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Migration of Russian speakers from the Baltic countries to Ireland:
role of ethnic politics and identity

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Abstract

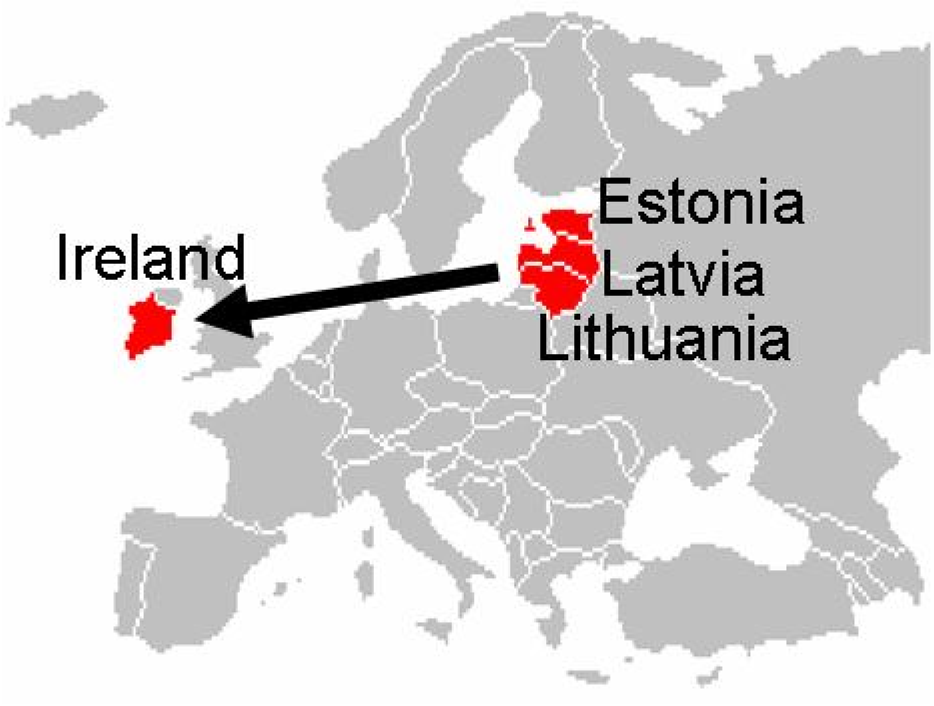
In recent years, Ireland has attracted tens of thousands of migrants from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, many of whom are members of large Russian-speaking minorities in the sending countries. This paper draws on interviews with Russian speakers who have migrated from the Baltic countries to Ireland in order to examine their contexts of exit, as well as some aspects of their adaptation to life in Ireland. For Russian-speaking migrants from Estonia, one of the primary motivations for emigrating is social stratification along ethnic lines and a sense of marginalization. Although Latvia's language and citizenship policies are similarly restrictive, differences in the nature of ethnic relations and stratification help explain why migration to Ireland is motivated by economic factors more than alienation. Russian-speaking migrants from Lithuania, with its more generous minority policies and smaller minority population, also tend to cite higher wages and better employment opportunities in Ireland as their reason for migration. Nevertheless, minority status played a role in the migration of Russian speakers from all three Baltic countries. There is evidence that given ample experience as the 'other', these migrants may be especially adapted to lives as cultural and linguistic minorities and may be less likely to return.

Key words: international migration, Ireland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russian minority

In the last five years, the Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – have become a major source of migrants to Ireland. This migration stream includes members of the large Russian-speaking minorities, whose decisions to migrate to Ireland and experiences of adaptation there are explored in this paper using a recent set of in-depth interviews conducted in Dublin. A full account of international migration from the Baltic countries to Ireland must consider the social, economic, and political situation of the minority populations and sending state policies towards these minorities. I argue that for Russian-speaking migrants from Estonia, one of the primary motivations for emigrating is social stratification along ethnic lines and a sense of marginalization in Estonia. For Russian speakers from Latvia, which is similar to Estonia in the harshness of its minority policies but different in terms of the nature of ethnic relations and stratification, migration to Ireland is motivated less urgently by alienation than by economic factors. The same is true of Russian speakers from Lithuania, the Baltic state with the most generous minority policies and the smallest minority population. Despite differences in motivations, however, most Russian-speaking migrants from the Baltic countries felt that they did not belong in their sending country, Russia, or any other country. I argue that the experience of feeling estranged or marginalised in the sending country structures the adaptation of migrants in the receiving country.

I start by reviewing the social, political, and economic setting of the receiving country. Following a summary of the Irish context, I address the particulars of minority situations in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Although the data was collected in Ireland, this background is needed to fully understand the trajectories of this group of migrants.

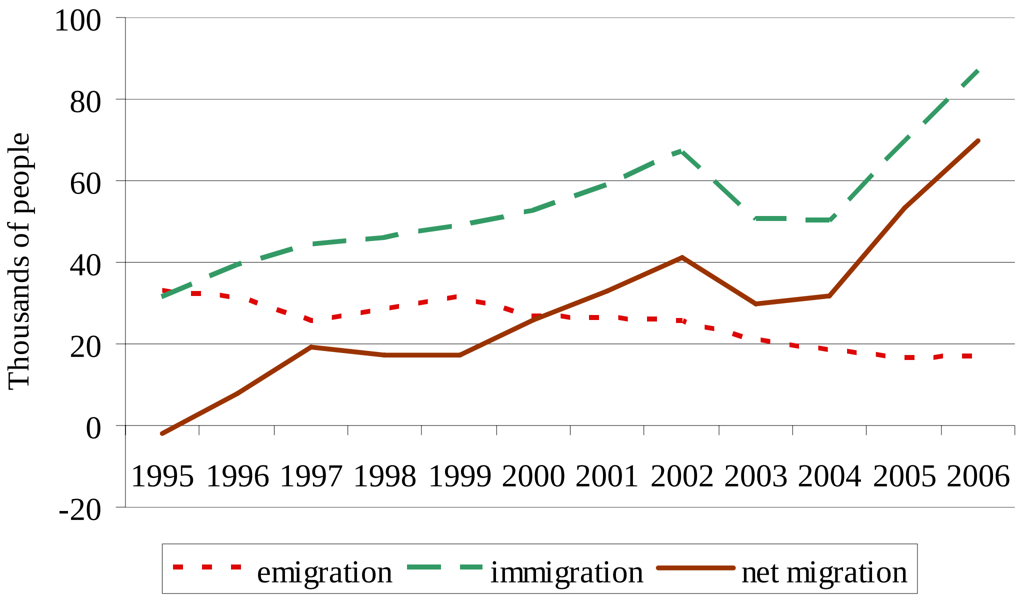
Figure 1.



Migration to Ireland

In the late 1990s, Ireland experienced tremendous economic growth after a decades-long period of stagnation. The 'Celtic Tiger' phenomenon continues and coincides with a historical turnaround in the migration flow (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001; 2006). Ireland has long been a country of emigration and thousands of Irish citizens continue to emigrate each year, although at lower rates than before. What is new is that immigration to Ireland has overtaken emigration, as Ireland has become a magnet for migrants from southern and eastern Europe and beyond. (see Figure 2) At the same time, a significant number of Irish living abroad return to their newly prosperous homeland. Foreign-born individuals accounted for six per cent of the population in 1991 and ten per cent in 2002. At the time of the 2006 Census, 15 per cent of the Ireland's four million residents were foreign-born, with about five per cent returning Irish (Central Statistics Office, Ireland 2007). Migrants fill positions in a rapidly expanding labor market and the Irish unemployment rate remains one of the lowest in the EU at around four per cent (Central Statistics Office, Ireland 2007, Quinn 2006).

Figure 2. Emigration, Immigration, and Net Migration, 1995-2006



Source: CSO Annual Population and Migration Estimates
http://www.eirestat.cso.ie/diska/PECA.csv

Table 1 displays information on the source countries for Irish immigrants using the latest Census data. According to the 2006 Census, the largest sender of migrants to Ireland is the United Kingdom; some of these migrants are second-generation Irish and others are native British. People born in Poland comprised the second largest group of foreign-born in Ireland. Migrants from the United States, including many second and third generation Irish, comprised the third largest group by birthplace. Lithuania and

Latvia – two of the Baltic countries examined in this paper – follow with 25 and 14 thousand people, respectively. This is a remarkable fact considering that the population of Lithuania is only 3.4 million and that of Latvia is 2.3 million, compared with Poland's 38 million. There are relatively few migrants born in the small nation of Estonia.

Table 1. Irish residents by birthplace[1] and population size of sending countries, 2006

Birthplace	In Ireland: Thousands	In Ireland: % of Total Population	Population in Sending Country (Thousands)
Ireland	3,559.4	85.3	--
Outside Ireland	612.6	14.7	--
EU25	438.5	10.5	463,523
Great Britain	221.6	5.3	58,124
Poland	63.1	1.5	38,157
Northern Ireland	50.2	1.2	1,710
Lithuania	**24.8**	**0.6**	**3,403**
Latvia	**14.0**	**0.3**	**2,294**
Germany	11.8	0.3	82,438
France	9.3	0.2	62,886
Slovakia	8.2	0.2	5,389
Spain	6.2	0.2	43,758
Italy	5.8	0.1	58,751
Czech Republic	5.2	0.1	10,251
Netherlands	4.3	0.1	16,334
Hungary	3.3	0.1	10,076
Estonia	**2.4**	**0.1**	**1,344**
USA	25.2	0.6	298,444
Other countries	149.0	3.6	--
Total	4,172.0	100.0	--

Sources: Central Statistics Office Ireland, Census 2006, Eurostat, UK National Statistics, and U.S. Census Bureau

It is important to note that Census data are likely to reflect an undercount of migrants. Migrants may be reluctant to fill out census forms for several reasons. While citizens of the Baltic countries hold European Union passports, my fieldwork revealed that many have illegal arrangements with their employers, which might make them apprehensive about contact with government agencies. Moreover, as I show below, the Baltic countries are home to large non-citizen populations; if these stateless individuals migrate to Ireland, they are most likely to be undocumented and reluctant to fill out Census forms. On the other hand, the latest Irish Census was available in Russian, Latvian, and Lithuanian, which likely diminished underreporting of migrants from the Baltic countries. Still, it is likely that the Census data underestimate the number of migrants currently living in Ireland.

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[1] I present data on birthplace. 2006 Census data on nationality is very similar.

Some of the evidence for the undercount comes from data on PPS numbers issued to migrant workers. These numbers are similar to Social Security numbers in the United States and are required for legal employment. From May 2004 to April 2007, Ireland issued about 50 thousand PPS numbers to Lithuanians, 25 thousand to Latvians, and five thousand to Estonians (Department of Social and Family Affairs, Ireland 2007). Without even taking into account migrants who do not get PPS numbers because they work illegally or do not work at all (including children, elderly, and homemakers), these numbers exceed the census count. While some of the discrepancy is due to the fact that many migrant work in Ireland for a period of time and then return to the Baltic countries, estimates by Baltic embassies in Ireland indicate undercounts as well. For example, the Latvian embassy estimated that there were over 30 thousand Latvian nationals in Ireland around the same time as the Census reported only 14 thousand (National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism and Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2006). A labor organiser placed the number of Lithuanians at 100 thousand (Holmquist 2006).

Whatever the exact numbers, it is clear that the Baltic countries, in particular Lithuania and Latvia, are major sources of migrants to Ireland.

Immigration Policies

Until a few years ago, Ireland had a relatively liberal immigration policy, with no quotas on work permits or work visas. Many citizens of the Baltic countries migrated to Ireland on work permits that were issued to their employers and which employers could renew on a yearly basis. Skilled workers, such as computer programmers and doctors, were granted work visas that were not tied to particular employers. All children born in Ireland were granted Irish citizenship and their parents were granted residence until 2004, when a new act established stringent conditions on the citizenship rights of Irish-born children of foreign nationals. When the European Union expanded in May of 2004, Ireland (along with Sweden and the UK) allowed nationals of the accession countries unlimited access to its labor market. As a consequence, the total number of work permits issued declined rapidly (Quinn 2006). Citizens of the newest accession countries, Bulgaria and Romania, have not been granted the right of free movement by the Irish government and have to apply for work permits (Lyall 2006).

Sending countries: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

Although the focus of this paper is on Russian-speaking migrants in Ireland, this migration stream cannot be fully understood without a review of the sending country contexts. What follows is a brief overview of the social, political, and economic situations of Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic region. After the Soviet Union annexed the Baltic countries during World War II, it deported tens of thousands of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians and brought in hundreds of thousands of Soviet workers to operate its industrial projects (Mettam and Williams 2001). Most of these blue collar workers were ethnically Russian, with a much smaller number of Ukrainians, Belorussians, Tatars, and Jews. As Soviet citizens, the migrants spoke the Soviet lingua franca, Russian, and lived in isolation from native communities (Laitin 1998, Pavelson and Luuk 2002).

Upon assuming independence in the early 1990s, the Baltic countries launched nationalizing projects (Brubaker 1996). The Russian speakers suddenly found their position inverted: from the ideologically superior embodiments of Soviet workers – at home and in the lead anywhere in the Union – to minorities in new nationalizing countries (Arutyunyan 2003, Kronenfeld 2005, Pavelson and Luuk 2002). To protect this new diaspora, the Russian Federation extended the right of return to all Russians in the near abroad[2]. However, only around a tenth of the Russian-speaking population left the relatively prosperous Baltic countries; many of the returnees were members of the Soviet military who were not allowed to stay (Arutyunan 2003, Vishnevsky 2003).

The Russian Federation maintains interest in the fate of Russians in the Baltic countries, with periodic clashes centering on questions of human rights and conflicting interpretations of history, as in a recent confrontation over a WWII memorial in Estonia’s capital, Tallinn (Myers 2007). Nevertheless, there is evidence that Russian speakers in the Baltic countries struggle with issues of identity, feeling different from Russians from Russia but not yet belonging in their countries of residence (Arutyunyan 2003, Laitin 1998). They are far from assimilating and remain among the largest minority populations in the expanded European Union (Hughes 2005). (See Table 2.) What follows is a more detailed treatment of each Baltic country and its Russian-speaking population.

Table 2. Size and citizenship status of minority populations in the Baltic countries.

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Total population	1.3 million	2.3 million	3.5 million
Non-titular* ethnicity	440,000	939,000	577,000
citizens	173,000	485,000	n/a
non-citizens**	266,000	454,000	n/a
stateless***	165,000	n/a	n/a

**Non-titular=those not belonging to the indigenous ethnic group of the country that gives the country its name, includes ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Tatars, Jews, and others*
***Non-citizens include those who are citizens of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus or are stateless*
**** Stateless=people who are not citizens of any country, usually holders of old Soviet passports*
Sources: Statistics Estonia, Population Census 2000, www.stat.ee; The Naturalization Board of the Republic of Latvia 2006, www.np.gov.lv; Statistics Lithuania, Population Census 2001, www.stat.gov.lt

Estonia

Estonia is a small nation with a large predominantly Russian and Russian-speaking minority. Only 40 per cent of non-titulars are citizens of Estonia, 20 per cent are citizens of Russia (mostly those over age 40) and the vast majority of the rest are stateless (Statistics Estonia 2000). Estonia is a strict adherent to neoliberal economics and is the most economically prosperous of the Baltic countries (Simonian 2003, Van Meurs 2003). Rapid economic growth is coupled with very high levels of social inequality (Lauristin and Heidmets 2002) and geographically uneven development, with heavily Russian areas in the northeast experiencing extremely high unemployment rates following the collapse of Soviet industry. The same region is also culturally and socially segregated from the rest of Estonia (Van Meurs 2003). Economic disadvantage, in general, is concentrated among the Russian speakers, who were hit the hardest during the economic transformation in the 1990s (Mettam and Williams 2001, Pevelson and Luuk 2002, Saar and Kaziulia 2006, Van Meurs 2003).

Upon independence, Estonia asserted state continuation from pre-Soviet era, which put Russian-speaking minorities in the position of foreigners at best and occupiers or colonisers at worst (Hughes 2005). Estonia’s Central Decolonization Initiative included negotiations with Canada and Argentina to accept the minority population as immigrants (Laitin 1998). The policy of ‘voluntary repatriation’ was supplemented by de facto restriction of citizenship to ethnic Estonians (Hughes 2005), leading to a state of uncertainty that characterised the lives of the Russian speakers: the periodically mandated renewal of their residency permits was not guaranteed, and requirements for citizenship were in constant flux. After EU intervention, Estonia eased the naturalization process somewhat in the late 1990s, especially for children. Nevertheless, language, income, and residency requirements make the naturalization process so daunting that Hughes (2005) estimates it will take 60 years to naturalise all non-citizen residents of Estonia at current rates. Meanwhile, political, social, and economic rights of non-citizens are limited when it comes to voting and holding office, employment, property ownership, and residential movement (Hughes 2005, Van Meurs 2003).

Language served to delineate group boundaries during the Soviet period and continues to do so now, exacerbating ethnic stratification. Proficiency in Estonian is required for holding local office and for obtaining government jobs even in overwhelmingly Russian-speaking areas (Saar and Kaziulia 2006). There are separate school systems with little overlap (Hughes 2005). Funding for language instruction is limited and Russian speakers living in Russian enclaves have limited possibilities for learning Estonian (Hughes 2005, Laitin 1998, Saar and Kaziulia 2006). Since Estonia's accession to the EU in 2004, many Russian speakers there place more importance on learning English (Vihalemm 2002). Intermarriage rates between ethnic Estonians and other groups are low (Arutyunyan 2003). In a multi-national study of attitudes toward minority rights in Eastern Europe, Evans and Need (2002) found that Estonia had the highest levels of ethnic polarization on these attitudes out of 13 Eastern European countries.

Latvia

There are strong parallels between the situation of Russian speakers in Latvia and Estonia, but some notable differences as well. Latvia also has extremely restrictive citizenship and language policies (Leyshkalne 2005). In a country of 2.3 million, 41 per cent are not ethnic Latvians and half of this large minority group are non-citizens (Naturalization Board of the Republic of Latvia 2006). Restrictions on voting by non-citizens and enforcement of Latvian instruction in schools are even more severe than in Estonia, and naturalization rates are low (Dorodnova 2003, Hughes 2005, Laitin 1998).

Like Estonia, Latvia also has a heavily Russian region, now economically moribund. Unlike in Estonia, however, there is a long history of Russians living in Latvia (Monden and Smits 2005), and economic inequality is perceived in geographical rather than ethnic terms (Van Meurs 2003). There is more integration than in Estonia at the neighborhood and county levels (Apine 2006, Kronenfeld 2005, Laitin 1998). Although there is tension and conflict over language in education as the Latvian government pushes instruction in Latvian (Leyshkalne 2005), Russian speakers are not mobilizing around nationalistic themes in response (Dorodnova 2003).

Perhaps the most poignant evidence that personal level interactions between Russian speakers and Latvians are not hostile even if there may be confrontation and exclusion at the state level[3] (Alpine 2006, Leyshkalne 2005) is the extremely high rate of intermarriages – rates that were already high during the Soviet period and grew following independence. Today, a full quarter of Russian women living in Latvia marry Latvian men (Monden and Smits 2005).

Lithuania

Lithuania is unlike the other two Baltic countries in that it has a much smaller Russian-speaking population, and extended citizenship to all residents upon independence (Kasatkina 2004, Van Meurs 2003). Lithuania has a long history of being a powerful independent nation (Simonian 2003) and through fierce resistance was able to retain ethnic homogeneity during the Soviet era (Budryte 2003). The Poles are actually the largest minority in Lithuania, at 6.7 per cent of the total population. Ethnic Russians comprise 6.3 per cent of the total but Russian-speakers outnumber the Poles because they include predominantly Russian-speaking Belorussians, Ukrainians, Jews, and Tatars (eight per cent of the total population cite Russian as mother tongue (Statistics Lithuania 2001)). Members of the Russian minority are more evenly distributed across rural and urban areas and across economic sectors than in Estonia and Latvia (Kasatkina 2004, Van Meurs 2003). However, like in other Baltic countries, fluency in the dominant language is problematic for Russian-speakers and leads to some degree of social and economic instability (Kasatkina 2004).

As the above descriptions show, Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic countries face various degrees of difficulty in terms of social, economic, and political integration. The exit options of Russian speakers in the Baltic countries have until recently been dismissed because only the Russian Federation was considered as a possible destination. After the accession of the Baltic countries to the EU, it became clear that Russian speakers would be more likely to leave for Western Europe rather than their historical homelands. In a recent paper, Hughes (2005) predicted that given the discriminatory regimes in Estonia and Latvia, there is potential for massive emigration of Russian speakers. There is some evidence that Russian-speaking minorities are emigrating west at higher rates than titular nationalities (Rumpite 2007). The exit option is only available to Russian speakers who are citizens of the Baltic countries, which leaves out large numbers of Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia who hold residency permits only. Nevertheless, the age distribution of citizens among Russian speakers is heavily skewed towards the younger ages, which means that those who are of the ages most likely to migrate are able to do so through legal means.

In this paper, I focus on the experiences of Russian-speaking migrants from the Baltic countries who have already migrated to Ireland. While it would have been preferable to survey the sending communities and follow migrants who moved to Ireland, I believe that the selective sample of migrants used here can nevertheless shed light on the factors affecting migration of Russian-speakers from the Baltic countries. How did their position as ethnic minorities in the sending countries influence their decision to migrate to Ireland? How does it shape their experience of migration, their adaptation to living in Ireland, and their relationships with other immigrant groups as well as the Irish?

Migration and adaptation of ethnic minority groups

Migration of Russian speakers from the Baltic countries to Ireland provides an opportunity to revisit theories of migration with an eye on fleshing out the role of sending state policies and structural positions of ethnic minorities. While no longer directly promoting emigration of Russian-speaking minorities, government policies of the Baltic countries, to various degrees, limit social, political, and economic rights of these groups in a way that makes emigration a more attractive option. In other words, the sending countries create additional push factors for an ethnically defined subsection of their population.

Estonia and Latvia have several conditions in common that would indicate higher levels of discrimination than in Lithuania: larger minority populations, restrictions on minority voting, hostility towards Russia as an ally of the minority, and an ideology that justifies the system as natural and inevitable (Blalock 1967). Estonia and Latvia also have similarly restrictive policies on minority rights in general. At the same time, the history and context of interethnic relations in a given country qualifies the impact of these policies towards minorities on emigration decisions of members of these groups[4]. Low levels of contact and intermarriage between the minority and majority group, coupled with restrictive citizenship and language laws, may result in emigration that is motivated by a sense of marginalization and real or perceived experience of discrimination.

Similarly, restrictive laws combined with high levels of contact and intermarriage between the groups may lead to a much less acute sense of being the 'other' (Allport 1954), with economic factors predominating as rationale for emigration for members of the minority and majority groups alike.

Social stratification along ethnic lines is another aspect of the process. If social stratification occurs along ethnic boundaries – and the perception of this may be exacerbated by low levels of contact and geographical isolation – members of the minority group will be more likely to frame their emigration decisions as exit from a discriminatory regime. On the other hand, social stratification that is less coterminous with ethnic divisions – or perceived to be less so due to high levels of contact – may lead to emphasis on economic and other motivations for emigration. Table 3 presents these relationships.

Table 3.

	Restrictive laws		Contact and intermarriage	Stratification along ethnic lines	Migration motivated by minority status, marginalization
	citizenship	language			
Estonia	yes	yes	Low	high	yes
Latvia	yes	yes	med/high	med/low	no
Lithuania	no	yes	med/high	med/low	no

Once members of the minority group migrate, their adaptation to the receiving society is affected by their experiences as minorities in the sending society. Members of minority groups in nationalizing countries that frame minorities as foreigners (Brubaker 1996) may be accustomed to feeling like cultural 'others' and being treated as such in the sending country. The experiences of minorities in the sending countries may have some parallels with their experiences upon arrival to the receiving country. In the case of the Baltic countries, many Russian-speaking migrants arrive to Ireland having had to negotiate contact with authorities or even store clerks in a language they barely speak. Many have lived in countries where their political rights were limited because they were not descended from the ethnic group that gave their country its name (titular nationalities).

How does this type of ‘preparation’ for being an immigrant affect the adaptation of members of minority groups? From one perspective, if an individual feels like a foreigner both in the sending and receiving country, it may make return migration less likely. In the Baltic case, Hughes (2005) predicts that ‘an ethnic minority that out-migrates because of opposition to a discriminatory ethnic hegemony, from a state where they have weak historical roots, and where they are not wanted by the majority, are not likely to return if they can find better prospects elsewhere, even if discrimination stops’ (742-743). In addition, continuing migration to yet other destinations may become more common for these relatively rootless populations.

Aside from having different probabilities of return migration and stepping stone migration, members of minority groups without a clear homeland may have a unique set of issues when it comes to identity development in their new country of residence. Their experience in cultural preservation in the sending country may translate to the new context and make it more likely that they hold on to their language and cultural traits. On the other hand, they may assimilate more quickly and develop new identities because they cannot draw on a clearly defined base for culture and language. In any case, members of ethnic minority groups are a special type of migrant whose adaptation processes bear unique characteristics.

Data and Methods

Russian-speaking migrants from the Baltic countries have a strong presence in Ireland. This paper draws on a sample of 57 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2006, primarily in Dublin. Respondents were recruited through advertisements in ethnic newspapers, stores, and through snowball methods. The paper draws primarily on a sub-sample of 26 Russian-speaking respondents from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, supplemented by interviews with ethnic Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, as well as with Russians from Russia and other Russian-speaking migrants from the countries of the near abroad (31 total). The focus on Russian-speaking migrants rather than a more balanced comparison between this group and titular nationalities serves to minimise a selection limitation of the dataset: the study was conducted and advertised in Russian and English, not Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian, and likely attracted members of titular nationalities who held more tolerant attitudes toward Russians.

The Russian-speaking subset of the sample ranged from 18 to 58 in age, with the median age of 27, and was almost evenly split in gender. Most migrants arrived after their countries joined the EU; however, some migrated as long as six years ago. Four respondents were unemployed and two were homemakers. One respondent was a single mother living on welfare benefits. The majority of those who held jobs worked in the service industry (wait staff, cleaners), construction, and manufacturing (furniture, pharmaceuticals). The rest had a variety of relatively low-paid white collar jobs. Slightly less than half of the sample were married or partnered; five respondents were living in Ireland with their young children and three others had left their children in the sending country. Despite the youth of the sample, fifteen respondents progressed beyond secondary school in education, with the majority of these completing some years of college.

All interviews with the sub-sample of 26 Baltic Russian-speakers were conducted in Russian. Half of the respondents did not speak the official languages of their sending countries, a quarter was fluent, and the rest described their proficiency as average. All considered Russian to be their native language. Not all were ethnically Russian, however: one respondent was Ukrainian, one was Tatar, and one was half Tatar and half Polish. Finally, there was a respondent who had a Latvian father and a Belorussian mother but considered herself Russian and favored Russian in conversation. Three quarters of the respondents were born in the Baltic countries and many of these had parents who were also born there. Five respondents were born in Russia or Ukraine and were brought to the Baltic republics by their parents at very young ages. Only one respondent – born in Kazakhstan – moved to the Baltic region as a young adult.

Decision to Migrate

In explaining their decisions to migrate, Russian-speaking migrants from the Baltic countries cited many economic reasons that are in line with the neoclassical economics and new economics of migration: higher wages, better chances of employment, high costs of university education, seasonal unemployment at home, and saving for a specific goal, such as starting a business (Massey et al. 1998). Migrants who had been in Ireland for a long time were often brought over by recruitment agencies. Most people knew someone already in Ireland who helped them with initial arrangements. The younger respondents often described a situation in their home communities where most people they knew had either worked abroad or were abroad at the time:

> Out of my generation, there are many who left. My friends and acquaintances, in some manner, have either been abroad or are abroad. (‘Liza’, 25, Russian Estonian)

The ease of migrating to Ireland before and after EU expansion was cited as a reason for migrating there as well, both in terms of entry policies and geographical distance. Most respondents did not think it was very likely that they would return home but they were not planning to stay in Ireland either. Many thought of Ireland as the first step in a migration trajectory that would eventually land them in a more desirable destination, such as Australia or Canada.

> Maybe for the last three years there [in Lithuania] we were thinking of moving. We were planning to go to New Zealand or Australia… Then our friends came from Ireland and said: Phew, for this little money and you are never home [the respondent’s husband was a long-haul truck driver], let’s go to Ireland, they pay us so much a week there. You are going to make the same in a week as you get here in a month… I still want to go to Australia. I still think we’ll use Ireland as a start. (‘Olga’, 32, Russian Lithuanian)

The youngest respondents (18-22) – 30 per cent of the sample – also cited desire to travel and see the world as part of their decision to come to Ireland.

Wanting higher wages or youthful wanderlust probably does not make Russian-speaking migrants particularly distinct from most other migrants who come to Ireland, particularly from the European Union. What makes them unique is that many also cite their situation as Russian speakers in the sending country as a major reason for leaving. One major issue is language because the vast majority of Russian speakers in the Soviet era never learned Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian. Now that the latter are official languages and are required in all three countries for a wide range of government functions and employment, many Russian speakers are disadvantaged in the political and economic sphere:

> *So it was hard to find work [in Estonia]?* – Yes, because of the language. It’s difficult to learn. I had a good school - although it was Russian… but that diploma means little in Estonia… If I go somewhere with this diploma and I don’t speak Estonian, they are going to say, so alright, you finished school, alright, you have good grades, and what are you going to do now? And if you look for work in Russian - you can’t imagine what type of work offered for Russians! Why do I need that? When here, I can be marketing manager. It’s just not for me. (‘Ira’, 21, Russian Estonian)

> When it comes to getting a job, of course, places like a bank, or something government or financial, of course, they will look at you. If there is a Latvian and a Russian, they will go for a Latvian. That exists. All the documents, of course, are in Latvian. Russian is only on government papers and there are problems with that. (‘Anya’, Russian Latvian, 34)

> What brought me here…. is opportunity to make money. To sell my labor. In Baltic countries, for Russian-speakers it’s problematic to find work. (‘Rashid’, 40, Tatar Lithuanian)

Higher education in the Russian language is severely limited in all three countries. Lacking fluency in the official language and/or feeling that one’s culture and language were marginalised were reasons for migrating most often cited by Russian-speaking Estonians:

> In Estonia you don’t have an opportunity to get higher education in Russian. And learning in Estonian, which is spoken by about one million people is absolutely crazy. (‘Denis’, 22, Russian Estonian)

> When I go to Estonia, I want to speak English. I don’t want to get ‘speak Estonian’ in response to every phrase I say…. It wasn’t really bad but I did not like it that much there. You understand, my appearance is not Estonian, in my blood, anyone can see that I am Russian. My problem was that I was too proud of that… To this day, you know, it’s unpleasant when you go to Estonia once a year to see your parents and… Better if I didn’t go. On the second day, I get nervous tics and want to go back. (‘Tamara’, 27, Russian Estonian)

> But I think first of all, what attracts is the salary. But also, in Estonia, the treatment of Russians is such - they don’t like Russians. They despise them… So it’s just uncomfortable for a Russian in Estonia. (‘Ilya’, 20, Russian Estonian)

The language situation, which contributes to feelings of estrangement from society and state in the sending countries, is exacerbated by the citizenship policies in Estonia and Latvia. Non-citizens, of course, are not able to leave the country through legal means. All of my respondents were citizens[5], but almost all of them had immediate family members who did not have an EU passport. The interviews revealed a sense of bitterness and confusion among Russian-speaking migrants regarding the citizenship policies.

> We are part of the EU. And we are citizens. Because there are also residents. For fifty years. Like my mom. My dad is a citizen and my mom is a resident. I am also a citizen. A non-citizen can have children that are citizens. (‘Anya’, 35, Russian Latvian)

> Everyone in my family is a citizen, except my mother. But she just can’t learn Latvian - 27-28 years in Latvia - she just can’t. So she can’t get citizenship either. (‘Alina’, 26, half-Latvian, half-Belorussian, Russian speaking, identifies as Russian)

Russian-speaking Estonians were the most likely out of the three groups of Russian-speaking migrants to refer to language and citizenship policies as push factors to migrate. They also cited many episodes from daily life in which they felt disrespected and oppressed by ethnic Estonians and they framed ethnic relations as a sharp division between us and them.

> I decided to stay here [in Ireland]. Absolutely for certain. Because Estonia is a country where I am not needed with the name like Ivanov. Especially with a name like that. And there is not a home, exactly. I only have my hometown but again, I was born in a country that no longer exists. (‘Denis’, 22, Russian Estonian)

> I was called an occupant even though I am part Estonian and I speak flawless Estonian. Doesn’t matter, Russian last name - goodbye… Many times it has been proven to me that here [in Ireland], our rights are respected. And at home you never had that. (‘Liza’, 25, Russian Estonian)

Russian-speaking Estonians often referred to the alienation they felt in Estonia as one of the reasons for migrating to Ireland. Russian-speaking Latvians and Lithuanians differed from Russian-speaking Estonians in that they were more likely to cite economic reasons – such as higher wages and factory layoffs – as primary in their decision to migrate. Russian-speakers from Latvia and Lithuania did talk of their feelings of estrangement but did not necessarily connect them directly to their decisions to migrate.

> We are almost Lithuanians but we are never going to be considered Lithuanian no matter how long we live there…. I did not know Russia. I knew it was my historical motherland but I did not think of it as home. When I went there it was the same as going to a foreign place. (‘Lena’, 32, Russian Lithuanian)

Russian-speaking immigrants from the Baltic countries experience a process of migration that is distinct from ethnic Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. The restrictive language and citizenship laws that result in structural disadvantages are cited by Russian speakers as a motivating factor in their decision to migrate. However, there is definite variation between the three countries. Russian speakers from Estonia who have migrated to Ireland emphasise alienation and marginalization as a major push factor while those from Latvia and Lithuania were as likely to speak of higher wages and better employment opportunities. But to some extent, minority status played a role in encouraging emigration of Russian speakers from all three Baltic countries.

Adaptation in Ireland

The ethnic politics of the Baltic countries does more than encourage migration of Russian speakers; it structures the way they experience migration and the way they adapt to life in Ireland. When asked about their adjustment in Ireland and their views on life there, some of my respondents, particularly the Russian-speaking Estonians, felt that they were well suited for migrant life because they have been treated like foreigners for most of their lives:

> I feel like home here. I don’t feel like I am abroad. Maybe because I am used to it because in Estonia, everything is in Estonian, not in your native language. I am used to that situation. Everything is English here, Estonian in Estonia. So I feel like I am at home here. (‘Ilya’, 20, Russian Estonian)

Some said that they preferred Ireland to Estonia because their rights were respected in Ireland and they were treated as human beings. Most of my respondents regularly visited their countries of origin, and many noted that these visits reinforced their belief that they made the right decision when they left.

> In Ireland there was always better, warmer attitude towards me compared to the country from which I came. I was always amazed by this… That is, you know, I never felt like I belonged in Estonia. For that reason, it seems that people who come from Russia, if I was leaving Russia, I think I would have a completely different attitude. Because I left Estonia, where we were Russians in Estonia and still are. But here [in Ireland], it’s purely… more comfortable. (‘Tamara’, 27, Russian Estonian)

Russian-speaking migrants from the Baltic countries encounter a curious situation in Ireland. Given their own history with emigration, the Irish are quite positive about immigrants, especially in comparison to other Europeans (Semyonov, Raijman and Gorodzeisky 2006), and they often ask the newcomers where they are from. The Russian-speakers report the frustration and confusion they experience when trying to explain who they are to their Irish coworkers and neighbors. They are uniformly ambivalent about calling themselves Estonians, Latvians, or Lithuanians but yet they are not Russian (or Ukrainian or Tatar) either. Some choose to self-identity as Russians, although that can sometimes come at the cost of being suspected of undocumented status, since legal avenues of migration are few for citizens of Russia:

> I thought about why not say I am Russian. Also probably because I don’t want to get that look. They look at you like they think that you are probably only here half legally. You came here to abuse the system. I am a little tired of that. You

> feel like right away at that moment saying that yes, everything is alright, you are legal. I didn’t come here to steal your money. (‘Liza’, 25, Russian Estonian)

> When people here ask me who I am, for a long time now I don’t say I am from Estonia. Because it’s difficult, almost impossible, to explain to them that I am Russian in Estonia with Estonian passport, with Russian parents, born in a country that no longer exists. Maybe because of that, because I am from Narva [overwhelmingly Russian city in the northeast of Estonia], I say I am from around St. Petersburg. That’s only 130 kilometers, that’s the easiest. At that point all the questions disappear and they start asking about mafia and about Siberia. (‘Denis’, 22, Russian Estonian)

Others go through the pains of explaining how one can be both Russian (or a Russian-speaking Ukrainian, Belorussian, Tatar, etc.) and Lithuanian, with some concern over how the Irish interpret this given their own history with the British colonisers:

> We say we are Russian… They say, where are you from and I start to explain that my grandfather and grandmother, they are from Russia, they lived here and there, then they went to help build factories in Lithuania. (‘Tolya’, 32 , Russian Lithuanian)

> I say that I came from Estonia but I am a Ukrainian. I tell them that I was born in Ukraine and grew up in Estonia. I don’t have to prove anything… But in the beginning, when I just got my job, they would ask where from, and I would say, I came from Estonia. And they asked me something about Estonia, something about politics or something, maybe it was something funny or interesting that they read in the newspaper… And I said, I am not Estonian, what do you want from me? And they were a little taken aback, if you are not Estonian, then what are you? But otherwise, people ask me and I say that I am from Ukraine but grew up in Estonia. I speak Russian, I am an Estonian Ukrainian, with time it got shortened to khokhol [derogatory term for Ukrainians]. <laughs> (‘Pavel’, 24, Ukrainian Estonian)

> At first I said I am from Estonia. Then they would say: Are you Estonian? And I would say: No. And they: How is that? That’s why now I just say I am Russian. That goes over well. But if you say that you are Russian from Estonia, they start to react very strangely. The way it is, it’s like the English, naturally the Irish are mad at them. It’s the same. (‘Oleg’, 21, Russian Estonian)

Finally, a third group has chosen to label themselves as the titular nationality and are hoping no one will ask them to say a few words in a language they may not know:

> At first I said I was Russian from Lithuania. Immediately people were stunned. They don’t understand how that could be. It’s easier to say that I am Lithuanian. Because, in reality, I don’t know anything about life in Russia. My entire conscious life I spent in Lithuania. (‘Olga’, 32, Russian Lithuanian)

> I say that I am from Latvia because it’s difficult for them to understand that you… It would be even harder for them to understand that I am a Tatar, born in Kazakhstan. It’s difficult to understand that you live in Latvia but you are not Latvian. For Americans, it’s easier to understand - that’s common that an American is of Mexican descent. They don’t have that. If you come from Latvia, you must be Latvian. For Latvians it was the same thing. It was difficult for me to explain that I am not Kazakh even though I came from Kazakhstan. (‘Rashid’, 40, Tatar Latvian)

> I have gotten tired of explaining that I am Russian but I am from Estonia. And when they ask why are you from Estonia but are Russian, I got tired of explaining it too. Because there are a lot of us there! So I just say I am Estonian. Many people here don’t even know where the country is. (‘Mikhail’, 22, Russian Estonian)

> And here, I prefer to say that I am Estonian. I don’t know how it is with others, but there is this thing with stereotypes of Russians, here I am a little scared of it. Because they are - the Irish when they see me as a Russian, they are like, ahh, you killed a bear with your bare hands, Russian vodka, Russian sauna, and so on. And your name is Natasha. And I try to avoid all of that. (‘Liza’, 25, Russian Estonian)

Expanding beyond the subset of Russian speakers from the Baltic countries to use interviews with members of titular nationalities and Russian-speaking respondents from other countries sheds further light on the identity struggles of our group of interest. There is almost no interaction between Russian speakers from a given Baltic state and their countrymen of titular nationality living in Ireland.

> We don't have Lithuanian friends here. Even there [in Lithuania]. I can't say. We only had one family - friends of our age and friends of our parents. We knew them from childhood. We were acquaintances, we met up sometimes. But serious friends, no. And here, not really. ('Olga', 32, Russian Lithuanian)

> There is an online forum. [Ethnic Estonians] are here [in Ireland] and they are very close-knit. They help people with housing, jobs, they organise Estonian parties… But that's just the Estonians, not the Russians. Well, I am also posted there, but in Estonian. I don't say I am Russian. ('Vanya', 21, Russian Estonian)

Several Russian-speaking Estonians reported altercations and tensions over language that they have experienced with Estonians in Ireland.

> I had this situation, in the house where I lived before. We had an Estonian couple - I spoke English to them. We have the same passport, no one in that house understood us - they would ask why we were speaking English. And I would say, I am Russian, they are Estonian! One country, one government, one passport, everything the same but we don't understand each other. They didn't want to talk to me [in Russian] but I lived abroad [for several years], what can I do. And I lived in a Russian city when I did live in Estonia, so it turned out like that. But they didn't want to. They have to know Russian, they lived in Estonia, through school, until they were 21. I did not have that, so why not talk to me in Russian. But if they didn't want to, whatever. They have this strange attitude towards Russians. ('Tamara', 28, Russian Estonian)

The tensions over holidays and the interpretation of Soviet history are transplanted from the sending countries to Ireland:

> Recently we were celebrating the Ninth of May[at the workplace in Ireland]. We are all Russians, we are celebrating. But we have this woman who works with us, she is Lithuanian. And for Lithuanians, the Ninth of May is not a holiday.

> Because we were the occupiers in that country. We freed them from the fascists but we, ourselves, occupied them later. Someone, out of ignorance, wished her happy May 9th and she showed that she was offended. One needs to pay attention to these moments. (‘Lena’, 32, Russian Lithuanian)

In the current sample, at least, Russian migrants from Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus avoid Russian speakers from the Baltic countries because the latter are ‘not real Russians’ and also due to resentment over their favorable migration status as members of the EU:

> From the Baltics, at this moment, I have not a single person [as a friend]. From Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia. They are as foreign to me as everyone else. They speak Russian but that’s it… I can’t say that they are Russian (*rossiyani*). (‘Olesya’, 27, Russian Belorussian)

> When I see someone from… Lithuania with no education, with absolutely nothing, zero, and they just can come and go with a backpack and they can do whichever they want. I think it’s unfair. Absolutely unfair… At the same time [Russians from the Baltic countries] always come to you: ‘Oh I am European now. You are just Russian. But we are Europeans, we are better.’ I have one [Russian] girl from Estonia who… said that, you know, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are better than Russia because they are part of EU. Oh please, don’t tell me this… Because you join EU doesn’t mean that your country has a very good quality of life. And that fact that there are thousands of you over here tells me that it’s definitely not… I never heard of Latvia and Lithuania in my life before I came here because no one cares about Latvia and Lithuania, they don’t even care about the European Union in Russia. (‘Yulya’, 25, Russian from Russia)

Finally, migrants from Moldova, another former Soviet republic with a large Russian-speaking minority, do not automatically embrace their counterparts from the Baltic countries because they see them as a completely different type of migrant. Moldova is an impoverished nation that exports a large proportion of its labor force and Moldovans, regardless of their ethnicity, come to Ireland through risky channels. Visits home are fraught with legal and financial obstacles and are nearly impossible, in marked contrast to the stereotypical carefree Baltic migrant who is able to visit home freely.

> They have their own mentality… The young people, young Russian-speaking people from the Baltic states… [addressing two ethnic Latvian women:] You have that opportunity now. For us, it's difficult. But when the borders are open, it's a sin not to try… For us it's difficult. For you it's easier. Today here, tomorrow in France, the day after that somewhere else. ('Roma', 22, Russian Moldovan and 'Tima', 21, Russian-speaking Ukrainian Moldovan)

> When we came here, we tried to study the language. To learn everything, to go places, here and there. They [immigrants from Baltic countries] came with everything already set up, they don't even try. Ruslan [her Russian Latvian boyfriend] says, oh, it's English, I am not going to watch that movie. I'll find something in Russian. Make a call for me, please. Someone else calls for him. Fill out an application? Another one does that. He goes and uses his broken English. ('Marina', 30, Moldovan from Moldova)

Conclusion

In the multicultural society that Ireland has become, Russian speakers from the Baltic countries continuously redefine their understanding of who they are and where they belong. Lacking roots in their sending country and with ample experience as the 'other', this group of migrants may be more adapted to lives as cultural and linguistic minorities than other migrants. They may also be less likely to return to their sending countries. Likewise, the position of ethnic minorities in the recently independent Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania plays a role in their decision to migrate in the first place, with a particular salience for Russian speakers in Estonia. Given large numbers of Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic countries, social scientists and policy makers should note the differences in migration processes between this group and other migrants from the accession countries, as well as paying attention to the differences among the three Baltic countries that are often considered only as a unit. My findings also add to the growing body of research on the fate of the Russian diaspora in the countries of the near abroad.

Moreover, this case study of migration from three small countries to a fourth small country can be instructive in understanding migration processes of ethnic minorities elsewhere. With likely expansion eastward, the European Union will come to include minority groups whose members are going to differ from members of the dominant groups in the sending countries in their proclivities to migrate and in their subsequent adaptation experiences. Aside from large Roma populations, the newest EU members have other sizable minorities, such as the Turks in Bulgaria. If and when the EU opens itself to the former Yugoslavia and Turkey, it will embrace minority populations of Albanians, Serbs, and Kurds, among others.

Beyond the European Union, the Baltic-Irish case is illustrative of the distinct migration experience of ethnic minorities in general. Future studies must theorise the distinct nature of migration processes of such groups, drawing on modern and historical accounts.

Notes

1. I present data on birthplace. The 2006 Census data on nationality is very similar.

2. ‘Near abroad’ is used to describe non-Russian countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union.

3. This disjuncture between a confrontation on the level of the state and interpersonal interactions was mentioned by my Latvian respondents (including ethnic Russians, ethnic Latvians, and those who were products of mixed marriages). For instance:

> [Ethnic tensions are] made worse and emphasised very much on purpose, especially around elections. But in reality, me, personally, when I go to all the agencies, speaking Russian, I don't see it. Maybe older people, grandfathers and grandmothers… but young people, there is not that. I have Latvian friends and Russian friends. So it's different but in general, you know, all the groups are separate, but to such an extent as the newspaper tell it, there is not at the level of the people. Because people suffer the same way without money, everyone's children leave - citizens and non-citizens. They are outlawing holidays and such, you can't celebrate the First of May. But again, they are all celebrated and no one does anything. So some exists but most of it is created by them, they inflame it. ('Alina', 26, half-Latvian, half-Belorussian, Russian-speaker, identifies as Russian)

3. Evans and Need (2002) demonstrated the importance of social distance and cultural difference on some aspects of ethnic polarization in the Eastern European context.

4. Anecdotal evidence suggests that non-citizens from the Baltic countries were present in Ireland illegally but none of them contacted me. I should note that my sample did include several undocumented migrants from Russia and Moldova.

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