; Pettai, 1998; Smooha & Järve, 2005). Post-independence citizenship laws left part of the Russophone community without citizenship, and today, although many minority members have gone through the naturalization procedure, there is still a substantial number of so-called “non-citizens”. These are former USSR citizens who did not acquire the citizenship of their country of residence either by birth or via naturalization, and who also do not hold the citizenship of a third country. In 2012 in Estonia and Latvia respectively the non-citizens were 93,006 and 280,584 – in both cases about a third of all the Russian-speakers.3 While in Estonia all permanent residents – including non-citizens and third-country citizens – can vote (but not be candidates) in municipal elections, in Latvia the right to vote at any level is reserved to citizens. As a consequence, over a third of the Latvian Russophone minority (14% of the total population of the country) is completely disenfranchised.

Language is the other main issue at the center of controversy between the ethnic majorities and the Russophone minorities. The Estonian and Latvian constitutions and Language Acts established Estonian and Latvian as their respective state language and as the language of administration both at the national and at the local level.4 In both countries we find Language Acts (which regulate the use of titular and foreign languages in the public space), Language Inspectorates (which ensure the enforcement of the Language Act and are sometimes disparagingly referred to as “language police”),5 and

2 Bourdieu recognises that the “principle of division” based on economic and cultural capital (that he sees as combining to form a group’s symbolic capital), can be reinforced by principles of division based on unrelated capitals like ethnic affiliation (Bourdieu, 1991, note 3 to p. 231).

3 In addition to this, about a fourth of Estonia’s Russian-speakers are citizens of a third country, typically Russia. The corresponding figure for Latvia is much lower, at around 5%. All the demographic figures for Estonia and Latvia are drawn from the Latvian Central Statistics Database (www.csb.gov.lv) and the Estonian Statistical Database (www.stat.ee).

4 For a thorough analysis of the Estonian and Latvian language laws see Poleshchuk (2009, pp. 18ff. and 163ff.).

references to the titular languages are conspicuous in their constitutions. Moreover, a language proficiency exam has to be passed in order to acquire citizenship by naturalization, higher levels of proficiency are required to hold public posts and some posts in the private sector, language requirements for election candidates have been temporarily in place in both countries, and in most programmatic documents about minority integration the provisions regarding titular language learning are given pre-eminence. According to Andres Kasekamp, the language laws were ‘the other instrument [together with the citizenship laws] through which Baltic nationalists tried to reassert their dominance over the monolingual Russian settler community’ (2010, p. 185).

Notwithstanding these similarities, important differences have emerged over the years between Estonia and Latvia with regard to the political representation of their Russophone minorities. In Latvia, since independence Russophone parties have consistently won a significant number of seats in the Saeima (the Latvian parliament). After the elections in 2011, the moderate Russophone party Harmony Centre is the biggest party in parliament, with 31 out of 100 seats. While Harmony Centre has so far been excluded from government coalitions – not least on account of it being “the party of the Russians” – it has been in power in the local administration of Riga since 2009, with the popular Russian-speaking mayor Nils Ušakovs. Although it is widely recognized as a Russophone party, Harmony Centre does not depict itself as an ethnic party but as an inclusive, progressive force (Poleschchuk, 2009, p. 188). This strategy has so far been electorally successful: Harmony Centre attracts almost the entirety of the “Russian vote” and there are indications that at least in local elections it is also starting to attract the votes of ethnically progressive and left-leaning ethnic Latvian-speakers (Dudzińska, 2011).

In Estonia, on the contrary, the Russophone parties that had emerged in the 1990s did not succeed in monopolizing the Russian-speaking electorate (Gallbreath, 2005, pp. 123–4; Sikk & Bochsler, 2008, p. 17) and, since the 2003 elections, consistently failed to clear the 5% threshold. This failure has been explained as the combined result of their internal squabbles and divisiveness (Daatland & Svege, 2000, p. 273), their marginalization both in parliament and in local councils that made them largely ineffective in terms of political impact (Poleschchuk, 2009, p. 56), and the presence of a strong minority-friendly Estonian party, the Centre Party, that managed to attract most of the Russian-speaking electorate (Saarts, 2011, p. 96). Indeed, the

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6 For example, the Latvian constitution stipulates that each new member of the Saeima (the Latvian parliament) shall pronounce an oath in which he/she recognises as one of his/her primary duties ‘to strengthen […] the Latvian language as the only official language’ (art. 18). In Estonia a direct reference to the Estonian language was added in 2007 in the preamble to the constitution, which now posits as one of the main responsibilities of the state to ‘guarantee the preservation of the Estonian nation, language and culture through the ages’ (emphasis added).

7 For literature on the fundamental role of language policies in Estonia and Latvia, see Hallik et al., 2002 (on the development of Estonia’s integration concepts), Priedite, 2005 (on the evolution of language legislation in Latvia), and Adrey, 2005 (on the effects of EU accession on Baltic language policies).

8 Electoral data for Latvia are taken from the Latvian Central Electoral Commission website, www.cvk.lv.
Centre Party’s more welfare-oriented economics, its civic-liberal rhetoric regarding the minority issue, and its open recruitment strategy that gives Russian-speakers a possibility for political career, made it the party of choice for the Russian-speaking electorate. However, few concrete actions have followed its pro-minority rhetoric, and the party’s policies have been at times inconsistent (Poleshchuk, 2009, p. 60). Co-optation seems thus to be the trajectory for minority representation in the Estonian party system.

As for other forms of minority political participation, it must be noted that – following a trend that has been observed in most post-communist countries (Howard, 2003; Kostelka, 2014) – civil society activism in Latvia and Estonia is generally low, both among the majority and the minority (Bartkowsky & Jasinska-Kania, 2004; Heidmets, 2008). However, also in this case there are considerable differences between Estonia and Latvia. In Estonia there are very few examples of mass mobilization by the Russian-speakers, and Estonia’s Russophone community has been described as isolated, with a low self-esteem, and politically passive (Berg, 2001; Heidmets, 2008). The events that have come to be known as the “Bronze Night” are a remarkable exception. In April 2007, the Estonian government decided to remove a Soviet-era WWII statue from the center of Tallinn, triggering the reaction of the Russian-speaking community for which that statue had acquired a high symbolic meaning. The riots that accompanied the removal resulted in the death of one protester, over a hundred injuries, and one thousand arrests (Kaiser, 2012). These events came as a shock, especially considering the fact that the Russophone minority had hitherto been seen as largely passive and on a quiet path towards social integration (Ehala, 2009). However, the Bronze Night was also an isolated event, and it did not signal the beginning of a new period of heightened minority activism in Estonia. The grassroots organization Nochnoy Dozor (ND, Night Watch) that had successfully mobilized protesters to oppose the removal of the statue failed to transform this into any sort of political capital. More recently, confirming a similar pattern of minority demobilization, activists campaigning against the reduction of Russian-language teaching hours in Russian-language schools have not managed to mobilize significant numbers of Russian-speakers, notwithstanding the fact that the education reform remains a very controversial and heated issue.

On the contrary, Latvia has experienced a relative surge in political activism (Kažoka & Akule, 2009, p. 4) that has involved (although not exclusively) the Russophone community. Protests against the reform of Russian-language schools mobilized tens of thousands of Russian-speakers between 2003 and 2004 (Silova, 2006, p. 149). Although not all those involved consider the school policy that emerged after the protest period as a victory, protests showed the mobilizing capacities of the minority and were instrumental in pushing the government to compromise. Another moment of high minority mobilization was the 2012 referendum on Russian as a second state language. Russophone activists collected over 180,000 signatures to initiate a referendum and mobilized the Russian-speaking electorate to vote in favor of

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9 Russian-speaking voters have traditionally been more left leaning than the average ethnic Estonian voter (Daatland & Svege, 2000, p. 263).

10 For a chronology of the events, see Silova (2006, pp. 176–89).
The referendum initiative triggered a counter-mobilization in defense of the Latvian language, and the Latvian national elite compactly presented it as a threat to the very foundations of the Latvian state (Lublin, 2013, pp. 386–7). The result of the referendum was predictably negative: about 25% of the voters were in favor of the proposed constitutional amendments, which roughly corresponds to the share of Russian-speakers in the electorate. However, notwithstanding the result, the 2012 referendum was a successful experience of minority mobilization. After this, the referendum initiators started collecting signatures for a new referendum to grant automatic citizenship to all Latvian non-citizens. However, this time the referendum was judged unconstitutional by the Central Electoral Commission.

This brief summary of Russophone political representation and civic activism in Estonia and Latvia clearly delineates divergent trajectories of minority voice in the two countries. In Estonia minority voice in institutional politics has been largely co-opted by a mainstream Estonian party, which – although it has consistently held a liberal view with regard to the Russian-speakers and relies heavily on the Russophone voters – has an overwhelmingly ethnic Estonian leadership and an inconsistent record of minority interest representation. Alongside this, civic activism has been low, and Russophone activists are finding it difficult to mobilize a significant portion of their community even on highly sensitive issues. The Bronze Night riots are an exception only in the sense that they saw an unprecedented peak of mobilization and visibility for the otherwise passive Russophone community. However, the 2007 events are perfectly in line with the negative trajectory described above. Indeed, powerlessness and exclusion have been indicated as determinant to understanding the logics of rioting: communities that feel marginalized and excluded from institutional avenues of political influence find in riots the only way to have their voice heard (Tshimanga, Gondola, & Bloom, 2009). However, the conditions of powerlessness and exclusion are only heightened by the riots as street unrest might provoke a hostile response from authorities and rarely elicits solidarity from the general public (Tshimanga et al., 2009, p. 43). The fact that the 2007 riots were not followed by heightened minority activism is in line with this understanding of riots not as an expression of minority empowerment, but rather as a manifestation of powerlessness.

The Latvian trajectory of minority representation and mobilization is, instead, upwards. Institutional representation of the minority has steadily increased and reached a peak in 2011 when the moderate Russophone party Harmony Centre became the biggest party in parliament. The election of a Russian-speaker as mayor of Riga in 2009 (then reconfirmed in the 2013 elections) is a powerful symbol of empowerment for the local Russophone community, and might contribute to normalize the presence of Russian-speakers in positions

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11 Launching a referendum in Latvia implies a two-stage process of signature gathering: 10,000 signatures must be independently gathered in order to access the second, state-funded stage of signature collection. One tenth of the eligible voters (154,379 in 2011) must sign in the second stage for the Central Electoral Commission to call a referendum on the proposed issue. In the case of the 2012 language referendum activists collected 12,353 signatures in the first stage and 187,378 in the second (Lublin, 2013).
12 For an analysis of the referendum campaign and the reactions it elicited, see Hanov and Tčraudkalns (2012), and Šūpule (2012).
13 This decision is currently being disputed in court (Latvian Centre for Human Rights, 2013, pp. 46–8).
It has also more immediately political implications, as control over Riga gives Harmony Centre both the resources and the visibility to challenge the governing parties. In addition to this, Latvia has experienced an increase in minority civic activism, which – since the 2004 protests – showed the potential for minority mobilization and imposed the presence of Russophone voices in the public debate.

These divergent trajectories of minority voice constitute the background against which minority initiatives to create alternative representative bodies took place. It is only by taking this background into consideration that it is possible to understand the different ways in which the “radical” label attached to these initiatives. The Parliament of the Non-Represented (PNR) in Latvia, and the Russkii Zemskii Soviet (RZS, Russian Land Council)\(^{14}\) in Estonia are both attempts by Russophone activists to challenge the political status quo by creating alternative, minority-centered institutions. In both cases, the organizers framed their initiative as a way for the Russian-speaking minority to denounce the illegitimacy of state institutions that exclude them from representation, and to reclaim political voice within their countries’ democratic space.

The PNR and RZS are particularly well-suited examples to highlight issues of “radical” labeling and minority voice legitimacy. First of all, the similarity of the initiatives and of the organizers’ discourse around it makes them suitable for comparison. Secondly, in both cases the question of radicalism was central to their activities and to the way they were portrayed in the public debate. Thirdly, the election of an alternative body for minority representation is not a strictly policy-based initiative, but it challenges the existing power relations between majority and minority, and calls into question the legitimacy of state institutions. As such, they are radical initiatives in the sense of Dean’s definition, as they challenge fundamental norms of the existing regimes and propose new ones (Dean, 2008). However, notwithstanding these similarities, the “radical” label proved much “stickier” in Estonia than it did in Latvia. I argue that this difference does not reflect a difference in the intrinsic radical content of the initiatives or the radicality of their initiators. Rather, it closely mirrors the divergent trajectories of minority voice legitimacy outlined above.

4. The double rationale of building alternative institutions to represent the unrepresented

There are many experiences of alternative elections and/or alternative institutions organized by protest and rights movements. Examples can be drawn from all over the world: the Women’s Shadow Parliament in Kenya (Ponge, 2013); the (women’s) Model Parliament Project in Palestine (Moghadam, 2007, pp. 37ff.); the alternative local governments of indigenous communities in Ecuador (Wolff, 2007); opposition-led attempts at creating alternative bodies (e.g., the Russkii Zemskii Soviet (RZS) in Estonia, the Russkii Zemskii Sobor in Russia). These efforts are often driven by the desire to challenge the legitimacy of state institutions that exclude minorities from representation and to reclaim political voice within their countries’ democratic space. However, the success of these initiatives is often hindered by the powerful interests of the existing regimes.

\(^{14}\) In explaining the choice of the name, the official website of the RZS refers generally to the European historical tradition of elected citizens’ bodies, and more specifically refers to the experience of the Eastland Land Council that was instrumental in securing Estonia’s independence in 1918. RZS’s official website is available at: [www.ruszemsovet.eu](http://www.ruszemsovet.eu) [Last accessed 30 June 2014].
alternative parliaments in Myanmar (Rieffel, 2010, p. 35), Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, and most recently the creation of an alternative People’s Rada in Ukraine. Interestingly, two notable examples of this strategy are to be found in Estonia and Latvia. The Congress of Estonia and the Citizens’ Congress of Latvia were both created in the 1980s by Estonian and Latvian activists as part of the struggle for independence from the USSR. Those alternative parliaments, formed through grassroots elections, were instrumental in pushing for Estonia and Latvia’s independence and were central in determining the direction state-building took after 1991 (Agarin, 2011, p. 88; Mole, 2012). Also importantly, in Latvia the League of Non-Citizens (LNC), an alternative elected body for the representation of the non-citizens which was mainly focused on reducing the differences in rights between citizens and non-citizens, operated throughout the 1990s.

While these initiatives were not always directed to an extensive social group, were not always aimed at creating fully-functional alternative institutions, and were not always successful, alternative institution building can be said to be part of protest movements’ repertoire. Notwithstanding this, alternative elections and alternative institutions have not been the object of theorization, and studies that mention these experiences are generally descriptive and focus on individual cases. Although a wide theorization of the rationale and usage of alternative elections and alternative institutions as part of protest movements’ repertoire is outside of the scope of this paper, some basic characteristics of these initiatives must be noted.

The initiatives listed above (a list that is by no means exhaustive) were created within different political environments, through different means, and by different politically excluded groups. However, it is possible to recognize a common double rationale behind the creation of these alternative representative institutions, which includes both a negative and a positive element. By claiming that alternative elections or alternative institutions are needed, activists clearly call into question the fairness of formal elections and the representativeness of formal state institutions. This implies an intrinsic critique to the very foundations of the existing political regime. However, alongside this negative, critical function, alternative institutions have also a more positive, constructive aspect. By providing a platform for the articulation and representation of the interests of the unrepresented, they aspire to

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16 ‘Fighting in eastern Syria ahead of election. Clashes erupt on eve of parliamentary poll being boycotted by opposition which has formed an “alternative” parliament’. Aljazeera, 6 May 2012. Available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/05/201256125132390359.html [Last accessed 30/06/2014]


19 One of its former members, Boriss Cilevičs (now an MP for Harmony Centre) considers the experience of the LNC a success, especially in terms of making the problems of non-citizens known to international organisations. The LNC eventually petered out when several of its members acquired the Latvian citizenship, entered official politics, or left the country (Interview with Boriss Cilevičs, 2013).
participate in the democratic process. Therefore, while alternative institutions stand as a reproach to the existing formal institutions for their incapacity or unwillingness to represent certain social or ethnic groups, they can also serve as interlocutors for formal institutions to find compromise solutions to the questions raised by those groups.

Of course, different contexts present a different balance of these positive and negative components. In extreme cases, alternative institutions can try to operate a substitution, that is, to replace themselves for the existing institutions they denounce as illegitimate. This is the case for some opposition-led alternative parliaments, including the Estonian and Latvian citizens’ congresses. More often (and more typically in democratic regimes) alternative institutions position themselves as compensating for a group’s lack of representation in formal institutions. They do not aim to substitute themselves to the exiting institutions but exist alongside them, as an ulterior, informal channel for the representation of interests that are otherwise marginalized and as an interlocutor for formal institutions on issues related to those interests.

**The Parliament of the Non-Represented and the Russkii Zemskii Soviet**

The Latvian PNR and the Estonian RZS followed this same double rationale, and – although the negative element is quite prominent in the motivations given by their initiators – their strategy is more one of compensation than substitution. In both cases, Russophone activists organized grassroots elections to alternative, minority-led representative bodies. In the case of the PNR, 61 candidates balloted for the 30 available seats, and about 15,000 people participated in the vote that took place between 25 May and 11 June 2013. Voting took place both through the Internet and in pop-up polling stations around the country (but overwhelmingly in Riga). The alternative parliament started its activities soon after the elections, and it adopted formal regulations and a statute. The regulations foresee regular meetings of the PNR plenary in the PN offices in the center of Riga; alongside these, regular meetings of standing committees on a number of relevant themes are foreseen.

The RZS was much less successful than its Latvian counterpart. The initiative of creating an alternative institution was taken in May 2010 and the election went on for over a year in pop-up polling stations mainly in Tallinn and (more marginally) in the majority Russian-speaking Estonian north-east. About 4,000 people voted and seven candidates were elected to form the RZS. No official regulations or statute were adopted, and the elections were not followed by regular meetings of the RZS, which has no official headquarters. In order to compensate for the elections’ low numbers and the lack of legitimacy (or at least recognition) they signify, the RZS invited representatives from other

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20 Interestingly, some of these initiatives’ initiators openly referred to the experiences of Estonians and Latvians during their struggle for independence as inspiration (Interviews with initiators, 2013).

21 The election period was chosen to correspond with the Latvian local elections in order to maximise visibility (Interviews with initiators, 2013).

22 The PNR internal regulations were made available to me by PNR members during the second plenary session of the alternative parliament, which I was kindly invited to attend.
Russian-speakers’ organizations to join forces under the name of Representative Assembly of the Russian Community in Estonia, that met for the first time in May 2013. Alongside RZS, the more prominent Russian School in Estonia (RSE) and representatives from a number of smaller cultural organizations took part in the meeting. After that, the RZS activities have been mostly in support of RSE initiatives.

The constituencies addressed by the two projects were different. Although, both citizens and non-citizens could vote and be elected in the PNR elections, the PNR clearly identifies the excluded group they seek to represent as Latvia’s non-citizens. Although the issue of non-citizenship is often seen by PNR members in the broader context of the Latvian Russophone community, non-citizenship remains the central issue for PNR and the non-citizens are their specific constituency. In Estonia, the RZS took the entire Russian-speaking community as the group they were aiming to represent, without making a clear distinction between citizens and non-citizens. This can be explained by two factors (one political and one legislative) that differentiate Estonia and Latvia. First of all, there is no Russophone party in Estonia, and the number of Russian-speaking MPs in the Estonian parliament (mostly elected through the Centre Party) has consistently been disproportionately low. Differently from Latvia, where a prominent Russophone party exists, the question of minority political representation in Estonia can therefore be presented as a question of minority under-representation in general rather than a question of non-citizens’ representation in particular (Interviews with RZS initiators, 2013). Secondly, in Estonia non-citizens have the right to vote in local elections. This to some extent blurs the distinction between Russian-speaking citizens and non-citizens, which is instead more clearly defined in Latvia.

As in other examples of alternative parliaments, the initiative behind the creation of the PNR and the RZS is based on a double rationale. First of all, by asserting that the Russophone (or non-citizen) communities in Estonia and Latvia need such an alternative channel for their representation, the initiators call into question the legitimacy of their countries’ state institutions. Seen in the light of the analysis of Estonia and Latvia as ethnic democracies, both initiatives imply a critique to the very foundations of the state: the non-citizens’ and Russian-speakers’ claim to a political voice is in contradiction with the ethnocentric view of the state that is inscribed in the Estonian and Latvian citizenship and language policies. This radical critique to what the initiators call “ethnocracy” emerged often in my interviews with PNR and RSZ activists (Interviews, 2013).

However, alongside this critical side, the rationale behind both initiatives had a strong positive, constructive side. First of all, the initiators stressed that, by forming alternative institutions, they aimed at creating a democratic outlet for the representation of an otherwise unrepresented group, and for the articulation of their interests. Moreover, they emphasized their role as interlocutors for the state institutions, and their willingness to cooperate with them in finding a solution for the problems of their constituencies. Indeed, in

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23 Reporting and pictures from the meeting on 18 May 2013 are available on RZS’s official website: www.ruszemsovet.eu. [Last accessed 30/06/2014]
both cases the primary strategy identified by the initiators is lobbying local, state and international institutions, and cooperating with the elements of the existing institutions that are willing to do so (Interviews, 2013; PNR Statute). Petitions, open letters (and, in the case of PNR, meetings with representatives of formal institutions) are indeed the main activities that these bodies have undertaken since their formation.

Therefore, within this double rationale, PNR and RZS can be understood as radical only in the sense of Dean’s definition, as they call into question the legitimacy of existing formal institutions and the very ethnocentric basis of power distribution in the Estonian and Latvian democracies. However, their strategies and activities are not intrinsically radical. They employ markedly democratic practices (elections, parliaments), and the democratic vocabulary of dialogue and cooperation is prevalent in the description initiators and members make of their role (Interviews, 2013). However, as noted above, “radicality” is not an objective essence but a political category. Therefore, the “radical” label must be understood in the context of a classification struggle between the national elites and the minority activists.

5. Mind the radicals: the terms of the classification struggle between “labeling” and “labeled”

In both Estonia and Latvia, minority grassroots mobilization is often labeled as radical and initiatives that contest the existing citizenship and language arrangements tend to automatically fall under the “radical” category. It is therefore not surprising that the label was widely used in state-language media to describe the PNR in Latvia and the RSZ initiative in Estonia. These initiatives were often referred to as too radical to be accepted within the mainstream democratic debate, and more or less veiled references to the possibility that the Russian Federation was behind their organizers were also voiced. For example, in Latvia, the then foreign minister Artis Pabriks argued that Latvia must ‘defend its democratic values’ from this kind of initiatives and that the non-citizens alternative elections show disrespect for both the Latvian state and the people of Latvia.24 In a description that clearly shows the marginalizing power of “radical” labeling, MP Sarmite Űlerte described the PNR project as a product of ‘Russia’s political ideologues, Harmony Centre, and Linderman’s people’ and concluded that ‘[by] questioning the doctrine of continuity, PNR alienates the possibility of a dialogue: you must recognize the country you live in before a dialogue can take place’.25 Members of parliament also asked the security police to ascertain PNR’s potential ties with Moscow


and whether this was not in fact an illegal attempt to overthrow Latvia’s legitimate state structures.  

In Estonia, RZS was much less visible in the media, but mentions of this initiative always stressed its origins from the “Kremlin-friendly Nochnoy Dozor”. Having been accused of having organized the April 2007 riots, ND activists are routinely presented in the Estonian press as radical and agents of Russia’s foreign policy. Although all ND members have been acquitted from all charges, their image was not rehabilitated and Estonian-language news routinely refer to the organization as “Kremli-meeline” (Kremlin-friendly). ND is still listed among the extremist organizations in the Estonian security police website. The influential Estonian politician Eerik-Niiles Kross spelled out the consequences of this labeling in a 2006 statement: ‘Although they never fail to say that they are not extremists, [ND] are radicals. [...] Neostalinists are to be treated as all countries treat the extremist right. They should not be allowed to dialogue with mainstream society. And the authorities should adequately react to their activities’. Therefore, notwithstanding its members’ efforts to distance the two initiatives and the fact that RZS active members are not former ND members, association with ND made the new initiative automatically radical.

The “radical” label delegitimizes the activists and their demands, marginalizes them (not least within their community), and demonizes them in the eyes of the ethnic majority. Once an organization is successfully labeled as “radical” there is no need to establish a dialogue with it and confront its demands. Radicals are by definition not expected to take part in any constructive dialogue; so this labeling is in effect tantamount to silencing. Moreover, the discourse of the foreign-led threat means that ignoring or discouraging those demands is perfectly justified within a democratic framework. If the PNR and RSZ’s initiators are representatives of Moscow’s interests in the Baltics, their demands and voices have no legitimate space within the Estonian and Latvian democratic debate. Securitizing minority political mobilization through references to the Russian threat is another way of cancelling out their claims. In both cases, the PNR and RZS activists were aware of the risks involved in being labeled as “radical” and responded to it. In the words of one the initiators of RZS:

> There is also the problem that the internal policy of the government is that if you try somehow to defend the rights of the Russian people you automatically


27 For example, at the time of the Bronze Night a major Estonian-language newspaper titled: “Äärmuslaste aktsioonid tagant paistab Vene diplomaatide vari” (“Bronze Night: "Behind the extremists’ actions there is the shadow of RF diplomats")”. Postimees, 25 April 2007. Available at: http://www.postimees.ee/1653973/aarmuslaste-aktsioonid-tagant-paistab-vene-diplomaatide-vari [Last accessed 30/06/2014]

28 The Estonian Security police’s official website can be accessed at: www.kapo.ee. [Last accessed: 30/06/2014]

become an extremist. As soon as the information went around that we had formed the RZS we were immediately categorized as extremists. (Interview with RZS member, 2013)

Being aware of the risk of the “radical” label, PNR and RZS negotiated it both internally and externally. First of all, by using elections as their mode of creation they tried to inscribe themselves within the democratic tradition. Although they implied a critique of the existing institutions, elections were primarily a way of gaining legitimacy both within their communities and as interlocutors for the authorities. Secondly, elections were a way of mediating between moderate and maximalist activists and of weighting their relative power within the movement in order to define the future strategy.

In RZS the goal of internally negotiating radicalism was present at least as an ideal (Interview with RZS initiators, 2013). However, the unsuccessful elections made internal legitimacy rather weak, and squabbles between the organizers took pre-eminence in articulating the internal negotiations between moderates and maximalists. In PNR the goal of measuring the support for different, more or less maximalist, positions was more successfully attained. All my interviewees from PNR identified a split between a moderate and a maximalist component among the election candidates (Interviews, 2013). This difference was expressed both in terms of preferring a gradual or an all-or-nothing approach to the resolution of the problems of non-citizenship, and in terms of their willingness to cooperate with existing formal institutions. One of the most prominent members of PNR, Alexander Gaponenko, explained it this way:

*The common idea is that we’ll represent the interests of the non-represented, and of those who aren’t satisfied with the current regime. [...] Within this common strategy there are two lines, which reflect the mood of two groups within this country’s population. One are those [who identify with] the Russian population, who would want that the interests of the Russians be defended, their ethnic interests. [...] The second group is composed of people who are more inclined to solving the problems of all the people of Latvia. [...] This second group is prevalent in the PNR – about 90% of the deputies – and they are for a moderate strategy to take the country out of the crisis it fell into.* (Interview with Gaponenko, 2013)

In terms of external negotiation of radicalism, RZS’s initiators were aware that their militancy in ND would have been toxic for the new organization. Therefore, they consciously decided to distance themselves from the organization they had contributed to create in order to avoid transferring ND’s stigma of radicalism to the new initiative (Interviews, 2013). In the words of a ND member and initiator of RZS elections:

*It’s important that RZS is independent from ND so that our negative shadow doesn’t fall on it. You know? We say that at a certain point children were scared of ND: “Look, ND is coming!” – it was like that, really. And even now, if you go to any organization and say “ND” they all step back, they simply don’t want to attract all that negativity upon themselves; they don’t want to attract the attention of the secret services. Yes, we created that organization [RZS] but they are independent, we keep away from it so that they can work quietly and normally.* (Interview, 2013)

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30 For example, one of the RZS initiators I interviewed suggested that a few Russian nationalist candidates were excluded during the electoral process because of their lack of respect for campaigning rules (Interview, 2013).
In addition to this, in both cases willingness to cooperate with existing institutions was stressed, together with their recognition of Estonia and Latvia as independent states and as their own homeland. As one of the initiators of RZS put it: ‘we want integration, we want to be here, I was born here, this is my fatherland, I am not a [Russian] nationalist. I want to be a Russian in a normal, democratic country’ (Interview, 2013). Similar self-descriptions as moderate members of society who simply want democracy and a model of integration that are respectful of their ethno-linguistic identity were voiced by the majority of my respondents from PNR (Interviews, 2013). This shows recognition on the part of the activists of the risks of being labeled as radical, anti-Estonian or anti-Latvian, and disloyal agents of Russia. By stressing their belonging to their country of residence, the activists attempt to position themselves and their demands within the domestic democratic discourse rather than as a matter of foreign policy and security.

6. Not all labels stick as tightly: differences in the classification struggles’ outcomes in Estonia and Latvia

While a similar widespread labeling of Russophone minority activists as radicals can be observed in both Estonia and Latvia, ethnocentric definitions of the border between unhealthy radicalism and healthy civil society participation can be (and are) contested. However, challenges to the “radical” label were much more prominent and have a much higher chance of success in Latvia than in Estonia. In Estonia, after the Bronze Night events, ND activists were consistently portrayed as radical, disloyal, and Kremlin-friendly. Subsequently, notwithstanding their employment of a democratic vocabulary, the fact that RZS elected members were not also ND members, and the attempts to distance the new organization from ND, their stigma easily attached to the new initiative. RZS remained marginal and obscure and an analysis of the Estonian-language newspapers database Delfi.ee shows that RZS is in fact much less present than the now virtually defunct ND in the Estonian public sphere.

Media references to ND after it was de facto disbanded in 2011 are worth a mention, as reports of links with former ND members seem to be a way of automatically transferring ND’s “radical” label onto other organizations or political figures. Thus, for instance, links between some former ND members and the NGO Russian School in Estonia – devoted to protesting against the education reform in Russian-language schools and currently the most sizeable Russophone grassroots organization – were reported in the media as part of ND’s new strategy after the issue of the Bronze Soldier has run out of steam. The links between Russophone politicians and ‘extremist group Nochnoy Dozor’ are also mentioned in the Estonian security police’s reports. And as


32 The reports, issued once a year by the Security Police, are available on the Police’s official website: www.kapo.ee.
recently as October 2013, Tallinn mayor Edgar Savisaar was asked to deny links with ND during his municipal election campaign.\(^{33}\)

While determining the actual “radicality” of ND and its members is irrelevant for this discussion, it is important to notice how the largely unchallenged nature of the labeling process has wider implications for the inclusion of the Russophone minority in the political debate and in policymaking on issues that concern it directly. Indeed, “radical” labeling strictly defines the boundaries of acceptable demands and ideas: the label can be attached to politicians and members of the public who appear to go beyond those boundaries. For instance, a respondent from a leading Estonian think-tank that advises the government on minority issues, commenting on Tallinn City Council’s opposition to the reform in Russian-language schools, said:

*The idea that Tallinn municipality has is a radical idea. They are supported by, or lean on radicals in the Russian community. I don’t think that you can reason with any radical, and find a compromise. With radicals I don’t think it’s doable. And I think that it’s not even a good idea to give in to radical needs, because it might threaten the whole balance of things. It would send wrong ideas.* (Interview, 2013)

Another example can be found in the process of drafting the new Integration Program, which included focus groups with members of the minority in which these were called to give their opinions on possible solutions to Estonia’s inter-ethnic divide. While this is on paper a good attempt to include the major stakeholders in the drafting of the policy, my interviews with the policymakers revealed that the boundaries of radicalism strictly apply to the acceptability of focus group members’ ideas and demands. In the words of one of the policy experts who conducted the focus groups with the Russian-speakers:

>[The focus group in] Ida-Virumaa was definitely extremely radical and I don’t think anybody will even consider discussing anything about Russian as a second state language or reversing the reform of the Russian schools, I don’t think this is going to be considered. (Interview, 2013)

In Latvia, the creation of the Congress of Non-Citizens at the beginning of 2013 and later the organization of the alternative PNR elections were also clearly inscribed within the discussion on radicalism. However, differently form Estonia, the discordant voices that explicitly or *de facto* put the “radical” label under question were much more prominent. This is not, however, because PNR is *intrinsically* less radical than its Estonian counterpart or because there were fewer chances for the Latvian national elite to present this initiative and its participants as radical. In fact, several figures with a distinct public image of radicals took part in the elections. Although the more moderate component (some of them openly linked to Harmony Centre) won most of the seats, some very “toxic” personalities became PNR deputies – most prominent of all, Vladimir Linderman and Evgenii Osipov, two of the organizers of the 2012

refendum and founders of the Russophone party Zarya. However, although these "radical links" were not missed in the media, this did not translate into outright "radical" labeling and marginalization.

Indeed, not all reactions were univocally demonizing. Harmony Centre did not claim ownership of the project but portrayed it as a legitimate civil society initiative that, by opening up the discussion on non-citizenship and giving non-citizens an autonomous voice, could only be positive for Latvia’s democracy. The Latvian President responded to the announcement of the alternative elections by stressing that the question of non-citizenship raised by the Non-Citizens’ Congress must be a priority of his presidency. Moreover, state and local institutions received Non-Citizens’ Congress/PNR members in unofficial and official meetings, so de facto recognizing them as legitimate interlocutors on the issue of non-citizenship. Already in February 2013, soon after the formation of the Non-Citizens’ Congress and its announcement that alternative elections were going to take place, the parliamentary committee on societal integration invited Congress members to attend their meeting. The head of the committee (a member of the nationalist party TB/LNNK) reportedly commented that, although the zero-option on citizenship was out of the question, the committee should anyway take the problem of non-citizenship seriously. In addition to this, a number of local administrations – including Riga – are conducting talks with PNR about initiating a formal cooperation and allowing PNR representatives in a number of local council committees (Interviews with PNR members, 2013; PNR second plenary session, 14 September 2013).

34 While admitting that several people would probably vote for Osipov, another candidate to PNR elections expressed the fear that ‘if a person like that enters the parliament that would discredit it’ (Interview, 2013).


36 While admitting that several people would probably vote for Osipov, another candidate to PNR elections expressed the fear that ‘if a person like that enters the parliament that would discredit it’ (Interview, 2013).


Alongside these formal or *da facto* recognitions of legitimacy, some Latvian public figures openly challenged the automatic dismissal of PNR as radical. They did this on the grounds that this initiative signals a serious problem that the government is guilty of minimizing, and more straightforwardly—that if every activity that brings together people on the basis of ethnicity is to be seen as dangerous by the Latvian security services, then also the nationalist parties in parliament should be put under scrutiny (Kažoka, 13/05/2013). More in general, my analysis of the Latvian-language newspapers’ coverage of PNR does reveal many instances of securitizing and “radical” labeling. However, coverage is rather extensive, which insures a high level of public visibility to PNR, and it includes much neutral-to-positive coverage, especially interviews with PNR members and reprinting of PNR press releases.

Although the different levels of success of RZS and PNR’s elections in all likelihood contributed to the different media attention they received, this is not enough to explain why the “radical” label was weaker and more openly contested in Latvia than it was in Estonia. First of all, the very successfulness of the PNR elections could be (and has been) called into question: although PNR’s 15,000 voters are many more than RZS’s 4,000, Latvia has about 300,000 non-citizens and the legitimacy of PNR to represent them all was not a given in the wake of the elections (Ozoliņš, 13/06/2013). Secondly, as shown above, also in the case of PNR there were evident “radical ties” that could have easily justified a more aggressive “radical” labeling. Finally, the “radical” label was in fact used in the Latvian public discourse in a very similar way to the Estonian case; however, the label did not “stick” as tightly.

7. The importance of the voice legitimacy trajectory to understand the stickiness of the “radical” label

The previous sections showed that the terms of the classification struggle between the labeling national elites and the labeled minority activists were remarkably similar in Estonia and Latvia. Moreover, RZS and PNR had both ties with figures that are widely recognized as radical, and— at the same time— both use a language and a repertoire that are generally democratic and non-confrontational. Therefore, the reasons for the different levels of the label’s “stickiness” cannot be found in either the terms of the classification struggle or in objective differences in the intrinsic “radicality” of the two initiatives. Rather, it must be sought in the context within which these classification struggles took place.

If we understand radicalism not as an essence but as a *relationship* between a certain initiative and the context in which it takes place, we must expand our glance to include the context in which the PNR and RZS initiatives were promoted. In other words, the negative trend of minority voice (both in terms

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of representation and of grassroots mobilization) in Estonia made it easier for national elites and national-oriented media to dismiss minority activism as radical and potentially dangerous. This was not necessarily a deliberate strategy, but possibly the result of the fact that agents tend to ‘apply to the objective structures of the social world structures of perception and appreciation which are issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture the world as evident’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 21). In other words, in a context in which there is no significant challenge to an ethnocentric view of the democratic debate, there was no incentive to question the automatic labeling of minority grassroots political initiatives as radical. In a context of general low legitimacy of minority voices, the label “sticks” more easily and is more difficult to challenge. This might have an effect on both the way the Estonian-speaking community sees minority mobilization (as a threat), and on the way the very Russophone community defines the borders of its own political action (within the mainstream determined by the Estonian national elite).

In Latvia, instead, the positive trend of minority representation and mobilization means that labeling of Russophone activism as radical is openly challenged. The stronger Russophone voice in the Latvian political debate makes classifications less univocal and creates room for Russian-speaking activists and representatives (and for liberal voices within the ethnic Latvian community) to actively negotiate the borders of legitimate political action. In other words, in Latvia the Russophone minority has a higher symbolic capital than in Estonia and, while it is still confronted with “radical” labeling and political exclusion, it has a higher chance of successfully challenging stigmatizing labels.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that it is useful to look at majority/minority relationships in Estonia and Latvia through the prism of a classification struggle about the definition of radicalism, which is at core a struggle over the definition of the boundaries of legitimate participation in the democratic debate. Applying the model of ethnic democracy to Estonia and Latvia can be useful to highlight the (practical and discursive) barriers to political inclusion that Russophone voices encounter. However, more attention must be put on challenges to the ethnocentric discourses that underpin those ethnic democracies, in order to understand differences between the two countries and identify potential for change.

The focus on radicalism and on the way its definition is politically negotiated offers the perfect vantage point to critically appraise the democratic debate on minority policies and the role minority voices play in it. Indeed, radicalism is not an essence but it is at the center of a classification struggle between the national elites and the minority.41 Who defines what constitutes legitimate, healthy civil society participation and what is instead unhealthy, dangerous radicalism? As readings of Estonia and Latvia as ethnic democracies suggest,

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41 A similar point was made by Michael Barbut in his study of the Mapuche movement in Chile (Barbut, 2012).
in these countries a hegemonic definition of who is a radical and what constitutes a radical demand tends to prevail: the label “radical” is routinely attached to Russophone political activists; and a number of demands – such as the zero-option on citizenship, the recognition of Russian as state language, and the reversal of the education reform in Russian-language schools – also usually fall automatically under this same label.

However, the labeling of minority activism and minority demands as inherently radical does not go unchallenged. Analyzing how strongly the label “sticks” and to what extent it is successfully challenged can help us go beyond the static ethnic democracy model to understand the democratic process in the ethnically divided societies of Estonia and Latvia. Looking at this from the perspective of Bourdieu’s classification struggle, it is clear that the success of the labeling claims does not depend on the actual radical content of the movement agenda or on its actions. Rather, I argue that the different “stickiness” of the label in the cases of the RZS in Estonia and the PNR in Latvia closely reflects the level of legitimacy that minority voices enjoy in the Estonian and Latvian political debate. The different trajectory of minority voice legitimacy in the Estonian and Latvian public debate, rather than the minority initiative’s objective radicality or the more or less “defective” control system, explains why the “radical” label has been less “sticky” in Latvia than in Estonia. While this does not mean that there are absolutely no chances for the emergence of domestic challenges to “radical” labeling in Estonia (or that currently everybody agrees with the way the label is applied), it suggests that there is more room for the development and (potentially) success of those challenges in Latvia.
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