

EXISTENTIAL SOVEREIGNTY

Latvian People, Their State, and the Problem of Mobility

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In the story that Latvians tell themselves about themselves, the Latvian cultural nation and national state are embattled. In the long aftermath of what the Latvian public refers to as Soviet occupation, the sense of embattlement derives from the proximity to Russia as a potential aggressor and the presence of a large Russian-speaking minority in the territory of Latvia (Laitin 1998; Dzenovska 2018a). The sense of national embattlement translates into compensatory politics. For example, one of the factors legitimating the post-Soviet Latvian state's restrictive citizenship and punitive language policies that aim to Latvianize the polity and public space is the dramatic shift in the ethnic composition of Latvia's population over the course of the twentieth century.¹ If before Soviet rule in 1935 Latvians made up 77 percent of the population of 1.9 million, then just before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 Latvians made up 52 percent of the 2.6 million population (following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the accession to the European Union in 2004, Latvia's population fell to 1.9 million by 2015).²

Despite—or perhaps precisely because of—the aggressive post-Soviet policies of compensatory Latvianization, the Latvian public continuously doubts the loyalty of the Soviet majority-cum-Russian minority toward the Latvian state as a national state, that is, as a state established for the purpose of ensuring the continuity and flourishing of the cultural nation of Latvians. In the 2000s, this distrust was exacerbated by Vladimir Putin's pronounced support of compatriots abroad (*sootchestvenniki*), whereby Russian speakers in the “near abroad” were depicted as subjects who could avail themselves of the protection of the Russian

state. While the compatriot discourse was short-lived and fairly quickly replaced by the more expansive and arguably less controversial support for *Russkyi Mir*, that is, a transnational Russian cultural space, post-Soviet states with significant Russian-speaking populations took Putin's statements seriously.³ With regard to Ukraine, for example, Catherine Wanner writes that, given the geographic concentration of Russian speakers in Ukraine, Russia's *sootchestvenniki* politics introduced the possibility of converting some regions of Ukraine into "zones of diminished sovereignty" (2014, 430). Russia itself continues to be perceived as a military threat by the bordering post-Soviet states, including Latvia. For the Latvian public and government, recent events in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine have confirmed the validity of this fear, resulting in significant increase in NATO troops in the Baltics (Dzenovska 2018c).

The threat of Russia and the Russian-speaking minority is widely considered to be the legacy of Soviet occupation, that is, of a period of unfreedom. However, in conditions of post-Soviet freedom, there has emerged another unexpected threat: expelled from the global circuits of capital in their places of residence, Latvia's residents, ethnic Latvians and Russian speakers alike, are leaving to live and work in Western European states. Outmigration began as a trickle in the 2000s but intensified after Latvia's accession to the European Union in 2004 and even more so during and after the financial crisis of 2008. When I began my research on the emptying of the Latvian countryside in 2010, it was referred to as "the Great Departure" (Dzenovska 2012, 2013, 2018b). Not much statistical or other information was available, but researchers estimated that about 10 percent of Latvia's residents had left (Hazans 2011, 2016). While scholars and policymakers mobilized to produce data, the contours of the Great Departure were most tangible in the accounts of those who stayed behind. People across Latvia's cities, towns, and villages reported that there were fewer children in schools, that the streets were notably emptier than they used to be, that it was difficult to find someone to fix your roof, and that social life had broken down, because so many people had left. Alongside this everyday sense of emptiness, demographers, economists, and psychologists identified a number of impending social, economic, and political threats: demographic crisis, deterioration of the infrastructure, unraveling of the social fabric, and last, but not least, a threat to the existence of Latvians as an ethnos, a cultural nation, and a polity, and a threat to the existence of the Latvian state as a state primarily legitimated by Latvian aspirations for self-determination (e.g., Zvidriņš 2005). A popular saying reflected the existential fear—at once physical and political—conjured up by outmigration: "What the Russians did not do to us, we will do to ourselves." Resonating with Joyce Dalsheim's (chapter 9, this volume) discussion of the Jewish threat to the Jewish state, Latvians were pondering whether perhaps freedom was a form

of self-elimination rather than self-determination. However, if in Dalsheim's chapter the Jewish threat to Jews lies in the struggle between legal and divine authorities for defining Jewishness and a Jewish way of life, the Latvian threat to Latvians lies in the inability of the Latvian state to care for the physical bodies of Latvians in conditions of capitalist freedom.

In this chapter, I ask what it means when a significant number of individuals who constitute the "state-bearing nation" that is thought to legitimate the existence and legal identity of the Latvian state move to live and work in territories of other states (Konstitucionālo tiesību komisija 2012). Put another way, what does freedom of movement mean for an embattled nation? To be sure, constitutive threats are a truism in studies of nationalism and nation-building. However, I use "embattled" here to denote a much deeper existential fear about the viable existence of both a people and a state. There is a difference, for example, between France or Denmark, where various political forces posit different threats to the fabric of the nation, however defined, in different historical moments, and Israel, a state that is constituted vis-à-vis foundational existential threats, such as that of the Holocaust and the present-day consequences of settler colonialism, that are said to threaten the physical and political existence of the people and the state. With regard to public and political life, Latvia, I suggest, is more like Israel than France. While some in France may be worried about the Frenchness of France (even if understood as a "community of value" (Anderson 2013) rather than ethno-cultural community), many in Latvia are worried about the political existence of the Latvian state as a guarantor of the physical and cultural existence of the people.

"Embattled nationhood," then, refers to a situation whereby a culturally distinct people claim a state, while at the same time exhibiting deep existential fear about a potential breakdown of the articulation of the people with the state, and the loss of the state. In addition to perceiving the existence of a national state as a guarantor for the existence of the people, Latvian politicians and members of the public also perceive the existence of the state as an indication of political maturity and civilizational status. As a member of a conservative political force said in a public demonstration against corruption in July 2017: "Not every people have their own state. We have our own state, and we have to protect it!" This is to say that Latvian existential fears emerge within a modernist developmental frame, whereby only a people that has a state has become a mature and democratic people insofar as it has evolved from an ethnic group to a mature nation with consciousness, political will, and the ability to establish, uphold, and protect its own state.

This developmental frame cuts across various political regimes, from liberal to socialist to postcolonial. If the Soviet party-state sorted peoples into ethnic

groups (*narodnost'*), nationalities (*natsional'nost'*), and nations (*natsiia*), depending on whether they exhibited national consciousness and had political institutions (Hirsch 2005, 10), postcolonial nations, too, strove to become “sovereign moderns” with “the right to a passport, a flag, a stamp, a coin, and the formation of a native state” (Bonilla 2015, 13). Having one’s own state—or what Rebecca Bryant and Madeleine Reeves (Introduction) call “state desire”—is important for Latvians who wish to be recognized as historical and political agents who shape their own lives, that is, as a people with sovereign agency (Bryant and Reeves, Introduction). While state desire among Latvians may be relatively recent, dating back to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dzenovska 2018a; Ījabs 2009; Ījabs 2012), it is no less efficacious in shaping the self-understanding of Latvians as not only legible historical and political agents, but also as emplaced human beings.

This is to say that in the case of Latvians the sense of embattlement and aspirations for sovereign agency, while most visible in the political realm and on the collective register, are intricately linked—often inseparable—from individual selfhood, or what Anthony Cohen (1996) calls “personal nationalism.” In Cohen’s interpretation, personal nationalism may diverge from political nationalism, thus political nationalists face the challenge of unifying a diverse group of people, all of whom recognize themselves as members of a cultural nation, but who may politically diverge to the point of unrecognizability (1996, 809). In the case of Latvia, this may be so if one looks at party politics, but there is a strong overlap of personal and political with regard to people’s understanding of themselves as human beings with particular life trajectories and as legible political agents. Vieda Skultāns’s (2007) work on life narratives supports this observation. Skultāns points out that many of her Latvian interlocutors narrated their personal lives through the life of the nation. Skultāns could not access personal experiences that were separate from the history of the nation, even though she had initially assumed that there would be personal experiences underneath the collective layer. If there were any, they were not accessible through life narratives. The nation was deeply constitutive of how her interlocutors knew themselves and narrated themselves. The existentialist question of the meaning of being was answered here in the collective register. To be was to be a member of the nation; personal life trajectories were inseparable from the fate of the nation. Fears about personal existence were fears about the existence of the nation and vice versa.

Most of the literature on nationalism, especially on nationalism in the region, does not get to the exact combination of elements that I am discussing here. By way of one example, in their analysis of nationalism in Romania, Rogers Brubaker and his team (Brubaker et al. 2007) separate nationalism as a political ideology from everyday ethnicity. The latter may entail in-group and out-group

distinctions and even prejudice, but in the authors' view, nationalism occurs in the political realm. This and similar takes on nationalism cannot capture the existential sense of embattlement and associated political claims that I trace in this chapter through analysis of how mobility is perceived and accommodated by the embattled nation of Latvians. In this chapter, then, I propose to speak of these practices in the rubric of "existential sovereignty."

Articulations of sovereignty in critical theory and anthropology tend to be primarily influenced by or be in conversation with Carl Schmitt's (1985) notion of the sovereign as he who decides on exception (e.g., Brown 2010) and Giorgio Agamben's (1998) articulation of sovereignty as power over life (e.g., Hansen and Steputtat 2005; Dunn and Cons 2013). Some also draw on international relations understandings of sovereignty as territorial self-determination in a community of nation-states (Krasner 1999). The notion of self-determination also informs concepts of cultural sovereignty (Winegar 2006), food sovereignty (Campbell and Veteto 2015), or resource sovereignty (Folch 2016).

The concept of existential sovereignty, as I use it in this chapter, pertains to the ability to bring into existence a people and their state and to ensure the continued physical and political existence of both.⁴ Rather than—or in addition to—ensuring control over territory or fighting for the right to self-determination, existential sovereignty pertains to practices that coconstitute the subject that can aspire for sovereign agency and the political institutions that make this subject "politically recognizable and capable of agentive action" (Bryant and Reeves, Introduction). The concept combines existentialist concerns with the meaning of human existence with concerns about political existence, one becoming inseparable from the other. It also adds an additional layer to theories of sovereignty, one brilliantly elaborated by Anya Bernstein (2012) in her analysis of the Buryat Buddhist notion of the "ideal sovereign body," where Bernstein argues that individual bodies are not only sites on which sovereign power can be and is exercised, but can also become embodiments of sovereignty, as in the case of reincarnate lamas that move across borders. However, it is not just leaders, such as kings or lamas, who have two bodies—one natural and the other political (Kantorowicz 1998), but also ordinary people who have both physical bodies and political bodies that lend legitimacy to political authority, especially in modern nation-states where sovereignty is thought to inhere in the people (Santner 2011; Yurchak 2015). Just as biopower works at the intersection of the individual and the population insofar as individual conduct is crucial for the life of the population at large (Foucault 2003), sovereign power, too, works at the intersection of the individual and the body politic. Rather than an abstraction fixed in territory, the body politic is an aggregation of living individuals who are engaged in crafting lives. It is precisely for that reason that migration, often thought of as an individual rather than a

collective act, becomes a collective problem both for the polities that people leave and for the polities in which people arrive.

In the rest of the chapter, I elaborate the phenomenon of existential sovereignty on the basis of analysis of how government and nongovernment actors handle the problem that post-Soviet freedom of movement introduces for the embattled Latvian nation and the state. In particular, I focus on the Latvian state's diaspora politics, as well as two political events—a referendum on whether to make the Russian language the second state language that took place in 2012 and the 2014 constitutional reform that reaffirmed the national nature of the Latvian state. On the basis of this analysis, I argue that existential sovereignty is not a state of being, but a claim to the coherence and continuity of a collective self, pursued with the tools of statecraft. It is not primarily a matter of control over territory, but rather of the existence of self in space and time. Within the modernist frame of national self-determination, claims of existential sovereignty remain articulated with a territorial state, that is, the physical and political existence of the sovereign subject requires the existence of a national territory, even if many of the individuals who constitute the sovereign subject do not live in it. At the same time, existential sovereignty allows for the distribution of collective selfhood across territories of several historically existing states. In that sense, existential sovereignty entails a transfer of political sovereignty from a territorially defined state to a reterritorialized collective self that operates transnationally alongside corporations, international organizations, God, and other actors that compete for the status of the sovereign.

Migration and Diaspora Politics

The current wave of emigration is not the first migration-related threat to the embattled Latvian nation. The self-narrative of the embattled nation includes two other stories of threatening migration—one of forced emigration and the other of organized immigration. The forced emigration story pertains to the pre–World War II elites—e.g., intellectuals, politicians, civil servants, military officers—fleeing Latvia on the cusp of the reestablishment of Soviet power in 1944, as well as to the mass deportations that took place during the first decades of Soviet power in Latvia. The organized immigration story, in turn, refers to the movement of Russian-speaking Soviet citizens from other parts of the Soviet Union to live and work in Soviet Latvia (Riekstiņš 2005; Dzenovska 2018a). Both the deportations and the organized immigration are commonly attributed to deliberate Soviet policies of mixing populations in order to create generic Soviet citizens out of unruly national subjects. Both are also widely recognized

as threatening to the nation, as well as to the existence of the Latvian state as a national state.

The loss of independence at the end of World War II and the dispersal of the nation to Siberia and the West shaped the twentieth-century self-narrative of Latvians as a nation that has been physically violated, politically alienated from its territory, as well as forcefully kept apart insofar as exit from and entry into the Soviet Union were restricted.⁵ Consequently, independence struggles of the late 1980s that culminated with the restoration of the pre-World War II (1918–40) Latvian state in 1991 simultaneously drew on national and liberal imaginaries: on the one hand, they drew on the imaginary of a cultural nation reunited as a political community in its rightful territory, and on the other hand, they drew on the imaginary of liberal freedoms, including the freedom of movement.

With the restoration of independence, exit and entry restrictions were lifted. Latvians living abroad were encouraged to return. Some did, but many did not, as they had established lives elsewhere. Certain forms of emigration were also encouraged—for example, the return of retired Soviet military personnel to Russia and other former Soviet republics or the emigration of Soviet-era Russian-speaking residents who did not wish to live in the independent state of Latvia (Dzenovska 2018a). But nobody could have predicted that the newly found freedom of movement in conjunction with the neoliberalization of the economy would result in such significant westward migration.⁶

People left for multiple reasons. In surveys launched by Latvia's social scientists and in my own ethnographic encounters, aspirations for social mobility and professional advancement were mentioned alongside unemployment, low wages, debt, and social and political discontent (Hazans 2011, 2015; Dzenovska 2012, 2018b). The 2008 financial crisis exacerbated job loss and pressure on indebted segments of the population, thus pushing more people to leave. While some of those who left struggled with balancing patriotic feelings with professional advancement opportunities (Lulle and Bužinska 2017), many labor migrants and debt refugees were angry and resentful toward the Latvian state for having let them down, that is, for not having created the kind of conditions within which they could lead livable lives at home—earn enough money, repay debt, educate their children, support family, or get heating in the winter. Most, including students and professionals, criticized political elites and public institutions for corruption, excessive bureaucracy, incompetence, or more generally, lack of care. “The state does not care about us,” I heard over and over again from those who had left, but also from those who had stayed behind (Kaprāns 2015; Kešāne 2011; Dzenovska 2012, 2018b). In response, political and intellectual elites claimed that those who left angry with the state only wanted things from the state but did not contribute to making Latvia a better place to live. However,

there were also politicians, civil servants, and activists, both within and outside Latvia, who thought that the mutual sense of betrayal must be overcome for the sake of ensuring the continuity of the Latvian nation and the state. This was the main impetus for attempting to institutionalize relations with the dispersed nation in the form of diaspora politics.

State-based diaspora politics is nothing new in the global arena (though states attempt to govern or influence their citizens abroad by other means as well, see Bozzini 2015). Many states have diaspora policies and even specific institutions dealing with diaspora affairs (Gamlen 2014). *Émigrés*, previously barely noticed or considered to be traitors, have suddenly become sought-after contributors to national development and ambassadors of their nations abroad. The proliferation of diaspora politics and policies on a global scale since the late 1980s has gone hand in hand with new inflections in diaspora scholarship. Contrary to the cultural studies-based and identity-focused perspectives on diaspora as a site of hybridity where rigid categories of identification are or can be subverted (e.g., Gilroy 1995; Brah 1996), the policy and political turn to diaspora is analyzed, even promoted, within the rubric of development (e.g., de Haas 2010). Here the focus is on remittances—economic, political, and social (de Haas 2007; Levitt 1998; Tabar 2014; Darieva 2011)—on forms of diaspora engagement in the affairs of the home country (e.g., Bernal 2014; Van Hear and Cohen 2017; Kaprars 2015; Anderson 1992), as well as on forms of citizenship and belonging (e.g., Soysal 2000; Lulle et al. 2015). Debates focus on whether remittances help or hinder development, whether diaspora engagement is politically progressive or regressive, as well as on what forms of membership and political participation are appropriate for diaspora.

In Latvia the term *diaspora* appeared when the Latvian government launched a diaspora program in 2004.⁷ At first, the term *diaspora* largely pertained to cultivating and institutionalizing relations with “Latvians in exile” (*trimdas latvieši*) or “Latvians abroad” (*ārzemju latvieši*), that is, post–World War II refugees and their descendants who left or were forced to leave as part of the two constitutive stories of migration. However, whatever mechanisms there may have been for tending relations with the “old exile,” these were not sufficient for governing people who had left in conditions of freedom. Thus diplomats, policymakers, and civil servants had to rethink their approach. The “new emigration” (*jaunā emigrācija*) presented a problem of government for the state. The “new emigration” seemed to lack the willingness and capacity to organize or to engage with the cultural and social institutions established by the *trimda* (old exiles), which was highly organized and self-sufficient. I often heard civil servants and members of *trimda* say that the “new emigration” was too preoccupied with economic concerns to understand the value of the Latvian language and culture and of political organization

in exile. As many of the “new émigrés” initially did not seek out Latvian organizations and institutions abroad, they were difficult to find and therefore to govern. The first task for the state, thus, was to find and get to know its diaspora.⁸

During our first meeting, Kārlis, a civil servant at a line ministry who worked on a document that would serve as the basis for the state’s diaspora strategy, showed me a big pile of printouts of Irish, Lithuanian, Israeli, and other diaspora policy documents. These documents were produced by the respective states’ institutions charged with the task of cultivating relations with diaspora. Many of them were produced with the assistance of academics involved in research on the development potential of diasporas. Kārlis had selected diaspora strategies of those states that were not commonly thought of as “developing,” and whose diaspora policies aimed to cultivate national identity as much as benefit from diaspora economically. Kārlis told me that he could easily copy any of the diaspora strategy documents in front of him for the purposes of producing a document, because they were good and, moreover, the “best practices” approach was quite common in governance. However, he wanted to know what was going on with the Latvians and that is why he sought out people who knew things about Latvians abroad, as well as engaged in generating this knowledge himself.

Kārlis’s initial activities seemed quite chaotic. He sought out people who seemed to be engaged in activities relevant for diaspora politics, yet most of these conversations did not translate into institutionalized collaboration. Kārlis explained that it did not matter, because one important aspect of his work was to motivate people and to put them in touch with each other, that is, to generate civic—and at the same time national—activity. Similarly, Kārlis picked up on some initiatives only to drop some later. He was always on the road to yet another meeting or conference and continuously sought out people who were doing something because they were either concerned that Latvians abroad were losing themselves—that is, losing the sense of who they were in relation to others—or because they were proud of being Latvian and wanted to invest their skills or knowledge at home.

In these initial stages, Kārlis often spoke of “a general lack of understanding” in the government about the need to transform governance to include Latvians abroad, as well as complained about a myriad of bureaucratic obstacles that often drove him to despair. Yet, he was well suited for the task. Born to Latvian parents in exile, he had at some point in his youth turned away from the Latvian language and society—that is, he had lost himself, as he put it—only to rediscover their significance later in life. He was convinced of the value of self-knowledge and considered that losing oneself—like he had for a moment—introduces great psychological stress for individuals. Life among others—other selves and other states—could become a source of vulnerability for both the selfhood of the migrants and the nation at large. He thought that diaspora work could prevent

further self-loss and alienation from the nation. Kārlis's work revealed a philosophy of what it means to be human.⁹ For Kārlis, being human was to be embedded in a historical and cultural community. It also meant being connected to a territorial state that ultimately served as the guarantor of the existence of the nation, but that allowed for the possibility that the nation was territorially dispersed and adapted its practices of governance accordingly.

The months went on and what at first looked like an ad hoc initiative of a small network of affiliated individuals began to look like a state project, though it still largely depended on individual commitment rather than institutionalized practices. About a year and a half after we first met, Kārlis and I both sat on the same panel at a high-level political meeting on the new Latvian diaspora in the United Kingdom. Kārlis's central message was: "Know your diaspora!" For the still fledgling project of diaspora work that was ongoing in the corridors of ministries, embassies, church halls, informal meetings in cafes, newspaper articles, cheap airline flights, and elsewhere, knowing diaspora was crucial: what they did, who they were, what they thought, and how they felt. This form of knowing exceeded knowing oneself as a historically and socially embedded being insofar as by inviting his audience to "know your diaspora" Kārlis appealed to the state's capacity to govern and thus to the state's ability to demonstrate to the sovereign, that is, to the people, that the state was indeed the guarantor of their collective existence.

In the following months and years, several institutionalized knowledge-production projects were launched. In addition to the formalization of the diaspora strategy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs funded the establishment of a Diaspora Research Center within the University of Latvia with a research agenda closely linked to the political objective of institutionalizing state-diaspora relations. One of its first outputs was an extensive research report on political representation, which also entailed thorough theoretical reflections on transnational political communities (Lulle et al. 2015). Alongside research, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with diaspora organizations, established an annual diaspora conference held in Riga every summer, as well as a business forum for Latvians abroad. Local governments were approached, and several came aboard with their own diaspora initiatives targeting their former residents abroad. The Ministry of Economy launched a remigration plan, and the local administering body of the European Social Fund sponsored a large-scale quantitative survey, which enumerated the diaspora and surveyed respondents on questions of identity, political participation, quality of life, and return possibilities (Mieriņa 2015).¹⁰

All the while, "knowing diaspora" as a project of government remained closely linked with "knowing oneself" as a project of existential sovereignty, that is, making sure that a people existed and knew itself as a people. On the one hand, it was necessary for the state to generate data about Latvians abroad in order to govern.

On the other hand, it was necessary for Latvians abroad to know themselves so that they could inhabit the nation and thus contribute to its continuity and thus also legitimate the Latvian state. The dual nature of the quest for knowledge present in diaspora politics—that is, as ontological knowledge of oneself and as sociological knowledge about ourselves—blurred boundaries between subjects and objects of knowledge and produced a novel knowledge apparatus that along with more conventional social sciences methods entailed a quest for knowing oneself shared by state officials, researchers, and the public alike. Modes of producing knowledge were mixed: informal knowledge generated by encounters between people was combined with formal knowledge generated by surveys. For example, at the already mentioned high-level meeting, Kārlis presented some basic statistical data generated by Latvian economists and geographers. This created a sense that the state knew or was working toward knowing its diaspora. However, Kārlis also provided anecdotal evidence from his own encounters with Latvia's mobile citizens on planes, at dinner tables, and in meetings.

Despite the fact that the state intensified its diaspora activities and Kārlis produced more and more stories of Latvians—and even some Russians—who realized that, despite being abroad, they were, after all, Latvian, not all of Latvia's citizens took up the call of the state. Many, especially Russian speakers, remained distant, even hostile, engaging with the Latvian state only when they needed to take care of paperwork (for example, to renew the passport). At the same time, more and more people did turn up for various communal events, such as the midsummer celebrations at the Latvian property Straumēni (Cathorpe Manor) acquired in 1975 by the Latvian organization Daugavas Vanagi, which was established in a post–World War II war prisoners' camp by former Latvian legionaries. Latvians turned up for these events regardless of their political orientations. Many of those who attended the celebrations continued to be critical of the Latvian state, its politicians, and public life in Latvia (Kaprans 2015; Kešāne 2011).

And yet, despite critical attitudes toward the state, many of Latvia's citizens abroad, both Latvians and Russian speakers, turned up not only for celebrations, but also for the 2012 referendum on the status of Russian language in Latvia. The referendum, as I show in the following section, was perceived to be crucial for the continued existence of Latvia as a national state. Thus, Latvians abroad readily mobilized to assert their and the Latvian state's existential sovereignty, while at the same time criticizing the Latvian state for its failure to care for the well-being of the population.

Reterritorialized Nation and Sovereign Agency

In 2011, a group of Russian-speaking activists initiated a referendum on the introduction of Russian as the second state language in Latvia (Druvieta and

Ozoliņš 2016; Ijabs 2016). This initiative came in response to the post-Soviet state's language politics, which aim to counter the effects of the Soviet nationalities policy by designating Latvian as the state language and regulating language use in the public sphere (Dzenovska 2018a). The activist group, led by Vladimir Linderman and Yevgeny Osipov, both referred to as radicals due to their involvement with Russia's National Bolshevik Party in the case of Linderman and a small left-wing extremist group in the case of Osipov (Ijabs 2016, 298), gathered the ten thousand signatures necessary for the state to initiate the process of organizing a national referendum. The organizational process involved another stage of signature gathering, during which one-tenth of Latvia's citizens signed in support of the referendum. The referendum was set for February 18, 2012.

Despite expert calculations that the referendum did not pose a serious threat to the Latvian language and thus the national foundation of the state, the fact that a significant portion of Latvia's Russian-speaking citizenry supported it created a palpable public sense of embattlement among Latvians, including among those residing abroad. As a result, the language referendum turned out to be the most widely attended referendum after the restoration of independence, with 71.3 percent of Latvian citizens coming to the polls and 74.8 percent voting against the motion, that is, against making Russian the second state language. Among Latvians abroad, attendance was also high, with 79.2 percent voting against the motion and 20.5 percent for.¹¹ Most important, however, the referendum produced not only a high voter turnout, but also what Iván Arenas and I have previously described as "barricade sociality," namely an affective and visceral togetherness that conjured up a sovereign people with constituent power (2012, 646).

In January 1991, Latvia's residents mobilized to defend the newly reestablished Latvian state from Soviet military units that wished to prevent the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In expectation of the arrival of the Soviet military units, known as OMON, Latvia's residents built barricades around strategic points in the city, such as the parliament building and the radio, and television headquarters. People came from all over Latvia to build and guard the barricades. On the barricades, the differences between Latvians and Russian speakers were momentarily dissolved, though never forgotten (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012, 652–653). Nevertheless, the barricade moment conjured up the people as a revolutionary and constituent power, a subject with a will and ability to refund, defend, and legitimate the independent Latvian state. In the barricade moment, the people were more like a "cosmic force" than a body of citizenry (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012, 652), united in diversity against a hostile military force. It was the liminality of the revolutionary moment and the ephemeral nature of the people as a sovereign that allowed for embracing the presence of Russian speakers without a sense of embattlement. This barricade moment has remained in collective memory as a moment of unity and possibility, even as political frontiers between variously

defined majorities and minorities began to emerge as soon as the restored state began to govern (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012).

The 2012 language referendum produced resonant affective togetherness, especially abroad, where Latvia's citizens, both Latvians and Russians, felt that they needed to go the extra mile to assert—or contest—the existential sovereignty of Latvians as the state-bearing people of the Latvian state. For example, one London-based acquaintance produced a video of people standing in a line that curved around the block, waiting in rain to cast their votes. Some of those standing in the line could be heard singing.¹² Another acquaintance posted a Latvian News UK video on her Facebook page, accompanied by a commentary that she, too, voted, and that this entailed some sacrifice insofar as she had put on clothing inappropriate for the rainy weather.¹³

In the news video that lasts about eight minutes, an elderly man points out that the referendum is an unprecedented event, when a people wish to defend their rights to language, while living in another country and standing in a very long line in rain. Another man, who refused to speak in Latvian, stated in English that he voted for making Russian the second state language in Latvia. The tension—and therefore the sense of embattlement—was palpable. Another man, originally from an eastern region of Latvia, but residing in London for three years, explained, in Latvian, that he had come to vote for a different Latvia, for a Latvia that can find a compromise, for a Latvia that is willing to accommodate people who speak Russian, and thus prevent them from leaving the country. A young woman, born and raised in London within a trimda family, but holding Latvian citizenship, said she had come to vote, because language is the “flag of our state.” Another woman, also born in an “old exile” family and living in London, stated that she is voting against the motion to make Russian the second state language, because she does not wish to visit “her state” and not be able to participate in public life, because it takes place in Russian.

Subsequently, in interviews conducted by Latvia's social scientists as part of a large-scale project on migration and diaspora, UK-based citizens described their experiences in terms similar to those used in the early 1990s, when describing the barricades.¹⁴ Only the frontier had shifted (Laclau 2007). The frontier no longer stood between an all-inclusive, if ethnically diverse people and hostile foreign forces as in 1991 (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012), but between citizen groups, one defending the existential sovereignty of the Latvian nation, and the other contesting the national identity of the state and the status of Latvians as the state-bearing nation. However, the sense of embattlement was similar. For example, a woman interviewed by Mārtiņš Kaprāns said: “The line to vote in London was really very, very long, and so Dainis and I considered leaving. But then we heard some of Latvia's Russian-speaking citizens call out: ‘Down with the dog's language! Down with the dog's language!’ And then we are standing in that line and I say to

Dainis: ‘You know, even though it’s cold and the line is long, I am not going anywhere, I will stand in this line, I will go and vote. . . . If the guy had not said it . . .’” (Kaprans 2015, 122). Another interviewee noted his desire to decide for himself: “Had to do something, could not afford not to participate and have someone else decide for us. In London, you had to stand in a very long line for several hours, it was very cold. . . . But it was, in a way, touching to see such a large crowd of Latvians and Russians. There were some emotions. . . . But, largely, people were cozy, friendly, and talkative” (Kaprans 2015, 122).

Civil servants and activists involved with diaspora politics were very pleased with the political activity of Latvia’s citizens abroad. They thought that their political activity was a surprise for Latvia’s politicians, and that it demonstrated how diaspora matters for the nation and the state. Kārlis, especially, repeatedly invoked the referendum in subsequent events to point out that: “We see motivation . . . when people realize that they can be useful to the state, when they realize that their vote counts, they go and vote.”

Despite the result of the referendum, and the warm feelings produced by the sense of embattlement and the resulting ethnonational solidarity in voting lines, the Latvian public, legal experts, and politicians found it worrisome that the foundational aspects of the state could be subjected to a popular vote, thus opening the possibility that a demographically reconfigured people might undo the national foundations of the state through democratic process. The president’s Constitutional Rights Commission argued that popular sovereignty was misused here, that the “actually existing people” did not have the authority to change the foundations of the state once they had been established by the constitutive power of the “original people” (Konstitucionālo tiesību komisija 2012). And the original constitutive power, they argued, most certainly belonged to Latvians as a cultural nation with a political will to establish their own state (Konstitucionālo tiesību komisija 2012, 71).¹⁵ Even though the pre-2014 Latvian constitution did not explicitly state this, the commission argued that the document should not be viewed in the spirit of positivism (that is, as a position that there is nothing outside the text) and that therefore the state-bearing status of Latvians could be inferred from historical analysis (Konstitucionālo tiesību komisija 2012, 94).

The 2012 opinion of the Constitutional Rights Commission served as justification for the constitutional reform that followed in 2014.¹⁶ As part of this reform, the parliament approved a preamble to the Latvian constitution for the purpose of rendering the implicit constitutional core explicit, that is, for the purpose of stating that the Latvian state is a national state established by Latvians and for the purpose of ensuring the continuity and flourishing of the cultural nation of Latvians.¹⁷ The opinion posits two immutable features of the Latvian constitution: the legal identity of the state—that is, the Latvian nature of the state, and

the political order of the state, namely democracy. These two features, the commission argues, cannot be changed by a demographically defined people (i.e., the majority of the current body of citizenry), because then the actually existing people would be violating the legal order established by the constitutive people (Konstitucionālo tiesību komisija 2012, 20). The only way to change the legal identity and the political order is through revolution, which the commission, not surprisingly, does not recommend. In that sense, the language referendum could be considered anticonstitutional even though, as the commission notes, the actually existing people did manage to act as a “qualified constitutional legislator,” namely a legislator that reaffirmed—rather than contested—the national identity of the state (Konstitucionālo tiesību komisija 2012, 45–46).

The opinion also states that a politically mature people requires its own state, if it is to operate in the international community of sovereign states, thus providing a legal argument for what exists in the public sphere as an existential state desire and civilizational aspiration (Konstitucionālo tiesību komisija 2012, 12). Moreover, the commission explicitly addresses the question of mobility insofar as the opinion states that “everyone who considers himself or herself as belonging to the Latvian nation [*latviešu nācija*] has a relationship with the Latvian state—between every Latvian, regardless of where he is located, and the Latvian state, there is a real, sociologically identifiable nationally cultural tie” (Konstitucionālo tiesību komisija 2012, 76). “Every Latvian,” the opinion continues, “can say that Latvia is their state.” The political nation can be more expansive, the commission concludes, and include minorities, but this does not in any way affect the state-bearing function of the Latvian cultural nation (Konstitucionālo tiesību komisija 2012, 77).

Taken together, diaspora politics, the language referendum, and the constitutional reform that followed reiterate the constitutive and ontological link between the self, the cultural nation, and the Latvian state. Importantly, the claims to existential sovereignty that these events and practices entail allow for a reterritorialization of the nation, while at the same time affirming the importance of a territorial state. In such conditions, when existential sovereignty seems to be the primary form of sovereignty of concern to the Latvian polity, other functions of the state—for example, care for the population as a social body—become less important and can be more easily “delegated” to other territorial states. For example, if the Latvian state is widely recognized to be crucial for the continued existence of the nation, the British state might be recognized as better able to care for the physical bodies of the members of the nation. As a result, Latvia’s residents living in the United Kingdom happily paid taxes, which they tried to avoid when they lived in Latvia. Thus, statecraft and sovereignty came to be disarticulated from each other and differently distributed across territories

of several historically existing states. Put another way, existential sovereignty—as practices constituting the physical, cultural, and political people and the institutions that make them legible as such—is clearly distinct from statecraft as “social relations between the governing authority and people in relation to resources” (chapter 6, this volume).

For at least the last two decades, there has been a significant proliferation of scholarship on shifts in statehood and sovereignty. Much of it has attributed these shifts to economic globalization, and thus has viewed sovereignty and the state in relation to economic governance. For example, Aihwa Ong (2000) has written on graduated sovereignty in Southeast Asia as a mode of governance that differentiates between segments of population according to how they relate to the global market, as well as a mode of governance that is subordinated to the needs of special production zones. Saskia Sassen (1996) has argued that sovereignty and territory remain constitutive elements of the international system, but that they are reconstituted and displaced onto institutional arenas outside the state, such as new emergent legal regimes or supranational institutions, and outside the framework of national territory (see also Brenner 1998). More recently, Wendy Brown has argued that as “nation-state sovereignty wanes, states and sovereignty do not simply decline in power or significance, but instead come apart from one another. States persist as non-sovereign actors, and the characteristics of sovereignty appear today in two domains of power that are, not coincidentally, the very domain of powers that the Peace of Westphalia emerged to contain within or subordinate to nation-states: political economy and religiously legitimated violence” (2010, 23). Brown argues that “key characteristics of sovereignty,” which she, building on classical political theory, depicts as a composite figure consisting of supremacy, perpetuity, absoluteness, decisionism, nontransferability, and specific jurisdiction (2010, 22), “are migrating from the nation-state to the unrelieved domination of capital and God-sanctioned violence” (2010, 23).

This scholarship juxtaposes political sovereignty of the nation-state to transnational flows of capital, forms of economic governance, or belonging, such as religion, that reconfigure sovereignty and territory. In analyses that attribute reconfigurations of sovereignty to transnational—or, more accurately, trans-statal (Verdery 1994)—flows of capital and forms of economic governance and belonging, the nation as a political community is undermined.¹⁸ This does not mean that states do not try to defend their territories, as Wendy Brown (2010) points out. However, these are no longer sovereign acts, but rather desperate attempts to keep out a variety of illegitimate and undesirable disturbances, mostly in the form of other human beings.

I suggest here that analysis of outmigration and diaspora politics, at least within the political space of Europe, brings a new dimension to rethinking sovereignty, statecraft, and territory. Namely, it shows that reterritorialized nations are emerging as sovereign actors alongside markets and religion, alongside private legal regimes and supranational organizations. While diasporas and diaspora politics are not entirely new phenomena, the extent to which political communities are cultivated across territorial borders of states suggests that the center of gravity, as it were, of political communities may be shifting. As analysis of Latvian outmigration and diaspora politics shows, the center of the nation is no longer fixed within the territory of a state, but rather reterritorialized across multiple state territories. It could be said that the political community has become trans-statal (Verdery 1994). In contrast to the widely discussed diaspora engagement in homeland politics or what Benedict Anderson has termed “long-distance nationalism,” the phenomenon of reterritorialized existential sovereignty is not about embattled ethnics in global metropolises channeling unaccountable political agency to homelands (Anderson 1992, 12; see also Kaprarns 2015), but about the spatial reconfiguration of historically constituted concerns with the physical and political existence of the self. The framework of long-distance nationalism does not get to the problem of existential sovereignty and its reterritorialization, though it does enable discussion of the constitution of diasporic subjects as political agents via imagined homelands rather than actual places of residence. In the case of long-distance nationalism, diasporic subjects’ political agency is reterritorialized toward the nation-state. In contrast, in the case of reterritorialized existential sovereignty, sovereign agency is being distributed across territories of multiple nation-states in order to ensure the continuity of the self in time and space, even as the existence of “our own state” as a territorial unit remains important. The shift may be subtle, but noteworthy. The reterritorialized political community claims sovereign agency—in the case of Latvia, existential sovereign agency—alongside other sovereigns—for example, markets and religion—in a global space still ordered along the lines of territorial states. In other words, it is not that the market and religion—or legal regimes and supranational organizations—are replacing the nation-state. Rather, sovereign aspirations are exhibited by multiple and reterritorialized agents that are not all of the same type and that do not share the same desires.

Notes

1. The first post-Soviet citizenship law defined the body of citizenry as all those who had held citizenship during the first period of independent statehood (1918–40) and their descendants. This effectively excluded Soviet-era incomers and their children who were

granted the right to naturalize through a series of amendments and on meeting Latvian language requirements. The language law, in turn, stipulates that all those occupying public positions, from bus drivers to parliamentary deputies, must demonstrate a set level of proficiency in the Latvian language. See Dzenovska 2018 for a more elaborate discussion.

2. See <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/sabiedribas-integracija-latvija/integracijas-politika-latvija-daudzpusiga-pieejja/etniskais-sastavs-un-mazakumtautibu-kulturas-identitates-veicinasana>.

3. See activities of Russkiyi Mir here: <http://russkiymir.ru/en/>.

4. See Houston 2009 on Kurdish efforts to prove continuous existence via Western colonial and orientaling texts.

5. There were some exceptions—for example, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union to Israel starting in the 1970s.

6. It should be noted that this freedom of movement was partly restricted, insofar as only three European Union members states—the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Sweden—opened their labor markets to citizens of the new European Union member states in 2004. All others instituted a grace period during which capital could flow freely, but people could not.

7. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/94728-par-latviesu-diasporas-atbalsta-programmu-2004-2009-gadam>.

8. Some parts of this section were previously published as a brief essay in *Diasporas Reimagined: Spaces, Practices and Belonging* (see Dzenovska 2015).

9. See Ijabs 2009 for an elaboration of the liberal thought of Paul Schiemann who held that being human means being cultured.

10. See migracija.lv.

11. The precise number of those voting abroad was 39,703, which is three times more than during the last parliamentary elections. It is impossible, however, to tell what percentage this is of citizens living abroad, as the total number of citizens residing abroad is not known. See <http://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/valodas-referenduma-rekordliela-latvijas-pilsonu-aktivitate-arzemes.d?id=42143006>.

12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzLA5GiPLK4&feature=youtu.be>.

13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKgkp_yNyzU.

14. See more on the project and its publications here: <http://migracija.lv/>.

15. Throughout the opinion, the state-bearing nation, that is, Latvians, exists as an a priori subject with a political will and ability to legitimate the founding of a state. The opinion cannot allow for the coconstitution of the subject and the state, as is common in studies of nationalism (e.g., Anderson 1983), because that would undermine the logic of the argument.

16. <https://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=267428>.

17. Ivars Ijabs (2016) has referred to this as militant democracy.

18. Verdery suggests that the concept of “transnational” betrays the hegemony of the “nation-cum-state” thinking in Western political theory and assumes that the nation and the state are coterminous (1994, 3). Drawing on the case of Eastern Europe, Verdery suggests that it would be more appropriate to distinguish between trans-statal, trans-ethnonational, and transnational processes.

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