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# Latgalia, POLISH LIVONIA & the Latgalians:

## Geopolitics of the BACK OF LATVIA

*by Olivier Roqueplo*

**Key-words:** Eastern Latvia, Russian-speaking people in Latvia, Latgalians, Back of Latvia, image, Latvia self-perception, Baltics, territorial identity, borderland, geopolitics, ethnopolitics, cultural borders, Russia, Byelorussia, Poland.

Latgalia also known as Polish Livonia, is the easternmost region of Latvia, at the border with Russia and Byelorussia. This region is mainly inhabited by two « minorities » of Latvia, Russian-speaking Slavs and *Latgalians* (a Catholic Baltic ethnic group using its own language, Latgalian, a tongue considered intermediary between Latvian and Lithuanian). Geopolitics of Latgalia and its inhabitants is part of the Baltic issue and part of the issue of the Russian-speaking people of the Near Abroad and Latvia, where they are both numerous and influential. This study focuses on ethnopolitics, interethnic tensions and interregional conflicts (capital region/remote region) in Latvia, mainly through the analysis of images. It also investigates the main questions of Eastern Europe in general and the local balance of powers between such actors as Russia, Byelorussia, Poland, the EU, NATO.

Latgalia is completely different from the rest of Latvia (Vidzeme-Livonia, Courland, Zemgale, altogether referred to as “Lower Latvia”) and constitutes somehow an opposite pole, a nadir of Latvia, what I call here the “Back of Latvia”, a reference to the geographical opposition between the Front of Japan (famous, rich and developed) and the Back of Japan (poor, remote, in crisis). There is indeed something of this structure in Latvia and therefore it seemed to me suitable to use these terms to portray the Latgalian issue. The Back of Latvia is the strange Latvia, as far as possible from the traditional and official image of the Front of Latvia that is a Lutheran country on the Baltic shore with German culture, a West-looking State with a liberal and, up to 2008, dynamic economy. The Back of Latvia, on the contrary, is an inland Catholic and Orthodox region keeping close ties with the East, and a poor one for having been experiencing economic decline for already twenty years. It is a Russian-speaking and Latgalian-speaking region, scarcely Latvian-speaking, and this is all the more decisive in a country where the official ideology widely assumes that Latvian language is a synonym of Latvianness.

Latgalia as the Back of Latvia shows the way to investigate Latvia from another point of view, from the East, a point of view that is opposite to the one of Riga, of the Latvian State, without ignoring the latter, of course.

Then, is the Back of Latvia an exception to the Latvian standard, even an abnormality as some Latvians seem to believe, or isn't it, on a deeper level, the other face of Latvia, the other half of the Nation forgotten because of the *raison d'Etat* through the national narrative claiming Latvia to be monolithic? Isn't the Back of Latvia a piece of evidence of an inner

dilemma inside Latvia, a dilemma caused by the confusion between Latvia as a whole and the sole Front of Latvia that is the currently dominant part of the country?

This is the hypothesis that I shall discuss here. Latgalia is first of all a territory, a region, and this implies to investigate the relation between the region and the State (Chapter 1). This territory is a borderland and is extensively a part of the external geopolitics involving the neighbouring countries, Russia, Byelorussia but also Poland (Chapter 2).

The issue of the population is complex as Latgalia, like the griffin, its coat of arms, has a double nature. Like a griffin half-eagle, half-lion, Latgalia is half-Russian-speaking, half-Latgalian-speaking.

The question of the Russian-speaking Slavs in Latgalia proves perhaps less to be a question of local majority than to be an argument to testify the autochtony of Russian culture in Latvia and therefore the legitimacy of Russian language to be recognized an equal status to Latvian (Chapter 3).

Finally the issue of the Latgalian language and thus of the Latgalian people is nothing but the issue of the definition of the Latvian people itself that is the very basis of the legitimacy of the Latvian State; as a result it questions the very foundations of Latvia, and requires a special attention (Chapter 4).

## **Chapter 1. The regional issue: a remote region unloved by the Latvian State**

This chapter focuses on the integration of the region into Latvia and thus on the issue of the unity or division of the Latvian Nation. Integration here is not considered from an economic point of view but from a geopolitical point of view that is in terms of territorial and political identity. This issue is all the more complicated that it belongs to several different levels. It is at the same time politic, ethnic, cultural, social, economic and geographic. But all these levels are inextricably mixed. The regional issue in Latgalia is first of all a problem of perception and image, now this image is precisely the combination of different elements. Geopolitics often studies conflicts and balance of power, and in this very case, I focused on the conflicts, and mainly three of them:

An economic and social conflict over the perception of the disaster in Latgalia: a common idea in Latvia is that Latgalia has always been underdeveloped, at least less than the rest of Latvia, thus such a poverty in Latgalia is not a surprise. On the other hand, the Latgalian opinion links this crisis to the liberal policy in the region since 1992 that destroyed most of the industry of the region inherited from the Soviet era without replacing the lost employment. Such perceptions imply different ties to the East and to history. The opposition are worsened because of the embezzlement of EU funds intended for Latgalia in Riga.

Then a political conflict over Latgalia seen as a “red” and “abnormal” province. Latgalia is supposed to vote for left-wing parties, parties of the traitors. At the same time,

Latgalia is suspected to be a threat for the national unity through the so-called Latgalian regionalism.

Finally a geopolitical conflict over Latgalia as a region so far from Riga, so close to Russia. Latvia's self-perception is based on elements like language and geographical situation that may be used to draw a map of concentric circles of "Latvianness" from Riga to Latgalia that gives Latgalia the last seat in the Nation. Latgalia is also Latvia's eastern and sole borderland, a land unclearly separated from the Eastern "ill-famed" neighbours, and somehow closer to them than to the capital region. Latgalia suffers from this image.

## **Chapter 2. The Latgalian issue at the Baltic scale: actors, interests, influences**

Latgalia is currently the eastern borderland of Latvia. It was already a borderland of the Empire of Russia and it rose several claims when the Empire gave birth to several Nations and one new supranational State (the USSR). Latgalia was utterly disputed between Soviet Russia, Poland, Byelorussia, Latvia and Lithuania in the period 1918-20. Each of these countries assumed historical domination over Latgalia and often the existence of an ethnic local community born of this very domination to assert their claims. It is then quite clear that ethnic minorities are widely connected with external geopolitics.

I discuss here how the existing minorities are connected with security concerns and political influence in the case of the neighbouring States (or formerly neighbouring in the case of Poland). The foreign interests in Latgalia are mainly concentrated in one particular area including Daugavpils and the Ilukste strip.

Nowadays, territorial claims seem to have settled down but external geopolitics of Latgalia still involves four States: Latvia, Poland, Byelorussia, Russia.

Latvia of course as Latgalia keeps the Latvian border with the Eastern neighbours seen as enemies. Latvia used to consider Latgalia as the shield against the East but paradoxically this perception does not lead to any political nor economic investment in this utmost sensitive region. At the same time, the local population is both disappointed by the Latvian policy and keeps close ties with the Eastern neighbours. Therefore Latgalia clearly appears, paradoxically enough, as the Achilles' heel of Latvia.

Poland tries to protect the interests of ethnic Polish population and Polish language in Latgalia.

Byelorussia is an important actor: it attracts a part of the Russian-speaking population through Soviet nostalgia, TV propaganda about President Lukashenko's integrity (vs Latvian general corruption) and economic projects in industry or energy fields.

Russia has the largest strategy and is all the more powerful in the region that Latvia seems nearly absent. From a strategic point of view, Latgalia is a natural path to Riga. Russia broadly influences Latgalia through culture and media so that for many Slavs and even

Latgalian, President Medvedev is as familiar as the Latvian Prime Minister and much more popular. The image of Russia as a wealthy and powerful country contrasting with the Latvian powerlessness in the economic crisis offers Russia an increasing role in the region: both Latgalians and Slavs seem to expect more from Russia than from Latvia for the future of the region. The positions of Russia in Latgalia are all the stronger that no clear Russian project was implemented yet; a beginning of actualization of economic investment might logically lead to the tenfold of Russian weight in the region.

### **Chapter 3. The issue of Russian-speaking Slavs in Latgalia: Russian-speaking yet autochthonic people**

The issue of Slavic people in Latgalia is a double-scale one: it is regional, of course through relationships between Slavic and Latgalian peoples, but the question is also national since Slavs are in a very particular situation in Latgalia: they are dominating, something that is a major problem for the Latvian State, and they are rooted in the Latgalian land, a matter interesting the numerous Slavs of Riga who remain rootless in Lower Latvia. Latgalia is under Slavic primacy: numeric primacy, cultural primacy, social primacy, but such a leadership is mainly urban. Slavs are a majority, their language, Russian, retains its actual status of *lingua franca* and their culture is the most widespread one; finally they often kept control over local major companies. Therefore the Slavic issue is a capital one in Latgalia and it is of importance to analyze how the Slavic domination comes out in its ties with territory, mainly in the intimate perception of a “small fatherland”, Southern Latgalia around Daugavpils (still named *Dvinsk* by Slavic peasants) where they feel at home thanks to symbolical presence of Slavic past (monuments of imperial times, Slavic vivid toponymy), and to overwhelming Russian language and because of reciprocal absence of Latvian symbols (except flags and somehow factitious official placards in Latvian language). In Latgalia, Latvia seems quite an external power since Russian is older than standard Latvian in the region, even as an official language, and since Latvian language is only the language of the State entering the region through laws and administration. Such a situation is all the more striking when compared with Riga where Slavs are even more numerous but are faced with an environment full of Latvian historical, political or cultural references. Thus, when considering themselves a “minority” in Riga, Slavs seem to feel themselves the “majority” in southern Latgalia.

Latgalia plays the part of a pole of identity for Slavic people formerly identifying themselves as Soviet citizens, and currently still far from being integrated in the Latvian Nation.

But this situation might conflict with claims of Latgalians and I investigate the local balance of powers and real relations between the two groups, with the conclusion that conflict is all the more external, imported from Riga, that the ethnic and cultural border between Slavs and Latgalians is broadly elusive because of countless mixed marriages since the 1950ies onwards.

At the same time, the Slavic issue in Latgalia exceeds the region itself and appears for Riga Slavs as the birthplace of the Slavs of all Latvia thanks to old Slavic settlement in Latgalia (Old-believers in 17<sup>th</sup> century), ancient orthodox influence (Jersika, 12<sup>th</sup> century) and strong Russification of Latgalia as old as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then Latgalia is both a pole and an argument to face Latvian nationalists' discourses over the Slavic-Soviet "occupation/colonization". Latgalia then testifies the historical right of Russian to be an official language in Latvia. Latgalia also appears as a cartographical argument as a Slavic territory with sufficient size to balance other Latvian provinces. Latgalia thus seems a possible basis for a future autonomous Slavic region in Latvia joining Riga through the Dvina and linking Riga to Byelorussia. In this very case Latgalia reveals the existence of another Back of Latvia, Dvina Latvia, as opposed to Baltic Sea Latvia.

#### **Chapter 4. The issue of Latgalians: Gordian knot of Latvia?**

In this chapter, we shall investigate the threesome relation between Latgalians of Latgalia, the ones of Lower Latvia, and the metropolitan powers that is the Latvian State and the Russian actor in Riga. The Latgalian question (rather than "Latgalian-speaking" since it involves people who may not speak Latgalian) comes from the rebirth of a cultural regionalism: Latgalians start to claim the official recognition of their particular identity by the Latvian State. Such a claim is not specifically targeted at the State but is nevertheless enrolled in the rivalry between the influential Slavic community in Riga and the State ruled by the Latvian-speaking elite, a situation that leads to the political use of the question on both sides.

The issue of Latgalians, exactly as the Slavic question in Latgalia, implies two scales, a regional (inside Latgalia) and a national one (since Latgalians live throughout Latvia, especially in Riga). This issue sets two problems: on the one hand, the problem of the birth of a Latgalian people and its potential effects over ethnopolitics, up to now limited to two groups; on the other hand, the even more important problem of Latgalian autochthony, with the political and legal echo of criticism against the State from such a titular autochthonic people. This criticism involves the nature of the State. Both problems refer to the capital issue of the State's legitimacy. Isn't therefore the Back of Latvia the Gordian knot of the Latvian question?

Latgalian identity relies on three main elements, Latgalian language, Catholic tradition, feelings towards Latgalia. The main element today is the language, following the general trend in Latvia, i.e. linguistic nationalism. Spoken by about 120 000 people in Latgalia but also by numerous Latgaalians outside the region, Latgalian suffers from its situation of mainly rural language with few prestige and inheriting from a century of Latvianization at school the image of "wrong Latvian" of which young Latgalians were ashamed. Activists (united in the association *Latgolys Saeima*) try to change this image by turning Latgalian into an internet language, and looking for official status in Latvia.

In the Latvian context, language is indeed a political issue and a sensitive one as the recognition of a language of its own means the one of a people. This is why the nature of Latgalian, world-wide acknowledged as the third Baltic language in use nowadays by linguists, is under debate in Latvia. The argument is rather confuse. The Law on the Official Language of Latvia “guarantees the development of the written Latgalian language” considering Latgalian to be “a historical variety of Latvian language”. But the interpretation of the law both in society and Parliament by the State is that Latgalian is rather an obsolete language that should not be used in public. In fact, Latgalian is facing strong opposition from State officials who deny any support to keep the language alive (in contrast with Livonian language, now a dead language, and that was therefore granted an official status) and avoid any debate over the existence of Latgalian and Latgalians.

The issue of Latgalians is an important one. Though unknown, the number of Latgalians in Latvia (drown into the Latvian group by statistics), and especially in Riga, is doubtlessly superior to to the one in Latgalia, with estimations supported by historical sources from 350 to 500 000 people. This amount of Latgalians is considered the Gordian knot of Latvian ethnopolitics by the State since the loss of 500 000 Latgalians by the “Latvian majority” would definitely turn it into a minority and thus ruin its rights to rule Latvia alone. This perception of a “Latgalian threat” explains the Low-Latvian attitude towards Latgalian, a fear that might become hatred in case of crisis. This Gordian knot reveals both the abyssal weakness of Latvian power relying on statistic games and the unrealistic policy of ignoring a third ethnic group in the political life of Latvia, a group whose weight is already an electoral reality.

The issue of Latgalians is thus a key-issue for the identity and future of the Latvian State. Latgalians do not assert they are not Latvians seeking the creation of an independent State, but rather that they are the true Latvians, that they are ill-considered and dominated inside the Latvian Nation, therefore present day Latvia is groundless. Such ideas and perceptions question the definition of the Latvian people and the legitimacy of the Latvian State through the part given to Latgalia. Our aim here is to show how. We give four detailed examples.

Firstly, I analyze the Latgalian perception of the part of Latgalia and Lower Latvia (Vidzeme-Kurzeme-Zemgale) in the Latvian national myth. « Destroying German Livonia to re-build a new Lettia » meant symbolically coming back to medieval Gercike and reassert Latgalian prestige for Latgalians, but only mending Livonia for Low-Latvians.

Secondly, I comment the oppositions between Latgalian and Low-Latvian perceptions of their former Vasa rulers, Poland-Lithuania and Sweden. Opposite images are evidence of opposite identity projections in a still vivid past.

Thirdly, western tropism based on the image of Latvia as a seashore, officially chosen as the State self-perception, broadly ignores Latgalian reality based on a millenium-long Eastern and continental tropism (towards Polotsk, Poland-Lithuania, the Russian Empire, the USSR, Russia and Byelorussia), which leads to Latgalian frustration.

Finally, Latvianization is sometimes considered as a policy against Latgalian culture and therefore against “pure Latvian” soul. It underlines the illegal inequality between “standard Latvians” and Latgalians. As such, Latvianization shows all the misunderstandings throughout the construction of Latvia.

## Conclusion

Latgalia is the unloved mother of Latvia, the unexpected daughter of the destroyed Poland-Lithuania and the shy lover of close, appealing, admired and feared Russia.

Is this back of Latvia an exception in Latvia or the forgotten half of the country? The Back of Latvia lives in a permanent opposition to the Front of Latvia (Chapter 1), and it is the Borderland of Latvia thus an exceptional territory (Chapter 2).

But the tremendous accumulation of particularities in this part of Latvia seems to mean something else, as if it was another country, at least another world. Paradoxically Latgalia is seen as the authentic half of Latvia by Latgalian activists.

Finally, the opposition between the centre and the periphery is balanced by the unexpected collusion and common points existing between the predatory Capital and the Borderland of the Nation (Chapter 3 and 4): if any, Riga itself is indeed the other exception to Latvianness. The main interest of the Latgalian issue lies cast a light on the existence of another Latvia, a Slavic and Latgalian Latvia with half of the population, a Latvia living in two complementary territories, the Capital region and the most remote periphery that is Latgalia, linked by a geographical reality: the Dvina river.

Not less paradoxical is the fact that economic, linguistic, ethnic and political tensions concentrate in the same area to create a strong conflict with the State without bursting out. Why? Probably because up to now no political force intended to use it. But it would be wrong to consider it will never explode in an open fight since some powers might try to, such as Latgalian activists, Saskanas Centrs (Harmony Centre), Slavic activists or Russia.

In all cases, it is clear that Latvia has no interest at all in going on with its policy of unconcern in a region on which relies the existence and independence of the country when it is nothing but Latvia's most vulnerable point.

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