

# A New Law In Latvia Aims To Preserve National Language By Limiting Russian In Schools

[Lucian Kim](#) October 28, 2018 7:03 AM ET



More than a third of Riga's population is Russian; the rest are Latvian, Lithuanian, Belarusian, Polish and Ukrainian. Russian often serves as a linguistic common denominator in the Latvian capital.

*David Keyton/AP*

A cacophony of languages fills Riga's historic center, as foreign tourists pack the cobblestone streets of the Latvian capital. But eavesdrop on residents and you're just as likely to hear Russian as you are the national language, Latvian.

The prevalence of Russian in public life is one reason why [Latvia's government has passed a law](#) that will limit Russian as a language of instruction in the country's schools, beginning next year. The move by the tiny Baltic nation has angered not only members of Latvia's sizeable ethnic Russian minority, but Moscow as well. Russia's foreign ministry called the decision "[odious](#)."

"Our constitution states the state language is Latvian, whereas at home, you can speak your mother tongue freely, no objection whatsoever," said [Rihards Kols](#), who represents the nationalist [National Alliance party](#) in the Latvian parliament and favors limiting Russian in schools. "Basically, we are a nation-state, so we are founded on the basis of language, tradition and culture."

Like its neighbors Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia is celebrating the 100th anniversary of its founding as an independent country, even though all three nations spent half that time as unwilling members of the Soviet Union.

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After centuries of Russian domination, many Latvians believe they need to protect themselves against cultural and political assimilation by their giant neighbor. Latvia has fewer than 2 million people, while Russia's population is more than 142 million. In a 2012 referendum, three-quarters of Latvian [voters rejected making Russian the second official language](#).

"It's a miracle Latvian survived as a language. It's something unique," says Andis Kudors, head of the [Center for East European Policy Studies](#) in Riga. "Latvians are sensitive because language is the main feature of our national identity."



Rihards Kols is a nationalist member of Latvia's parliament who believes his country must protect its language from Russian influence.

*Lucian Kim/NPR*

When Latvia regained its independence in 1991, it inherited a bilingual educational system from the Soviet Union, with instruction in Latvian and Russian. The country took a first step at dismantling that system in 2004 by requiring at least 60 percent of school instruction to be in Latvian.

The [new law will now put an even greater emphasis on Latvian](#), so that by 2021, the last three years of high school will be taught entirely in the country's official language.

"Latvian will lose in natural competition with English or Russian," said

Kudors. "We have a duty to preserve it as part of the cultural heritage of the whole world."

Opponents of the law, largely members of the Russian-speaking community, counter that the new legislation unfairly discriminates against them, since instruction in languages of the European Union — like at the German and French schools in Riga -- can continue.

"De facto, Russian is not a foreign language in Latvia, it's been used here for ages," said Degi Karayev, an activist who has organized protests against the change. "The problem with this new education law is that the Russian language is being wiped out of our society."

Karayev, a computer programmer, fears his two children will be at a disadvantage because the quality of education they receive will be poorer than if they get instruction in Russian, as not all Russian-speaking teachers have mastered Latvian.

Like many countries that emerged from the Soviet Union, Latvia's ethnic composition is a patchwork: [Latvians make up just over 60 percent](#) of the population, Russians about a quarter, followed by Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles and Lithuanians. Given that mix, Russian often serves as a linguistic common denominator, especially in Riga, where more than a third of the population is Russian.

In the Riga suburb of Imanta, with rows of identical Soviet-era apartment blocks, it's hard to find anyone who supports the new restrictions.

Language isn't an issue in daily life, says Erik Darznieks, a driver out for a walk on Imanta's main street.

"It's pure politics. If there weren't such bans, there would be a lot less

problems in our society," said Darznieks. "Those ethnic Russians who live here are taxpayers — why shouldn't their kids be able to study in their native language?"



The Moscow House, a Russian cultural center that hosts concerts and other performances in downtown Riga, is one of the soft-power levers that the Kremlin employs in Latvia.

*Lucian Kim/NPR*

Darznieks is an ethnic Latvian, but says he feels more comfortable speaking Russian. The main threat to the Latvian language, he says, is that its speakers are leaving Latvia in droves to work in Western Europe. [Hundreds of thousands of Latvian citizens moved away](#) after Latvia joined the EU in 2004.

Darznieks laughs out loud at accusations that critics of the language law are helpers of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has frequently said Latvia

violates the rights of its Russian minority.

"I've never considered myself a Putin helper or part of any 'fifth column,'" he said. "I couldn't care less what some politicians think about me."

But Russia's annexation of Crimea four years ago is still on the minds of many Latvians, exactly because Putin justified his military intervention in Ukraine by claiming to defend the rights of Russian speakers there.

The Kremlin has two main instruments to influence hearts and minds in Latvia, according to analyst Kudors: Russian state media and outreach to so-called "compatriots," Russians who found themselves living outside Russia's borders after the Soviet Union broke up.

Both anti-Ukrainian propaganda and support for local pro-Russian groups preceded Putin's occupation of Crimea in 2014. In Latvia, says Kudors, the language law is one way to respond "asymmetrically" to the Kremlin's media juggernaut by raising a new generation of Russian speakers that doesn't get its news only from Russian state TV and identifies more strongly with Latvia.



Elizabeth Krivcova is a lawyer and activist in Riga who says Latvia's new language law discriminates against ethnic Russians. Born and raised in Riga, says she now feels unwelcome in her own country and is taking part in a lawsuit to stop the Latvian government from implementing the language law.

*Lucian Kim/NPR*

Latvia's ethnic Russians are in fact far from a homogeneous group, he says, and can be categorized into three groups: "loyal citizens," who are happy to be citizens of Latvia and the European Union, "neutral" Russians, who neither support their own government nor the Kremlin and "Russian compatriots," who look to Moscow for their worldview.

Unlike Ukraine, Latvia is anchored in the West as a member of the EU and NATO. But in [its latest annual report](#), the Latvian Security Police identifies

"the Kremlin's use of hybrid methods" as "one of the main threats to Latvia."

The report names Elizabete Krivcova as a pro-Russian activist. A [lawyer](#) and councilwoman in Latvia's seaside resort of Jurmala, Krivcova says that branding opponents of the language law as "Kremlin agents" is an easy way of avoiding a serious debate. She insists she is acting on her own convictions in fighting the language law.

Krivcova, an ethnic Russian who was born and raised in Riga, says she now feels unwelcome in her own country. She's taking part in a lawsuit to stop the Latvian government from implementing the language law.

"I hope we will find a good way in our state without violence — and without the need to ask help from any foreign country," she says.

Karlis Sadurskis, Latvia's education minister, argues that the whole purpose of the language law is to stop the polarization of the country's two largest ethnic groups.

"If our kids are not learning together, it's difficult to imagine that our society will be integrated, follow the same values, celebrate the same festivities and have the same attitude to our country," he says.

The new law is intended to strengthen the civic sense of all Latvian citizens, he says, regardless of what language they speak at home.