(Post-/De-) Colonial Baltic Shades: The Latvian Case and its Global Breath

Michela Romano

◊ eSamizdat 2021 (XIV), pp. 87-104 ◊

IN the Baltic states, history and individual and collective memories of historical events have played and still play a relevant role in the contemporary political and socio-cultural scene, reverberating through past events and contemporary nation-building processes. Today, the exceptional role of historical trauma in contemporary societies in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – which is influenced by several factors, such as the Russian national narrative, the European framework and the Baltic national memory apparatus – appears as colliding with the transcultural strata of the Baltic societies, disclosing fragmented and multivocal post-Soviet cultural realities.

The Baltic area is considered a substantial and prolific field of studies, especially for its geographical location, historical past and ethnic composition that, however, manifests highly plural and heterogenous aspects. Several facts influenced and are still influencing the ethnic composition of the Baltics countries, and specifically the presence of Russians and Russian-speaking inhabitants: among them are the Soviet occupation, the subsequent migrations from/to Russia after the fall in 1991 and to the European Union, the politics adopted towards minorities by the republics and the influence from the Russian Federation itself. Moreover, economic, social and cultural factors participate in giving shape to what is nowadays the ethnic population. The presence of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking inhabitants in general is less relevant in Lithuania, where statistically the number of ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population are relatively low, and it is far more significant in Latvia and Estonia[1]. The discrepancies and collisions between Russian ethnicity and the use of the Russian language, between national and individual identities, between memories and historical interpretations, are the core subjects of this contribution, which is aimed at investigating the transcultural strata of Baltic society and the multivocal post-Soviet cultural realities.

In this regard, the article considers the Latvian state, and in particular the city of Riga, as an exceptional model and case study because of its ethnic composition and the widespread use of the Russian language, configuring new hybrid and plural socio-cultural manifestations, opposing standard definitions of ethnicity, identity and nationality[2]. The discussion consists of several parts. Firstly, the article will observe the impact of historical events on memory narratives and cultural policies implemented in the post-Soviet era. In this section, the global evolution of identities in the post-Soviet space will be further considered with an examination of the transitional mechanisms leading to collisions and negotiations between titular inhabitants and Russian-

[1] According to the official statistics, in 2021 Russians in Lithuania made up the 5.8% of the total ethnic composition, along with Poles (6.6%), Belarusians (1.2%) and Ukrainians (0.5%) and others. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/lithuania-population> (latest access: 09.11.2021). In Latvia, the Russian population made up 26.9%, followed by Belarusians (3.3%), Ukrainians (2.2%), Poles (2.2%) and others. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/latvia-population> (latest access: 09.11.2021). Finally, Estonia is made up of 25% Russians, 2% Ukrainians, 1% Belarusians and others. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/estonia-population> (latest access: 09.11.2021).

[2] The article will refer to and retrieve its information and examples regarding Latvian society from field research conducted by the author in the city of Riga from March to June 2019. Among the information acquired during the field research, the work will include excerpts from some of the 17 interviews conducted among members of the Russian and Russophone academic, political and cultural strata of Riga, including poets and artists.

speaking communities. The history and memory of the region as well as the status of the Russian/Russophone communities in the Baltic territories are elements that will be taken into account in the understanding of the Soviet legacy and the present national identities.

From here we move to the origins and current dynamics of the Baltic postcolonial discourse, investigating the complex Soviet experience and its problematic socio-cultural traces, the implications of the ethnic composition of these territories and the resulting continuous reconfiguration of cultural identities. In the last section, the Latvian context will be explored together with a deeper analysis of the internal and external national narratives involved in the history of the Baltic states along with 'Russophobic' perspectives resulting from the widespread use of the Russian language and the social and political influence of Russia as an external factor. These dividing perspectives will be presented in contrast to the Russophone poetic and artistic expressions of Latvia. Here, the dialogue about Russophone cultural manifestations will be further enriched by interviews and data retrieved from the intellectual and cultural environment of Riga. Finally, the article is committed to observing Russophone cultural expressions as examples of "post-dependence tempo-localities", as hybrid signs of the development of peculiar forms of decoloniality[3]. The Latvian case, with its multivocal artistic, cultural and poetic manifestations, discloses how the locality of certain Russophone cultural strata may be considered as one of the several 'post-' shades reflecting from the prism of the postcolonial paradigm, delineating new paths of research where history, memory, (post-/de-) coloniality and cultural borders meet and transform.

Memory and cultural diversity in the post-Soviet era: the impact of a discontinuous history on contemporary Baltic societies

It is undoubted that in the modern era the Baltic region experienced a tumultuous and discontinuous history, which has been characterized by periods of subjection to foreign rule and independence alike. The former began first with the Russian annexation in the 18th century after the Great Northern War, and lasted until the First World War. The latter saw the Baltic region experiencing political autonomy between 1919 and 1939, before reaching the dramatic turning point of the so called "illegal occupation", when a secret protocol signed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet state divided Europe into various spheres of influence, opening an era of deportations, invasions and deep Sovietization of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Whereas the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 had only a relative effect on the political, social and cultural life of these states, the brutal Stalinization, with its waves of deportations and repressions after the Nazi-Soviet pact, undoubtedly impacted the histories, memories and identities of the Baltic Bloc deeply. The occupation led not only to brutal actions, such as the deportation of peasants to the Siberian regions, and to harsh repressions of partisan movements such as that of the "Forest Brothers"[4], but also to the Soviet structural collectivization and industrialization of society, culminating in a heavy and suffocating socio-political atmosphere[5]. If, during Khrushchev's destalinization period starting in 1953, Baltic states faced a relative easing of tensions, Brezhnev's government was marked by stark restrictions on intellectual and cultural expression. Finally, in Gorbachev's USSR, an atmosphere of independence and rebellion took

[3] M. Tlostanova, *Postcolonial theory, the decolonial option and postsocialist writing*, "Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures", Brill 2015, p. 32.

[4] Guerilla troops, operating in Baltic states between 1940-1941 and 1956, which originated first with German troops and patriotic Baltic partisans fighting together against Soviet troops with the advantage of the forested environment. See A. Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Path to Independence*, New Haven-London 1993, pp. 87-89.

[5] S. Bianchini, *Liquid Nationalism and State Partitions in Europe*, [Kindle DX version] 2017, <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/liquid-nationalism-and-state-partitions-in-europe>.

shape, with music festivals, green protests and the activities of the "Popular Fronts" which paved the way for what would be called the "Singing Revolution", culminating in the independence of the three national entities in 1991[6].

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 provoked a veritable earthquake in the political, cultural, social and economic panorama worldwide. The expected changes concerned the political (and cultural) geographies of the newly born states and the establishment of new forms of government in the post-Soviet space. Admittedly, after decades of German and Russian domination, the Baltic states found themselves "in between their desire to be recognized as fully integrated components of the European 'family' and the fascination stemming from the bonds of their perception of history, partially affected by revisionist appeals"[7]. During the early independence period, these countries "expected to be anchored as quickly as possible to the Euro-Atlantic security system", with a perspective of securitization of territorial borders[8]. Nevertheless, it is significant to underline that the relationship between 'us' (the ethnical titular state) and 'them' (ethnic Russian and Russophone communities) fostered a "sense of vulnerability often mixed with suspicions toward the domestic ethnic minorities and their kin states, enhancing nationalist political culture movements"[9].

The 'national re-awakening' had the main aim of building strong and united countries with specific cultural and social structures, in order to move towards a new state architecture. The three Baltic countries undertook a delicate transition period where the priority was to build a national consciousness and identity from the ruins of what was left after decades of changing dynamics. The consolidation of a strong sovereignty and national identity was among the major necessities of these countries when entering the European Union and NATO. Times of change thus came very fast in national politics and international relations: the Eastern European involvement in a new international environment underlined once again the importance of the nation-building process. As a matter of fact, this process involved issues of ethnic and memory policies projected towards a future of regained sovereignty.

Certainly, Eastern Europe was in a moment of finding a lost asset, both in political and in cultural and economic terms. The process of democratization had to consider civic as well as economic equality, overcoming the delicate transition from a planned and centralized economy to a free market[10]. The occurring transformations in the economic field developed in parallel with the cultural and ideological transformations, where individuals' mindsets and social values were about to change. Indeed, the identity and social transformation of the Baltic population was grounded in nationalistic and self-deterministic stances, together with an almost mythological rewriting of the past. It is, however, relevant to consider that the nationalist character of these states was not in fact a creation of the independence period. Indeed, Kolakowski clarifies the complex panorama, affirming that:

> The standard and often repeated explanation for this phenomenon is that nationalist ideologies stepped into a "vacuum" left by communism; that they had been "frozen" for decades, thawed by sudden political changes. The reality is less simple. There was no ideological "vacuum" suddenly opened up by the destruction of the old regime; the communist ideology had ceased to exist as a viable idea years earlier. And nationalist passions were not exactly "frozen"; they had been asserting themselves for a long time, parallel to the gradual enfeeblement of the totalitarian machinery. The process had been going on for over thirty years before the glorious year 1989![11]

The existence of this inner national consciousness was finally glorified with the implementation of

[6] Emblematic of the past and representative of the future was the so called 'Baltic Chain', a peaceful protest held on 23rd August 1989 – the anniversary of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact – which involved people of the three regions making a human chain through Tallin, Riga and Vilnius.

[7] S. Bianchini, *Liquid Nationalism*, op. cit.

[8] Ibidem.

[9] Ibidem.

[10] In fact, as Anatol Lieven highlighted: "the Baltic economies were wholly integrated into that of the Soviet Union, and overwhelmingly controlled from Moscow" and "even with goodwill on the Soviet side, the task of separating Baltic institutions from centralized Soviet ones would have been a hideously complicated process". The projected detachment from Russian markets placed the Baltic states in a problematic position, both in the field of industry and agriculture, making them vulnerable in their entrance into the world market. A. Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, op. cit., p. 316.

[11] L. Kolakowski, *Amidst Moving Ruins*, "Daedalus", 1992 (121), 2, p. 51.

a solid memory and a historical architecture of the state. As a matter of fact, an officially new collectivity was set be established, legitimizing, in the internal and external dimension of the states, the 'national re-awakening'. Regarding these dynamics, Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt highlight the crucial link occurring between the political and social transition processes and the reshaping of a community's collective memory, affirming that: "Memory can play a key role in processes of change and transition because it is itself flexible and has a transformative quality [...] as memory is itself volatile and transient; it is constantly in flux"[12].

The memory apparatus and processes of remembering become crucial when certain states are in the path of defining their own truths and building up new roots with which citizens can recognize themselves, reinforcing their own identity and their specific 'national values'. In this regard, considering the Eastern European past and the discussed use of history, the geographical map was not just a priority to be established, but a mnemonic one as well. In the light of these contexts, it is relevant in the study of the process of remembering to see how the use of past memories can become a tool of identification and state legitimation. This interrogative opens space for a wider analysis about the shape of memory, between strong ethnical oppositions and shared life experiences. Memory narratives, from personal individual stories to collective processes of remembering, trace new boundaries and categories that in the case of the Baltic countries may represent two opposing visions of history: invaders and victims. Rather than being truly 'collective', the first waves of memory politics had a dividing social impact, provoking separation and categorization in the Baltic community of identities. An external projection of this conflict came also to find another ground for conflict in the relations between the Baltic states and other political actors in the region, such as the Russian Federation, which emblematically appropriated and instrumentalized the Soviet narrative. The claim of the Baltic states, formally recognized by the European Union, was the urgency of putting the memories of the Soviet occupation and the atrocities of the Second World War on an equal level of recognition among all the European countries when compared to the Holocaust and Nazi atrocities' commemorations. On the 2nd of April 2009, with a dedicated resolution, the European Commission approved the 23rd of August "as a Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, to be commemorated with dignity and impartiality"[13]. To some extent, the entrance of the Baltic countries into this wider memory space signified the creation of new ties, collaborations and efforts to share a common historical framework within a wide and diversified European scenario.

The preservation and the official recognition of these historical events contributed to the hybridization of the memory map of the Union. With the Baltic experiences, the 'Russian' memory discourse has entered the 'European' one and, being widely known, it resulted in certain collisions in terms of historical interpretations leading memory wars or, more specifically, monument wars. Among some of the most famous episodes involving conflicting views of history in the Baltic states, we can mention the removal of the Bronze Soldier in 2007 in Estonia, that was preceded by riots and protests by two opposite ethnic groups during the so called 'Bronze night'. The monument was erected in Tallin in Soviet times, in memory of the Soviet troops who died during the taking of the town in 1944 by the German army. Among Estonian citizens, the presence of the monument in the 'new' independent urban landscape was reminiscent of the Soviet occupation and especially the years of deportations. On the contrary, the main argument supporting the defense of the monument on the 'post-Soviet' Russian side was the crucial intervention of the Russian army in the defeat of the Nazi regime. The so-called 'Bronze night', which happened in April 2007, involved a mass protest held in Tallin against the removal of the monument from

[12] A. Assmann – L. Shortt, *Memory and Political Change: Introduction*, in Idem (ed. by), *Memory and Political Change*, London 2012, p. 3.

[13] Report From the Commission to the European Parliament and to the Council, The memory of the crimes committed by totalitarian regimes in Europe, Bruxelles 2010, p. 16.

the center to the outskirts of the city[14]. Another emblematic example involved the Latvian state, and specifically the town of Bauska: at the moment of the unveiling of the war monument with the inscription "To the defenders of Bauska against the second Soviet occupation on July 28-September 14, 1944", huge contestations were manifested by the Russian and Belarusian governments. Bauska soldiers were in fact part of the Latvian Waffen SS punitive police fighting against the Belarusian partisans. The issues around the monument instigated protests from the Latvian Jewish community as well, who were already asking for a Holocaust monument in the city[15].

In light of these episodes, it is clear that conflicting memories played and still play a relevant role in the definition of both the Baltic and the Russian communities within and outside the republics. Memory and history legitimate the existence and the identity of a community, and during the Baltic independence period two communities, the titular citizens on one hand and the Russian communities on the other, were struggling to find their role. In consideration of the massive cultural, political and memory transitions occurring after the end of the Soviet Union, the Russophone communities were generally considered stateless identities in new sovereign countries. These communities seemed to never be totally attached to the Russian 'homeland', as well as never truly separated from it. While the supranational Soviet identity was withdrawn from people's lives together with all former Soviet national features, certain ties with the 'motherland' kept on existing. The scholar David Laitin brilliantly framed the situation:

> This sense of loss, insult, and uncertainty pervaded everyday-life for the Russian-speaking population in the newly independent Post-Soviet Republics. Yet under those very conditions [..] people have momentous life decisions to make. Should they learn the titular language; Should they apply for citizenship in their new countries; How were they to go about constructing a new social and political identity?[16]

Among memory disputes, these delicate socio-political and cultural operations passed through series of ethnonationalist revisionist claims both from the Baltic and the Russian counterparts, all of which challenged national and ethnic definitions of the Russophone minority as established before the fall of the USSR and the subsequent migrations waves of ethnic Russians from and to the Baltic area[17].

The fall of the Soviet system caused a change of the cardinal points of many communities and nations, switching their visions and perceptions from the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the Soviet area, from the East to the West. In this respect, Pål Kolstø reflected on the plural identifications of a Russian inhabitant in the territory of the former USSR as a consequence of the rebordering processes that happened before and after its fall:

> As a new political map has been superimposed on the demographic map of the former Soviet Union, the line between the core and the diaspora has become drawn as with a scalpel. In the political sense at least, it is now possible to claim that Russians living on one side of a state border belong to the core group, while their ethnic brethren a stone's throw away on the other side belong to the diaspora[18].

Kolstø ultimately suggested several conditions influencing the kaleidoscopic development of Russian identities once detached from their 'Homeland', which can be summarized in the following schema[19]

It is possible to argue that, by observing the agents influencing the identity of Russians and Russian speakers residing 'abroad' presented by Kolstø and the issues regarding the 'new' citizenship suggested by Laitin, the ambiguity between ethnicity and language use is rather significative. Indeed, it is deducible that the use of the Russian language is not necessarily linked with the ethnic origins or sense of

[14] R. Kaiser, *Reassembling the Event: Estonia's 'Bronze Night'*, "Environment and Planning D: Society and Space", 2012 (30), 6, p. 1047.

[15] A. Gromilova, *Changing Identities of the Baltic States: Three Memories in Stone*, "CES Working Papers", 2014 (6), 2a, p. 94.

[16] D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*, New York 1998, p. 86.

[17] In 1991, Latvia and Estonia were at the center of a heated debate, demanding the recognition and restoration of the interwar borders as they were before the Russian occupation. However, the Russian state contested the claim, calling for the discrimination of Russian-speaking minorities in those states to be solved as a prior problem. See C. Levisson, *The Long Shadow of History: Post-Soviet Border Disputes. The Case of Estonia, Latvia, and Russia*, "Connections", 2006, 2, p. 98.

[18] P. Kolstø, *The New Russian Diaspora: An Identity of its Own? Possible Identity Trajectories for Russians in the Former Soviet Republic*, "Ethnic and Racial Studies", 1996 (19), 3, p. 4.

[19] Ivi, pp. 12-18 (the schematization is mine – *M. R.*).

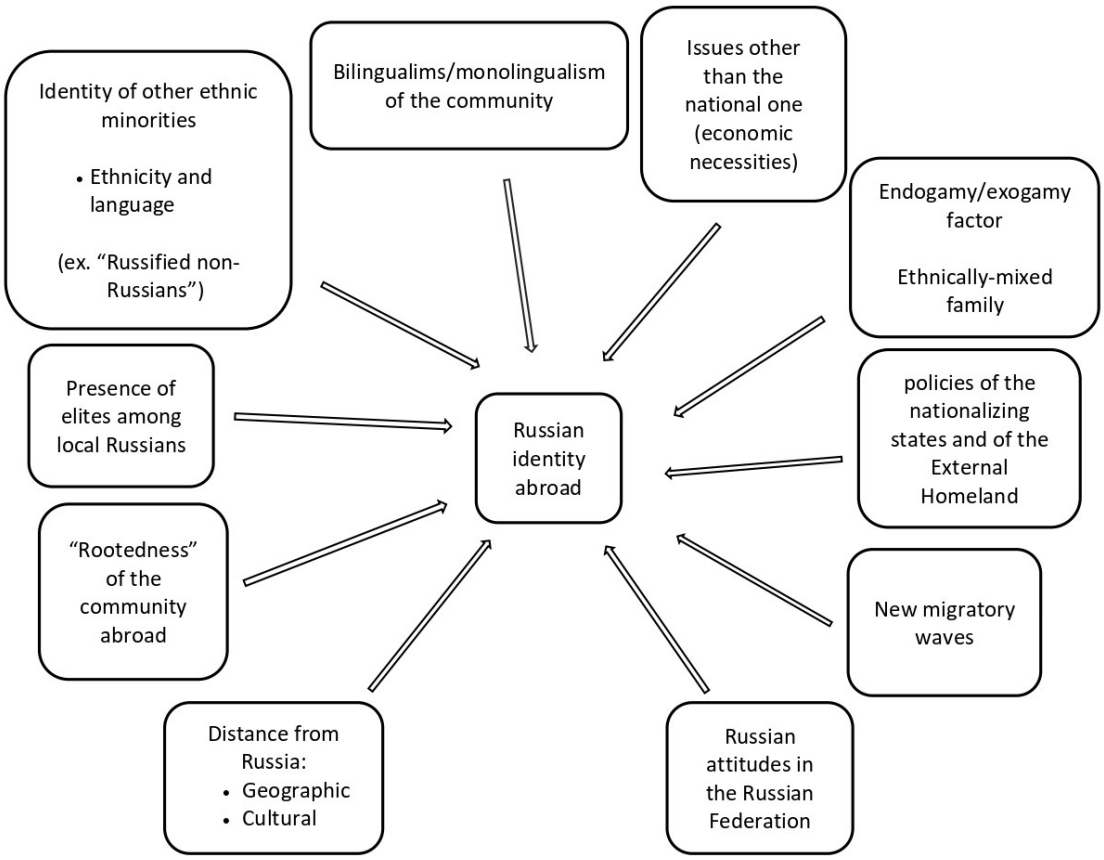

Fig. 1

belonging manifested by the individuals inhabiting the Eastern Bloc. Regarding this matter, the challenge in defining the ethnic Russian community and its sense of belonging is underlined by the scholar Kevin Platt:

> Given the complexity of ethnic Russian identification following centuries of social and cultural assimilation – in which a proud Russian might well be the grandchild of a Pole, Jew, Ossetian or Ukrainian, or in which an "ethnic Russian" might consider himself a Ukrainian and take up arms against separatist formation in Donbass – determining which former Soviets are the "real" ethnic Russians is not so easy, either[20].

Thus, it is a problematic issue to encapsulate a portion of Baltic population within the "ethnic Russian" sphere or solely within the Russian-speaking one, as borders are not easy to draw and remain unclear. These considerations are of crucial importance in our analysis devoted to the development of the Baltic nations after the end of the USSR. Undeniably, the Russophone factor gradually became a double-edge sword in these territories, whereas national identity is constantly challenged. A widespread Russophobic attitude, intended as a "propagandistic assault based on an essentialized and singularized identity of Russia(ness)", further complicates the already jeopardized scenario[21].

The question is especially true in states like Estonia and Latvia, where the density of Russophone inhabitants entails significative communitarian characteristics, and, consequently, where nationalist stances from the inside (the Baltic state nationalist attitude) and the outside (the Russian Federation's active cultural and political influence) create social and identity discrepancies.

To conclude, the historical conditions observed in this section, the subsequent fragmentation of memories, national identities and languages, as well as the 'internal' role of the Baltic states and the 'external' homeland influence are to be considered as pivotal elements resulting from the 'Soviet legacy'. There-

[20] K. M. Platt (ed. by), *Global Russian Cultures*, Madison 2019, p. 97.

[21] D. Uffelmann, *Is There Any Such Thing as "Russophone Russophobia"?*, in K. M. Platt (ed. by), *Global Russian Cultures*, op. cit., p. 208.

fore, the pervasive debate about definitions such as 'coloniality', 'colonization', 'occupation', 'postcoloniality' and 'decolonization' in the Baltic states is to be read in the light of the specific historical events, the memory issues and the status of the Russian/Russophone presence in these territories as the legacy of a controversial past.

My investigation of the postcolonial aspects of the Baltic region takes inspiration from Annus' reflections around the dichotomy 'colonizer-colonized':

> Categories of colonizer and colonized should not be regarded as natural, essential and mandatory subject positions. But, in certain situations, a settler adopts and accepts the structural position of colonizer; similarly, a local inhabitant can be positioned, in certain circumstances, within the role of the colonized. These structural positions are conditional and do not necessarily become an essential and permanent part of a person's identity[22].

These conditions of interchangeability and constant overlapping of structures of meanings, colonial subjects and identities beyond rigid identity definitions lie at the core of the attempt made in this article at reconfiguring the Soviet legacy and its limits and boundaries in the Baltic area, addressing crucial questions such as: How can the presence of the Soviet Union in these territories be defined? What are the implications of such an heterogenous ethnic composition of the contemporary Baltic states? How is the Latvian intellectual community reconfiguring 'colonial' and identity labels?

Which postcoloniality? Lights and shadows of the postcolonial discourse in the Baltic space

> There was a more Western atmosphere before, in Soviet times.
> Today it is different, because we are 'Eastern Europe': we are more detached today from Europe, and not just geographically speaking.
> Mental maps have been transformed: before we were more 'West', now more 'East'
>
> Riga, 2019 [23]

The issue around the postcolonial condition of the Baltic states is part of a huge intellectual and academic debate about whether to consider certain former Soviet countries as once colonies (an issue intertwining with global debates regarding postmodernity and post-dependence). The following section does not aim to encapsulate the Baltic case in a specific colonial, postcolonial or decolonial vision; however, it is committed to fostering dialogue on the complex dynamics involving today the Russian state and the former Soviet republics, by reflecting on the colonial and decolonial shades the Baltic states may reflect.

The Baltic states embody a highly peculiar case in the post-Soviet scene, revealing all the nuances and complexities of the application of the postcolonial methodology to the study of the whole region. Undoubtedly, the assumed acknowledgement of a 'postcolonial status' for the Baltic states would eventually bring us to consider coloniality as part of the Soviet experience, with clear effects on the present (i.e., on the Russian Federation as the legal successor state of the Soviet Union). However, the postcolonial (or, rather, post-imperial) condition of the Russian state may acquire even more relevance, when considering the contested legacy of the former imperial structure and the effects it is having on its former colonies today. Along these lines, Nancy Condee affirmed:

> The collapse of the Soviet Union¬¬ – internally imperialist but (in its declared animosity to First World predation) externally anti-imperialist¬¬ – resolved one core contradiction, but substituted another: Russia, recovering gradually from its postimperial fatigue, remains (though reconfigured) an empire nevertheless[24].

The whole colonial and postcolonial discourse, traditionally interested almost exclusively the Anglo-Franco imperial experiences, acquires new dimensions, reflections and subjectivities in the understanding that "every postcoloniality is situated and therefore different"[25]. Moreover, adopting the Baltic case as the main subject of the postcolonial and later decolonial investigation brings us to consider the undeniably peculiar geographical position of these territories today, bordering both the Russian federation and the European Union. Thus, the study of the postcolonial manifestations within this area could

[22] E. Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies*, op. cit., p. 12.
[23] Retrieved from an interview conducted with Nadezda Pasuhina.
[24] G. C. Spivak *et al.*, *Are we postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space*, "PMLA", 2006 (121), 3, p. 830.
[25] Ivi, p. 828.

not leave out the political and socio-cultural influences deriving from this "in-between" condition[26].

The very first appearance of the term 'postcolonial' in the Baltic states dates back to 1950, being mentioned by the Lithuanian poet Jonas Aistis, and mainly equates the word 'colonial' with the connotation of 'occupation'. The term began to be an integral part of national narratives and discourses especially during the pre-independence events of the Baltic 'Singing revolution', until being fully presented in 1998 within a dedicated issue of "World Literature Today" along with the contribution of American critics[27]. The roots of the concept of postcoloniality were always, and still are, rather controversial among the Baltic states, as the term implies a certain perpetual linkage to the Soviet past: thus, postcoloniality comes to be perceived as an experience that is at the same time historically inevitable and intentionally distanced. Additionally, the 'postcolonial' label may appear to the population of the republics as a 'stigma', especially when perceived as a discourse that equalizes the Baltic states' experiences of colonization to those of the Third World, thus ideologically and culturally 'limiting' the 'European heritage' of their national experiences.

Indeed, Violeta Kalertas recognizes the motivations behind the refusal of the category of 'postcolonial people' by the Baltic populations in their willingness to be counted among 'civilized' states, thus failing "to recognize, as Chioni Moore observes, that postcolonialism is 'fundamental to world identities', taking in Canadians and even Americans from the pre-Revolutionary historical period. Postcolonials make up a motley crew that cannot be avoided"[28].

Among the diverse interpretations of postcolonial concepts in Baltic public discourse, Annus clarifies the complex terminology revolving around the colonial experience, borrowing the distinction made by Jürgen Osterhammel between "'colonisation' as 'a process of territorial acquisition' and 'colonialism' as 'a system of domination'". Following Osterhammel's analysis, Annus further explains:

> Here, one can argue that the Baltic states were not precisely "colonized" by the Soviet Union, but were instead "occupied", since the term "colonization" is not quite apt for describing the process of annexing modern nation states, as the Baltic states had been by the end of the 1930s. Yet the authors here nonetheless share a conviction that the Soviet period in the Baltic states can be characterized as a colonial situation, wherein colonial strategies were deployed[29].

In this regard, Annus also pointed out the conditions of the colonization of "modern nation states", such as the Baltic states, especially when a national identity is already deeply grounded in people's cultures and sense of belonging. While speaking about the process of Sovietization in these territories, she underlined the authorities' willingness to control the cultural production and to rewrite the national past, thus undoubtably having a significant effect on cultural identities, but not suppressing "anticolonial and decolonial impulses" that "could readily ground themselves in preexisting ideals of national self-determination"[30].

Moreover, considering the entangled framework of colonizing, nationalizing and decolonizing processes, Annus outlined the main problematic issues around the historical relations between the Soviet Union and the three Baltic states. These include: "historical layers" of occupation in these regions; "the entanglement of different discourses" about the Soviet coloniality, Western modernity and the national discourse; the "different regimes of art" under Soviet, modernist and postmodernist impulses; the "connections and interconnections within the Soviet sphere"; and, finally, the "differential developments in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania", taking into considerable account each country's uniqueness in its cultural and historical path[31].

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[26] The term is retrieved from Homi K. Bhabha, where these areas are defined as "spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated", H. K. Bhabha (ed. by), *Nation & Narration*, London-New York 1990, p. 4.

[27] V. Kalertas, *Baltic Postcolonialism and its Critics*, Amsterdam 2006, p. 3.

[28] Ibidem; citing D. C. Moore, *Is the Post-in Postcolonial the Post-in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique*, "PMLA", 2001 (116), 1, pp. 111-128.

[29] J. Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus. Geschichte – Formen – Folgen*, München 2009, p. 23, in E. Annus, *Between Arts and Politics: A Postcolonial View on Baltic Cultures of the Soviet Era*, "Journal of Baltic Studies", 2016 (47), 1, pp. 1-13, (2).

[30] E. Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: a View from the Western Borderlands*, London-New York 2017, pp. 95-96.

[31] Idem, *Between Arts and Politics*, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

In this respect, for example, in Piret Peiker's study on Estonian society we may observe a complex and variegated picture of influencing societal factors, that go beyond the above-mentioned opposition frames:

> In Estonia itself, issues relating to nationhood and nationalism (such as national movements, nation-building processes, inter-ethnic conflicts, etc.) are today habitually treated within the parameters of a mutual offensive between conservative nationalists (considered (proto-)fascists by adversaries) and liberal cosmopolitans (self-colonizers and "red professors" according to the other side). I believe that it is useful to consider this deadlock also in the global and postcolonial framework, rather than solely in the context of Eastern European vs. Western values (as does Saarts 2012). It can offer a reflective intellectual space in which to examine the comparable post-Soviet processes without idealizing or demonizing them or taking for granted that they ought to fit a Western grid of normality – as it emphatically is not taken for granted in Postcolonial Studies[32].

Peiker goes on affirming that following this perspective we may consider "the particular political-sociocultural imprint left by the experience of triple colonization (Baltic German, Czarist Russian, and Soviet), native and imposed aspects of modernity, and struggles for political emancipation in shifting historical circumstances" as factors significantly shaping "the present-day Estonian definitions of collective self" and influencing "the present political and sociocultural imagination"[33].

Peiker's intention is to shed the light on "internal connection-patterns"[34], taking into consideration a more global postcolonial context, letting values, social mechanisms, socio-cultural patterns and even boundaries emerge[35].

This highly fragmented and multi-faceted context of analysis is further discussed by Violeta Davoliūtė, when presenting the concepts of 'acculturation' and 'transculturation' (as a new way of understanding the Lithuanian experience of Sovietization)[36]. By reporting Ortiz's distinction between the two definitions, she explained:

> If acculturation implied little more than the acquisition of a "dominant" culture, as if the "primitive" were an empty vessel ready to be filled, transculturation emphasized the process of passing from one culture to another through a series of steps that included deculturation, or the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, and neoculturation, or the consequent development of a new cultural hybrid that drew from two or more traditions[37].

Thus, in elaborating the concept of transculturation from Rama's contribution, Davoliūtė clarified it as a process of "adaptation, appropriation, selection", but also "reinvention" that "gives rise to new cultural forms"[38]. This concept of transculturation as reinvention is a fundamental step in elaborating new research perspectives on the postcolonial contemporary cultural and literary context of Baltic states. Dorota Kolodziejczyk and Cristina Sandru perfectly described the cultural, political and social impulses to be considered while reflecting on the postcolonial space occupied by the Baltic territories:

> structures of exclusion/inclusion (the centre/periphery model and theorizations of the liminal and 'in-between'); formations of nationalism, structures of othering and representations of difference; forms and historical realizations of anti-colonial/anti-imperial struggle; the experience of trauma (involving issues of collective memory/amnesia and the rewriting of history); resistance as a complex of cultural practices; concepts such as alterity, ambivalence, self-colonization, cultural geography, dislocation, minority and subaltern cultures, neocolonialism, orientalization, transnationalism[39].

Taking into account this multifaceted array of impulses, we may observe that the Baltic region presents itself as a highly fragmented, controversial, and nuanced postcolonial scene, which opens room for hybrid manifestations and new cultural subjectivities. In order to consider socio-cultural nuances emerging from the Baltic countries that go beyond the binary opposition between 'colonizers' and 'colonized', we will now devote our attention to the "regimes of art", i.e., cultural expressions built around hybrid and transcultural forms and dis-

[32] P. Peiker, *Estonian Nationalism Through the Postcolonial Lens*, "Journal of Baltic Studies", 2016 (47), 1, p. 2.
[33] Ibidem.
[34] Ivi, p. 3.
[35] Ibidem.
[36] V. Davoliūte, *The Sovietization of Lithuania after WWII: Modernization, Transculturation, and the Lettered City*, "Journal of Baltic Studies", 2016 (47), 1, p. 50.
[37] F. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint, Tobacco and Sugar*, Durham 1995, pp. 97-113, in V. Davoliūte, *The Sovietization*, op. cit., p. 50.
[38] A. Rama – J. C. Chasteen, *The Lettered City*, Durham, 1996; A Rama – D. L. Frye, *Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*, Durham 2012, in V. Davoliūte, *The Sovietization*, op. cit., p. 50.
[39] D. Kołodziejczyk – C. Şandru, *Introduction: On Colonialism, Communism and East-Central Europe. Some Reflections*, "Journal of Postcolonial Writing", 2012 (48), 2, p. 113.

courses[40]. The following section will be thus devoted to the peculiar case of the Russophone culture and language in the Baltic states, with a specific focus on the Latvian case. This will serve as a meaningful model to look at the development of hybrid cultural identities and new forms of decoloniality in today's post-Soviet scene.

A LABORATORY OF DECOLONIALITY: THE LATVIAN RUSSOPHONE HYBRIDITY

> I am a European who is born in Latvia or a Latvian of Russian origins with a strong European identity. Indeed, I am more European than Russian or Latvian. I enjoy Latvian contemporary arts, music and poetry. I am teaching at the Latvian university in Latvian.
> At the same time, Russian culture and language play an important role in my identity. I am indeed a hybrid; I am a mix of different cultures and I really like it .
>
> Riga, 2019 [41]

When examining the geography or imaginary location of the Russian culture, the questions posed by the scholar Kevin Platt help grasp the crucial issues at stake: "where is Russian culture properly located? What does it mean to be a hyphenated Russian or a 'global Russian'?"[42]. These queries shed light on Russian culture as a global event that today also has to include its (hybrid) Russophone manifestations. It is undoubted that the Soviet collapse in 1991 also brought about the fragmentation of Russian culture, bringing the establishment of internal and external forces governing its wider space: on the one hand, the former come from the new 'nationalizing states', with a huge introduction of new cultural and language policies upgrading the role of the national languages; on the other, the latter are embodied by the new role of the Russian state, which gradually posed itself as an ideal 'external homeland' for – and cultivated an ideological bond with – the Russophone minorities residing abroad. In this regard, it is significant to consider Brubaker's theorization of the Triadic Nexus, in which he discloses a brilliant interpretation of all the influences that may affect the Russophone minorities as well as generally the post-colonial structures of a state, from the inside and from the outside. His theory considers "the triadic relational nexus between national minorities, nationalizing states, and external national homelands"[43].

On the one hand, the massive presence of Russian-speaking communities in former Soviet republics created the ground for the claim of states around the idea of the "unrealized 'nation-state', as a state destined to be, but not yet in fact (at least not to a sufficient degree), a nation-state, [..] destined to be, by promoting the language, culture, demographic position, economic flourishing, and/or political hegemony of the nominally state-bearing nation"[44]. On the other, the homeland embodied by Russia is another relevant and complex actor involved in the shaping of the Russian-speaking community abroad. In this context, the minority takes shape as squeezed between the titular state and the "external homeland" that "is a political, not an ethnographic category", something that is "constructed, not given"[45]. This is, indeed, part of a general top-down process of constructing an ethnic identity abroad: in the case of the Russian Federation, it also embodies an attempt to give the Russian-speaking individuals abroad the shape of a Russian state 'abroad'.

The Triadic Nexus paradigm is particularly relevant in the understanding of the influencing factors that have to be considered in the analysis of the Baltic case, and specifically Latvia, as the case study under scrutiny in this section. Since the beginning of the Latvian national-building process in 1991, the definition of the national identity was grounded mainly in the extreme opposition 'Us-Them', starting a structural change of the ethnic-cultural balance within the newly born state. Nevertheless, the

[40] After a general look at the Lithuanian and Estonian perspectives, the Latvian case will be presented as the final focus in the following section.

[41] Retrieved from an interview conducted with Deniss Hanovs.

[42] K. M. Platt, *Eccentric Orbit: Mapping Russian Culture in the Near Abroad*, in M. Waldstein – S. Turoma (ed. by), *Empire De/Centered: New Spatial Histories of Russia*, Routledge 2013, p. 275.

[43] R. Brubaker, *National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe: Notes Toward a Relational Analysis*, "Reihe Politikwissenschaft / Institut für Höhere Studien, Abt. Politikwissenschaft", 1993, p. 3.

[44] Ivi, p. 12.

[45] Ivi, p. 9

national revival had to consider the massive presence of ethnic Russians. The latter's condition was described by Laitin as the result of a 'beach diaspora', after the retreat of the Soviet Union and decades of settlements in the area. In this respect, Kevin Platt clarifies:

> From a Russian perspective, it numbers among the most "near spaces" – territorially, historically, linguistically, ethnically, and in term of economic, social and familial relationships bridging the border. Russians have resided there for centuries and form a proportionally larger part of the Latvian population than of the other post-Soviet states besides the Russian Federation itself[46].

Even if this article does not consider ethnical categorizations as an exclusive feature delineating the sense of belonging or a specific identity of individuals residing in Latvia, certain data are relevant to understanding the general categorization used by the state on the population and the usage of the Russian and Latvian languages. As of 2017's surveys, the percentage on the total population of Latvia speaking Russian at home is 37.7%, compared to 61.3% of inhabitants speaking Latvian. Notably, "out of the total population of Latvia, 50% indicated that they know Russian, more than 37% know English, while 28.8% mentioned that they know Latvian as foreign language"[47].

Lara Ryazanova-Clark pointed out that in post-Soviet times "the laws on language, education and citizenship have been viewed by many as discriminating against those minority language communities while seeking to reinforce the status of Latvian as the state language"[48]. In terms of citizenship, language requirements are quite severe, and require several steps of knowledge of the Latvian language[49]. Indeed, in 1991, the law on citizenship in Latvia considered for naturalization only inhabitants, and consequently also their descendants, who had been citizens of Latvia in the interwar period. This decision awakened significative criticism from the parliament section protecting the former Soviet citizens, who denounced it as discrimination[50]. As Karlinks observed, the factions were extremely divided about on this topic: "Russia and representatives of the post-war settlers argue that the granting of an unconditional citizenship option was crucial for preserving ethnic concord. Most Latvian politicians argued the opposite. In their view, political integration in a state is the precondition for citizenship, rather than vice versa"[51]. Even today, the current geopolitical tensions and social hostilities revolve around controversial interpretations of the Latvian-Russian historical encounter and language policies addressing Russophone residents in Latvia; furthermore, they are also triggered by international developments, such as the controversial annexation of the Crimean peninsula by the Russian Federation in 2014.

Yet, going beyond these opposing supranational and national narratives, an extremely peculiar heterogeneity of the linguistic and cultural scene in Latvia is taking shape, making it a territory of experimentations and hybridizations. It is not by chance that, today, the Russophone intellectuals, writers and artists are engaged in reshaping the cultural reality of the Latvian state, creating new spaces of dialogue[52].

Looking first at the dynamics of Russophone culture in the broader post-Soviet scene, we may refer to Marco Puleri's description of current literary processes, whereby "post-Soviet literature, in particular, stands as an emblem of the processes of identity negotiation: it develops narrative strategies aimed at the specific re-elaboration of historical memory, at the phenomena of cultural hybridization, and at a

[46] K. M. Platt (ed. by), *Global Russian Cultures*, op. cit., pp. 98-99.

[47] <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/characteristics/key-indicator/indicators-characterising-languages-used> (latest access: 21.05.2021).

[48] L. Ryazanova-Clarke, *Russian Language Outside the Nation*, Edinburgh 2014, p. 47.

[49] Ibidem. As reported by Ryazanova-Clarke, an applicant for naturalization "completely understands information of a social and official nature [...] can freely tell about, converse and answer questions regarding topics of a social nature [...] can fluently read and understand any instructions, directions and other text of a social nature and [...] can write an essay on a topic of a social nature given by the Commission".

[50] R. Karklins, *Ethnopolitics and the Transition to Democracy: The Collapse of the USSR and Latvia*, Baltimore-London 1994, p. 146.

[51] Ivi, p. 147.

[52] The cultural expressions considered in this article are not solely poetic and/or in the Russian language, but engage a wide scenario of intellectual dialogue from the socio-political, literary and artistic points of view, with the common purpose of challenging borders of identity, language and nation.

symbolic relocation of identity"[53]. Therefore, applying labels or definitions to these cultural processes is overall arduous, as clearly expressed by Platt in raising crucial questions such as: "What does it mean to be a Latvian Russian, or a Russian in Latvia?"[54]. The need to redraw borders, or to make distinction between top-down and bottom-up cultural expressions, resides also in the distinction "between everyday culture and high culture" as "in Russia the former is lacking, while the latter is axiomatically present"[55].

When speaking about Latvia, the above-mentioned phenomena of cultural hybridization emerge especially in multicultural environments such as the city of Riga. One of the most outstanding examples of this merging of languages, but also genres, is embodied by the group of artists and poets known as Orbita. The group, formed in 1991, counts five stable members: Aleksandrs Zapoļs (Khanin), Sergejs Timofejevs, Artūrs Punte, Vladimirs Svetlovs, and Zohrzh Uallik, and it also has several affiliations with music, arts, visual arts exhibition, and web portals[56]. What is to be considered innovative and challenging is the bilingualism adopted in the artistic expression of Orbita, that "reflects the group's highly self-conscious negotiation of the border between the Latvian and the Russian ethnic enclaves, on a local level, and between Russia and Latvia or Eurasia and Europe, in a larger frame"[57]. The bilingualism adopted by the group in their cultural production – as a result of the use of Russian as their mother tongue and Latvian as the language of their country of residence – is to be considered overall a powerful and original tool. Furthermore, the group goes beyond the standard views of the poetic genre itself, as it produces mixed performances and the so-called 'poetic installation', a combination of objects symbolizing the poetic discourse. This is the case of the exhibition "2 sonnets from Laputa", constructed through objects and exposed at the 56th edition of the

Fig. 2 - Source: <https://arterritory.com/en/visual_arts/interviews/24026-reason_to_create>.

Venice Biennale. About the work, the artists claim once again the will to overcome any kind of border, including the linguistic one:

> That was an attempt to find a universal language, to accept the world and objects in it as fragments of a poetic statement that we then exhibit arranged in a certain order to form a sonnet. That was a deliberate decision, and we debated quite a lot before making it, because we work a lot with language ourselves. The work was shown in Venice, a place where people from every corner of the world converge and speak in so many languages; and they should recognise and understand something, at least partially, so they would not be limited by the boundaries of a specific language[58].

Moreover, Orbita addresses both local and an international audiences, participating in literary festivals and winning prizes both on the Russian and on the European scenes. The publication of poetry books both in the Latvian and the Russian language also highlights the elasticity of the group in terms of ethnic-cultural identification. The following poem by Semyon Kanin, written originally in Russian and translated into English by Platt, is a literary example of how borders and identities can be blurred. It embodies an "intentionally trans-ethnic and trans-linguistic phenomenon [..] an avant-garde of cosmopolitan hybridity"[59]

> glue's not quite right
> and the eye colour hair colour height are slightly off
> go easy opening it
> at the border try to look honest

[53] M. Puleri, *Narrazioni ibride post-sovietiche: per una letteratura ucraina di lingua russa*, Firenze 2016, p. 20.
[54] K. M. Platt, *Eccentric Orbit*, op. cit., p. 296.
[55] Ivi, p. 281.
[56] Ivi, p. 287.
[57] Ibidem.
[58] <https://arterritory.com/en/visual_arts/interviews/24026-reason_to_create> (latest access: 05.05.2021).
[59] <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/2177/russian-poetry-in-latvia-orbit> (latest access: 05.05.2021).

and smile
so the seams'll be less obvious
on the other hand the first and last name are magnifico
and the age suspiciously young
while the watermarks are so fine
that there's totally no reason to flinch
if someone looks long and hard at your face[60]

Another prominent example of the Russophone cultural vitality in Latvia is the poet Dmitry Kuzmin[61]. Here I will report a small excerpt from a more exhaustive interview conducted with Kuzmin in Riga in 2019 to support my argument. In this passage from the interview, Kuzmin was struggling with some interrogatives about the role of Russian culture in Latvia. When I raised the question about which cultural environment, among the Latvian, Russian and European ones, he felt closer to and which he belonged to, he gave voice to his thoughts:

> Obviously, I am belonging to Russian culture, but maybe my Russian culture doesn't belong to the Russian culture so much. What I mean is the Russian state culture and society as it exists nowadays. Both are used to reject what was important in Russian culture for decades. My great ancestors worked with the Russian poetry as samizdat and nobody in the state culture apparatus has ever read them, while official Soviet poetry was just rubbish. The result was that promoting Russian culture in its highest examples was the business of narrow circle of people, with no official legitimation, except the legitimization of their own circle. It works more or less the same today. A circle of people working within the Russian culture where all the rest is just following state regulations, producing something politically useful but culturally senseless. When asking about the belonging to the Russian culture it is necessary to ask first what Russian culture is. I imply that I am Russian culture, not them. Within the Latvian national culture, this idea of alternative culture is not so evident, it is a small country, and they just don't have as many people in culture. When we invite women to participate in these festivals, they are the most known artists of the country, and for them is more or less natural to appear in places like *Kanapes*[62], as they have no other options, it is not the same as the Russian official artists who go to the Kremlin[63].

Fig. 3 - Source: <https://arterritory.com/en/visual_arts/interviews/24026-reason_to_create>.

Kuzmin is not only a Russophone poet, publisher and critic, but also a migrant from Russia who has, for political and personal reasons, such as because of the government's intolerance towards LGBT rights, openly criticized the Russian government's strict restrictions on artists' works[64]. In this respect, an intriguing feature of his identity is embodied by its open protest towards the Russian state's regulations, as we may read in a small appendix to the poem *Catullus 16*:

> [...] I bring to the attention of the investigative authorities of the Russian Federation
> and of the other institutions of establishmentalized lawlessness functioning on the territory of my squalid nation:

[60] Ibidem. Poem translated by Kevin Platt. The original version of the poem: "клей неудачный/и слегка изменен цвет глаз цвет/волос рост/сильно не раскрывать/на границе делать честное лицо/и улыбаться/чтобы швы были не так видны/зато шикарное имя и фамилия/и подозрительно юный возраст/а водяные знаки такие/что можно вообще не дергаться/если кто-то не отрываясь смотрит тебе в лицо" <https://literratura.org/criticism/2976-sergey-moreyno-far-abroad.html> (latest access: 17.11.2021). In this respect, extremely significative is Tlostanova's observation about the mutability of the standard canons of expressions, which find in postsocialist realities a fertile ground: "When societies go through sharp axiological fractures in a short period of time as happened in the postsocialist world, a specific multispatial and multitemporal hermeneutics grounded in intertextual and hypertextual principles, becomes a necessity. Many postsocialist works presuppose the interaction of several semantic layers – from the national and ethnic to the global, Western and non-Western, (post)socialist, (post)soviet and postcolonial which fewer and fewer readers or viewers can handle", M. Tlostanova, *Postcolonial Theory*, op. cit., p. 38.

[61] Born in Moscow in 1968 and graduating from the Moscow State pedagogical University, he founded in 1989 the Vavilon Union of Young Poets for experimental poetry and he was the editor of the poetry magazine "Vozdukh" [Air] and "Risk", the first Russian gay magazine for writing. His poems have been published England, France, Poland, China, Italy, Estonia and Slovenia, and in the United States, and since 2014 he lives in Latvia. <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/contributor/dmitry-kuzmin> (latest access: 21.05.2021).

[62] The name refers to the *Kaņepes Kultūras centrs* [Kanapes Cultural Centre], also called "the cultural oasis of Riga's city centre", which was historically a place of cultural dialogue and meetings between German and Russian aristocrats, and is today a reference point for the Latvian Art Academy and the cultural life of Riga, hosting events and exhibitions.

[63] Retrieved from an interview conducted with Dmitry Kuzmin. Riga, 2019.

[64] <https://www.politico.eu/article/russias-dissident-poets-society-latvia-russian-culture/> (latest access: 21.05.2021).

Fig. 4 - Photo taken by the author. Riga, May 2019.

> the present text is not liable under statute 6.21 of the RF legal code
> regarding "administrative violations of rights" even though
> it specifically cites "appealing to non-traditional sexual relations";
> it is not intended for dissemination among minors.
> Anyone underage who inadvertently acquires it
> must immediately discard the read materials and banish any thoughts:
> an exemplary minor dependent of the Russian Federation,
> a future exemplar of a citizen of the Russian Federation,
> a future model writer of the Russian Federation,
> future model descendant of a literary figure
> must be occupied only with the mouthpieces of authority, that they may listen
> to decrees, and the anuses of authority, that they be gainfully engaged swilling them,
> and the cantrip with which the Russian Federation will swiftly be awash in
> a subject of the Russian Federation must not pay attention to at all[65].

Clearly, what is to be observed here is that these cultural practices manifest a peculiar transnational activity through which intellectuals attempt to eliminate "colonial features" that may affect their literary works, disclosing new codifications of plural and hybrid identities both within the European and the Russian cultural spaces[66]. The success of Russophone poetic manifestations is mostly the result of the activity of cultural organizations that have to be mentioned here for their cultural impact on both national and international audiences. Among the most prominent ones, we may mention "Words Without Borders", an organization founded in 2003 with the aim to expand "cultural understanding through the translation, publication, and promotion of the finest contemporary international literature"[67]. Moreover, when entering the realm of contemporary artistic and poetic encounters, the Latvian Center for Contemporary Art is another outstanding example. Indeed, among the numerous events promoted by the Latvian Center, we may mention the Annual Art Festival "Survival Kit" in Riga. An emblematic edition of this project was the one held in 2019, where was indeed introduced the theme of the 'outlands', with the main goal of questioning "the traditional division of geopolitical and cultural space into centre and periphery [...] shedding the light on the complex construction of identity"[68]. In this respect, in an interview conducted in 2019, the curator of the exhibition Inga Lāce described Riga's social and cultural environment, underlying the meaning of these cultural ventures:

> There is no diversity [...]. When you say that there are two com-

[65] Excerpt translated by Alex Cigale, <https://springhousejournal.com/Issue1/Kuzmin/> (latest access: 21.05.2021). Original version of the excerpt: "К сведению следственных органов Российской Федерации/и других структур/институционализованного беззакония,/действующих на территории моей несчастной страны:/данный текст не подпадает под действие статьи 6.21/Кодекса РФ об административных правонарушениях, хотя и/трактует о "привлекательности нетрадиционных сексуальных отношений":/он не предназначен для распространения среди несовершеннолетних./Всякий несовершеннолетний, которому он случайно попадётся,/должен немедля выкинуть прочитанное из головы:/образцового несовершеннолетнего Российской Федерации,/будущего образцового гражданина Российской Федерации,/будущего образцового писателя Российской Федерации,/будущего образцового писательского потомка/должны занимать только рот начальства, чтобы слушать приказы,/и жопа начальства, чтобы её вылизывать,/а пизда, которой вскорости накроется Российская Федерация,/обывателя Российской Федерации занимать не должна. <https://itsnothere.org/verses/kuzmin05.html> (latest access: 17.11.2021).

[66] Here, together with the Orbita collective and Kuzmin, it is important to cite, though by no means exhaustively, other prominent figures involved in the Latvian literary panorama, engaging with bilingualism and Russophone literature, such as Dmitrii Sumarokov, Miļena Makarova, Sergei Moreino, Svens Kuzmins, Andris Kupršs, Andrei Ļevkin, Roald Dobrovenski, Aleksandr Meņshikov and Oļeg Petrov.

[67] One of the main aims of the association is to "connect international writers to the general public, to students and educators, and to the media and to serve as a primary online location for a global literary conversation". The association has published more than 2700 writers from 141 countries, with translation in 132 languages. Among the writers included there where prominent figures such as "Elena Ferrante, Svetlana Alexievich, Han Kang, and László Krasznahorkai" and "today's literary stars, like Olga Tokarczuk, Osama Alomar, Mariana Enríquez, and Gunnhild Øyehaug". In May 2017 a new program was launched: the WWB Campus, an online portal hosting classrooms and collecting multimedia materials and cultural resources. <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/about/> (latest access: 10.05.2021).

[68] <https://lcca.lv/en/survival-kit-10/> (latest access on 10.05.2021).

Fig. 5 - Photo taken by the author. Riga, May 2019.

munities, then you are already creating these boxes and you are putting one against the other. But if you would somehow imagine that there is one community that just uses different languages [...] perhaps it would become an issue and also politicians would polarize the society less[69].

The global and local character of the festival makes it a unique 'window' onto the works of artists from all around the world, while still attempting to keep the attention on the contested issues emerging in the city of Riga, such as the complex identity of individuals. As mentioned by Lāce, the festival's role is one of deconstructing artificial borders among citizens: it works as a place for re-discussing the standard definitions not only of geopolitical borders, but also of identity borders. As displayed on the festival website: "geography and migration are taken up as core themes in the hope of revealing the complexities embedded within different local communities"[70].

Finally, another example of cultural practices demystifying traditional divisive visions in terms of memory conflicts is the one realized by the same contemporary Latvian art center, with the exhibition "Difficult Pasts. Connected Worlds": as mentioned on the project website, the exhibition, which has been hosted in late 2020-early 2021 by the Latvian National Museum of Art in Riga, "sheds light on difficult, often omitted subjects in the Baltic and Eastern European region and turns to the complex legacies of the twentieth century", since "despite being suppressed in collective memory, these subjects and legacies often continue to influence today's reality"[71]. The artists' works involved in this exhibition aimed at dealing with the colonial past and traumas of the area, from periods before World War II and from the more recent Soviet times of the 1980s/1990s. The project aimed to avoid a narrow focus on Baltic histories and memories and to be open to a more European and global perspective involving experts from anthropologists to researchers[72]. Among the works included in the exhibition, we might refer to those of Vika Eksta, who dealt with "the forgotten Soviet war in Afghanistan, where many people from Soviet republics, including Latvia, were made to fight against their will", and Ülo Pikkov, who explored a dramatic journey to Siberia in a women's wagon presented as "a painful memory that connects contexts throughout the former Soviet Union"[73]. These are just some of the installations and pieces about memory this exhibition presented, with the aim to "narrate those experiences through individual stories, while evoking broader layers of cultural memory [..] offering dialogues, forging connections and foregrounding solidarities between the different difficult histories that are often perceived as incompatible or in competition with each other"[74].

All the above-mentioned artistic contributions and projects are only a small part of what can be inscribed in a highly plural and multivocal cultural environment in Latvia, where Russophone intellectuals find their voices beyond local interpretations of post-colonial dichotomies and nationalists stances.

Conclusions

The above-cited realities are only some examples of the cultural encounters that the Latvian environment may produce, and are emblematic of the panorama of hybridity emerging within a postcolonial frame, that at the same time clearly shows a 'decolonial' potentiality. Regarding this matter,

[69] Retrieved from an original interview to Inga Lāce, conducted on 13.06.2019 in Riga.
[70] <https://lcca.lv/en/survival-kit-10/> (latest access: 10.05.2021).
[71] <https://lcca.lv/en/exhibitions/exhibition--difficult-pasts--connected-worlds-/#izstade> (latest access: 10.05.2021).
[72] Ibidem.
[73] Ibidem.
[74] Ibidem.

Fig. 6. - Source: <https://blokmagazine.com/difficult-pasts-connected-worlds-at-latvian-national-museum-of-art/> (latest access: 17.11.2021)

Tlostanova's definition of "transcultural tempo-local models in art" brilliantly help us frame any artistic and intellectual contribution within a context of mutability – sometimes dealing with post-socialist elements, other times experiencing the unlabelling of subjectivities:

> In post-dependence tempo-localities multiple spaces are permeated by and broached with multiple histories, sometimes parallel or intersecting with each other and with exhausted metanarratives of modernity. These spatial histories do not go back to some ancient roots in a quest for ethnic renaissances, as was still happening several decades ago. They are dynamic, changing, and marked by the principle of non-exclusive duality. The spatial history is often materialized through changing and flexible language. Space becomes a palimpsest of overlapping traces left by a succession of inscriptions, and the function of inscribing names on the symbolic cultural map comes forward. It turns into an experimental field with constant crossings of borders, spaces, and times, where the signs of history exist in the signification lacunae, semantic slippages, and re-namings[75].

Tlostanova's observations open room for a peculiar definition of decoloniality that may take into account the Russophone cultural expressions presented in the previous section of this article. When speaking about these poetic and cultural manifestations, we may consider them as belonging to the group of decolonial manifestations that go beyond a unique ethno-national community – as shown in Kuzmin's interview[76]. On this matter, Tlostanova again identifies these artistic figures as forging a peculiar decolonial expression:

> [...] there are still artists who manage to critically and dynamically engage with their national-ethnic elements, and Western and Russian canons, as well as with dif¬ferent subversive traditions within them. They try to remake and problematize all of these elements in their works. These impulses are decidedly decolonial, as the artists criticize both global modernity/coloniality and provincial local color from their border position[77].

The conclusion we may deduce from these experiences is the impossibility of describing Russophone culture abroad and in Latvia as reflecting binary representations of a nationally forged identity. On the contrary, they manifest the mutability and relativism of ethno-national categories. In the light of postcolonial theories, here it is relevant to remember Bhabha's observations about the nature of locality to be applied to these specific cultural manifestations:

> This locality is more around temporality than about historicity: a form of living that is more complex than 'community'; more symbolic than 'society'; more connotative than 'country'; less patriotic than patrie; more rhetorical than the reason of state; more mythological than ideology; less homogeneous than hegemony; less centred than the citizen; more collective than 'the subject'; more psychic than civility; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications – gender, race or class – than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism[78].

In conclusion, together with Bhabha, we may state that the Latvian case experiments with a transcultural locality that simultaneously engages the past and the present, challenging borders and territorialization and going beyond colonial, postcolonial and decolonial definitions alike. In this contribution we undertook a journey through the Baltic states' history and memory, with a focus on the identity ramifications of these communities in the pre- and post-independence period. Then, we attempted to summarize some of the main points of the debate around the postcoloniality of these states, considering intellectuals and scholars from outside and inside the Baltic countries. Finally, following the examination of Russophone cultural manifestations, and specifically the Latvian poetic practices, we aimed at exploring colonial and decolonial conjunctions,

[75] M. Tlostanova, *Postcolonial Theory*, op. cit., p. 33.
[76] Interview with Dmitry Kuzmin in this paper.
[77] M. Tlostanova, *What Does it Mean to be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire*, Durham 2018, p. 41.
[78] H. K. Bhabha (ed. by), *Nation & Narration*, op. cit., p. 296.

disclosing their identity and cultural peculiarities. At the end of our journey, we may state that the field of the postcolonial studies specifically dealing with post-Soviet realities should consider more deeply the discourse about hybrid socio-cultural manifestations in the Baltic states, since — as we had the chance to see — any poetic fragment or interview or exhibition may open new space for reflection and reconsideration of binary thinking.

www.esamizdat.it ◇ M. Romano, *(Post-/De-) Colonial Baltic Shades: The Latvian Case and its Global Breath* ◇ eSamizdat 2021 (XIV), pp. 87-104.

♢ *(Post-/De-) Colonial Baltic Shades: The Latvian Case and its Global Breath* ♢

Michela Romano

Abstract

The Baltic area has always been conceived as experiencing a constant oscillation between the Western European cultural space and the Russian one. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, countries such as the Baltic states had to deal with a history of invasions alongside a present of plural memories, languages and cultures. The article will be committed to analyzing the contemporary Russophone cultural patterns in Latvia departing from the Baltic historical and mnemonic frame followed by a journey into the post-Soviet and postcolonial debate. The last part will disclose the Russophone translingual and transcultural environment of Latvia between hard borders of nationality and soft hybrid subjectivities. Examples of Russophone intellectual, artistic and poetic manifestations will be presented in the light of post-Soviet studies, colonial and (de-)colonial theoretic trajectories, taking into account interviews and field research conducted in Riga. The final purpose will be to understand in which ways certain Latvian Russophone manifestations can be analyzed as postcolonial and decolonial representations, highlighting junctures and fractures in terms of identity, language and national identification.

Keywords

Post-Soviet, Postcoloniality, Russophone Culture, Latvia.

Author

Michela Romano is a Postgraduate student at the University of Bologna currently working on Eastern European and Postcolonial studies. Born in Parma (Italy), she attended her Bachelor studies in foreign languages and literatures (English and Russian) at the University of Bologna, graduated in 2019 in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe (MIREES, University of Bologna). She collected academic experiences such as conferences, Erasmus and research periods in Edinburgh, Kaunas (Lithuania), Riga (Latvia), Estonia (Tartu and Narva) and Russia (St. Petersburg). Her research interests focus on Russophone identities and cultures, Baltic studies, Postcolonial and post-Soviet studies and cultures.

♢ ISSN 1723-4042 ♢