

LATVIA: Majority language pushed in schools, leaving parents miffed

Teachers in the Baltic country's bilingual schools are transitioning into teaching mostly in Latvian. Critics worry that the reform will come at the detriment of minority students – mainly ethnic Russians.

By Daiva Repeckaite

DW (08.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2wUPjoM> – Words in various languages adorn the stairs of Riga's secondary school No. 34. Inga Sokolova, the school's deputy headmaster, greets a colleague in a classroom with Latin and Cyrillic alphabets on the walls, and the two exchange jokes about coming to work even during the summer break. Both project an image of a happy multilingual community, where recent Chinese immigrants and traditional minorities study side by side. Yet for over a decade now, there has been uncertainty about whether bilingual schools like this, which cater to the country's large Russian-speaking minority can survive the latest attempt to 'Latvianize' them.

By the 2020/2021 school year, the government wants all 16- to 18-year-olds to study in Latvian only – except subjects related to minority languages and heritage. Currently minority schools have the option of teaching only 60 percent in the national language. Grades seven to nine will also see an increase in the amount of teaching in Latvian.

Proponents say the changes will boost integration. Critics respond that schools will struggle to recruit teachers. The government promises €3.3 million (\$3.82 million) from EU structural funds to have at least 2,700 teachers improve their language skills, but its critics question why the government seems hellbent on dismantling something that works. In November, Delfi.lv, a Baltic news site, wrote that as many as 8,000 teachers would need to improve their Latvian. Several protests have taken place, and the Constitutional Court is scrutinizing the reform.

Parallel school systems

Over a quarter of pupils in Latvia speak another language at home, usually Russian. Sokolova says the school administration has repeatedly met with parents to reassure them. "It's not like a child will be left alone with a strange book, not knowing which side to open it from," she asserts. According to the education ministry, of the 94 state-funded minority schools, over 41 percent teach half of their curriculum in Latvian, whereas other schools mix and match the languages.

After World War II, Latvia became part of the Soviet Union, which meant that Latvians could study in their native language, but a parallel Russian-language education developed for incoming Russians and other Soviet residents, absorbing pre-war minority schools. In 1991 independent Latvia viewed these "new" residents as colonizers and required them to take a Latvian language test to gain citizenship rather than granting it automatically. According to the latest data, 11 percent of the population does not have Latvian citizenship.

The dual education system was reformed in several stages, introducing more teaching in Latvian in 2004. When researchers in the UK and Norway compared Latvian school exam results between 2001 and 2010, they found “significant deterioration” in pupils’ performance in minority schools after the share of teaching in Latvian increased. It took five years for the results to return to pre-reform levels. In absolute terms, however, minority pupils continued outperforming their native-Latvian peers in some subjects.

The reform “will expand opportunities for young people in vocational and higher education, where learning takes place in the Latvian language, as well as increase their competitiveness in the labor market,” according to Gunta Araja, head of policy initiatives and development at the education ministry.

Armen Khalatyan, whose son is in secondary school, is not convinced. He often takes to a Facebook group of Russian-speaking parents to voice his opposition to the reform. He believes it is not about integration, but rather about disconnecting Latvian-born Russian-speaking children from their heritage. “Most of them [Russian-speakers] were born in this country,” he says, one of a choir of critics who cite the results of graduation exams to prove their point: Native Russian speakers do just fine.

Minority as the majority

In the former industrial town of Daugavpils, a group of teenagers hang out by the picturesque river Daugava. One of their friends has already left for Riga, but the others have

no interest in the capital, which it is far bigger, busier – and effectively bilingual. Here in their hometown, 89 percent of residents speak Russian at home.

Daugavpils is in the fast-shrinking eastern province of Latgale, but it is home to a university, a new arts center, numerous lakes and green spaces, and bustling cafes, where Russian is nearly the only language one hears spoken. Statistically it's the least ethnic Latvian city, and one in six does not have Latvian citizenship.

The youngsters cheerfully share their experience learning Latvian, which they have succeeded at to varying degrees. One of them, who studies at the local art school, says that while all classes are in Latvian, finding information online for homework and personal projects is much easier in Russian.

'Shaming teachers'

Andrejs Zaichenko, a chemistry teacher, has been busy attending seminars for teachers to comply with the novelties of the reform. His is a minority school, and his pupils, like him, speak Russian at home. Fortunately for him, comfort in delivering his classes in Latvian is not an issue, but he still has doubts.

"[A teacher's] work will only be judged according to two parameters: Firstly, your pupils' exam results; secondly, the competitions they have taken part in," he says.

Educators like Zaichenko worry that science-inclined pupils tend to struggle with languages, and the shift may alienate them from science as well. "If a pupil asks me to explain something in Russian because he didn't understand it in Latvian, should I fulfill my duty to explain my subject, or should I behave according to the law and say, 'Sorry, I won't explain it to you in Russian. Go and read some books'," Zaichenko worries.

In June, a bilingual school received a warning from the State Language Center for conducting an event in Russian during a random inspection of 16 schools. This sent a ripple of concern across bilingual schools.

"Shaming teachers for the [approaches] they use begs the question what goal the government wants to achieve – to increase the level of education or to make everyone speak Latvian," Zaichenko says. Both of those goals could be achieved another way, he adds: "I check the scientific facts and a Latvian teacher checks the quality of writing. This is where we need a reform: promoting cooperation among teachers. But there are not enough incentives for it – on top of all the work we do daily."

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MYANMAR: Russian tourist who wore shoes inside Bagan pagodas refuses to pay K500,000 fine, gets one-month jail sentence

By Coconuts Yangon

Coconuts.Co (03.08.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2uqiVHj> – A tourist who was arrested for wearing shoes inside several Bagan pagodas has been sentenced to a month in jail.

Authorities say that the tourist, a Russian national, was given multiple warnings to take off her shoes but refused to comply.

Finally, locals went to the Nyaung-U police station and filed a case against the woman under Section 295 of the Penal Code for intentionally causing religious insult. Under the charge, the defendant faced a jail sentence of up to two years and/or a monetary fine.

“For days, she was walking around pagodas with her shoes on.... She would be given warnings and sent back to her hotel, but

she kept returning and still wearing shoes on the pagodas. The locals couldn't stand it anymore, which is why they opened a case against her under Section 295," First Lieutenant Myo Nyunt of the Tourist Police Force told *Eleven*.

On August 1, the woman was ordered to pay a fine of MMK500,000. When she failed to do so, the judge handed down a one-month jail sentence.

In addition to the religious insult charge, the defendant is now also being tried under Section 13(1) of the Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act for violating visa regulations.

Last October, a Dutch tourist was found guilty under a similar religious insult charge after he unplugged a speaker at a Buddhist dharma sermon taking place at a religious hall in Mandalay. Although he was sentenced to three months in jail, he managed to avoid an additional six-month sentence by paying a K100,000 fine.

We're not lawyers, but we feel like someone should've also advised the Russian tourist that US\$370 is a small price to pay to avoid a month in a Myanmar prison.

Correction: An earlier version of this story stated that the tourist in question was a man. The defendant is a woman. We apologize for the error.

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Russia: Anti-evangelism law hits Russian protestants

Three Baptists in Orel province fined on the basis of “Yarovaya Law”

Orlovskie Novosti (13.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2m3xilS> – The Uritsky district court of Orel province on 10 March sentenced three representatives of the Evangelical Christians Baptists to a fine for violation of the law on missionary activity. Orlovskie Novosti learned about this from its own sources.

According to the decision, each of the Baptists who appeared before the court on article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law (Violation of legislation on freedom of conscience and freedom of religious confession and on religious associations) was fined 5,000 rubles.

The court found the Baptists guilty of illegally engaging in the distribution of religious literature and inviting people to their religious meetings, while they had not notified the Russian Ministry of Justice about the start of the activity of the religious organization, as the law requires.

In July 2016, in Russia, a package of “anti-terrorism amendments” was adopted, which had been proposed by deputy Irina Yarovaya and senator Viktor Ozerov. Among other amendments, an amendment about missionary activity was introduced into the law. Thus, point 4 of article 5.26 of the

Code of Administrative Violations of Law provides for a penalty in the form of an administrative fine for citizens of from 5,000 to 50,000 rubles and a fine of from 100,000 to one million rubles for legal entities.

The first decision based on the "Yarovaya Law" was issued on 30 September 2016 by a court in Orel, which sentenced an American Baptist missionary, Donald Ossewaard, to a fine of 40,000 rubles. The American did not succeed in challenging the fine in the Russian Supreme Court and then he announced that he intended to leave Russia after 14 years of residence in the country. (tr. by PDS, posted 14 March 2017)

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RUSSIA: Saransk Jehovah's Witnesses lose in Supreme

Court of Mordovia

Press Service of the Supreme Court of Republic of Mordovia (15.02.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2l2Dshf> – By a decision of the Supreme Court of the republic of Mordovia, the ruling of the Lenin district court of the city of Saransk of 6 December 2016 was left without change, by which the local religious organization of Saransk Jehovah's Witnesses was found guilty of committing an administrative violation of law under article 20.29 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law of the RF—possession for purposes of mass distribution of extremist materials included in the published Federal List of Extremist Materials.

The administrative violation of law was committed under the following circumstances.

On 13 October 2016, during the conduct of operational search activities in the premises of the local religious organization of Saransk Jehovah's Witnesses, located on Titov Street of the city of Saransk, there was discovered and confiscated literature that was stored there—"How to develop close relations with God," and "Watch. In what respect? Why is it now that this especially important?"—which by decision of the Salsk city court of Rostov province of 27 June 2011, by the appellate determination of the Rostov provincial court of 13 October 2011, and also by the appellate determination of the legal college for civil affairs of the Kurgansk provincial court of 5 August 2014, was ruled to be prohibited for use and was entered by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian federation into the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

On the basis of this incident, a protocol of administrative violation of law with respect to the religious organization was drawn up.

By order of the Lenin district court of the city of Saransk, the religious organization of the Saransk Jehovah's Witnesses is held administratively accountable, with the assessment of an administrative fine of 150,000 rubles. (tr. by PDS, posted 19 February 2017)

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RUSSIA: Attempt to deport chief Rabbi of Sochi from Russian Federation

Interfax.ru (06.02.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2k6w4Ax> – Deportation threatens the chief rabbi of Sochi, Ari Edelkopf.

As he reported on his page in a social network, the basis is subpoint 1 of point 1 of article 7 of the law "On the legal status of foreign citizens in Russia" (advocacy for violent change in the foundations of the constitutional structure of Russia or creation by other actions of threats to the security of the RF or its citizens).

"That is, by our actions we are creating a threat to the security of the Russian federation. This is a difficult trial from above. But I trust the Almighty and I am sure that, with God's help, everything will be fine," the rabbi wrote.

He did not explain what he is specifically charged with and what it is for.

In his turn, the head of the Department of Public Relation of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia [FEOR], Borukh Gorin, commenting on the situation, declared that in his 16 years of residence in Sochi, Edelkopf has been interested in only one thing—to make it possible for Sochi Jews "to live a full-fledged Jewish life," and when the Olympiad was held in Sochi in 2014 "hundreds of Jews—athletes and tourists—were able to pray and get kosher food thanks to the Jewish community."

"The accusation of Rabbi Edelkopf, like the recent accusation of the rabbi of the Moscow congregation of Among One's Own, Joseph Khersonsky, of violation of migration legislation obviously has one common basis—the desire of overly zealous officials to get new 'stars' for displaying vigor in removing alleged 'violations of law' taking place," Gorin noted, who was quoted by the press service of FEOR on Monday.

After emphasizing that such decisions "disorient the Jewish community and evoke serious concern for the future of Jewish congregations in the country," he expressed the hope that, just as in the case of Khersonsky, "this misunderstanding will be cleared up."

In turn, members of the Sochi Jewish community consider the deportation of Edelkopf and his family from Russia to be illegal.

“Members of the Jewish community . . . of the city of Sochi ask President Putin to render personal assistance and annul the decision of the police of Kuban cancelling the permission for temporary residence, given earlier to the rabbi and his family and also to provide the possibility for Edelkopf to continue his work,” the chairman of the Sochi Jewish congregation, David Kosnevich told the Interfax news agency on Monday.

In 2003, a rabbi from Rostov-on-Don, Eliashiv Kaplun, and Rabbi Chaim Friedman, were deported from Russia. In 2009, the rabbi of the Primore territory, Isroel Zilbershtein, and rabbi of Stavropol territory, Tsvi Kherskvich; and in 2013, the rector of the International Jewish Institute of Economics, Finance, and Law, Rabbi Alexander Feigin; and in 2014, Rabbi of Tula, Zeev Wagner; and an attempt was made to deport Omsk Rabbi Osher Krichevsky. On 27 January 2017, the rabbi of the Moscow Among One’s Own congregation, J. Khersonsky, was arrested on a charge of violating the migration legislation. However a trial conducted on 30 January removed all accusations from him. (tr. by PDS, posted 6 February 2017)

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