*Information about interviewee:*

*Boriss Cilevičs is a member of the political party, Harmony, and a deputy of the Latvian Saeima. Interview conducted in Riga, Latvia*

*R= Respondent – Boriss Cilevičs*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: So, from my email, you know roughly my topic, but I will just give a quick summary, I am looking at the political impact of dual citizenship policies on interstate relations. And in the case of Latvia, I am looking at the Russian citizenship arrangements or the lack of in Latvia. And some people that I have met on my trip so far have framed the dual citizenship, or potential dual citizenship with Latvia, Russia as a threat to national security. What would you say to this?

R: In general, the concept of dual or multiple citizenship has undergone a substantial evolution after world war 2. So, traditionally, dual citizenship is considered a problem, and it is interesting that after the world war 2 the Council of Europe drafted special convention to avoiding dual citizenship. We are continue for a long time, many years, and there is a process this convention, complete change its aim. So, now, after it is adopted it was not a convention of the avoidance of dual citizenship. So the relations and certain aspects of dual citizenship, the general spirit of the convention rather, encouragement of dual citizenship. A considerable extent of percent was connected with the establishment of the European union, and even more so cancellation of the mandate of conscription in many countries. Of course the relations between states is a crucial point. And these relations are also quite unpredictable, I would say. France and Germany for centuries mainly competed as rivals and enemies of Europe and now they are the closest of allies. Unfortunately this is hardly the case in our part of the world, so, weak changes which was anticipated. So, this is why originally Latvian citizenship it is based on the presumption of prohibition of dual citizenship. And it is interesting that the first law which was adopted and actually it was not even resolution or restoration of Latvian citizenship October 15, 1991, completely excluded dual citizenship. However a strong lobby of Latvian of exiles intervened and literally within a couple of weeks, amendment was adopted which permitted dual citizenship to narrow categories. So, some groups, mainly those Latvian citizens who fled to the west in 1944. So, it was allowed for them to restore Latvian citizenship, and to keep their current citizenship in the meantime. However, when the citizenship was also adopted, it was much later July 1994, this law established a tough, tight deadline for those who wanted to make use of this opportunity until June 1995. So, actually, it was less than one year. And so, several thousands of people really registered as Latvian citizens kept their citizenship mostly American, and then Canadian, Germans, Swedish, Australian and there were protracted controllers with regards to the Russian citizenship. Because originally there was no exclusions, no state was mentioned with regards to this principle, so, some Russian citizens, Russian Latvians, managed to restore the citizenship without going into legal details. So, the process ended in 1995 and situation was actually fixed until 2012 when the citizenship law was opened. One of the reasons was to extend the possibilities of dual citizenship, again there was some lobby in the department of exiles, of their descendance young generations were interested in restoring Latvian citizenship back in 1994, 1995, but after Latvia joins European Union they change their mind, as dual citizenship much more valuable of course. So one of the amendments of this law was indeed these possibilities to have dual citizenship were substantially expanded and now, according to the law in force, dual citizenship was permitted with EU member states, NATO member of states as well as Australia, New Zealand and Brazil. Its rather peculiar choice of states. Which was actually determined by the presence of a number of sizeable Latvian communities. Of course, for citizens of Brazil and Australia, it is not bad idea at all, also some EU citizenships, some travel in Europe, to travel to work here, in that case, so, that was very open. Other states basically excluded. It is peculiar that not only Russia and Belarus are excluded but also Israel and it is really a very interesting issue. Those Latvian Jews, who actually left for Israel before 4th May 1990. So, before restoration of independence, dual citizenship is allowed because they are considered emigres who are leaving from the former Soviet Union and so on, in the late 80’s it is difficult to speak of some kind of oppression during Petroski. But, anyways, that is fixed. Then later, it was not allowed. Of course not everybody duly notified Latvian authorities about receiving Israeli citizenship. So, formally, they can be deprived of Latvian citizenship, by decision of court. This was rarely done but these policies were quite selective. No one knows exactly, there is no clear algorithm. So, usually Latvian embassy prepared some at least, so for those new Israeli citizens who also had Latvian passports and they were about 100 cases decided by District Court. But, there is no algorithm at all. Some people lived for 20 years in Israel with two passports and had no trouble. But to some people were summoned here in the Court half a year after arrival in Israel. Apparently these are some part of and for many people who have Israel actually, there are still live in those countries. They have their property here and housing and started businesses here after having spent some time in Israel, they are actually commuting. It is the same with Germany, but, German citizenship is allowed. Latvian citizenship, Israel citizenship is not allowed. So, this, I wouldn’t say this causes any complications with relations with Israel. For Israel, another citizenship is not something they dream of. Because they wouldn’t like their citizens to have some other let’s say reserve. So, Israel is not so active in raising these issues. Occasionally, in my view, a quite clear case, which reveals that Latvian citizenship is based on ethnic considerations. So, this is formal institutions of citizenship is considered sort of facilitation of development of Latvian ethnic nation. So, this is why Latvian Jews were exclusively excluded. And even the case of Russia, it can be explained that some security considerations, which are unfortunately quite valid. In the case Israel, it is absolutely not the case, relations were very good, not only a very good economic relation but also very close for security. But nevertheless this is the situation with like this. With regards to Russia, it is more complicated. For Russia, protection of compatriots living abroad has always been quite a lucrative slogan but not more. So, in fact Russian policies in recent years are probably the worst which can be imagined with regards to the interest of their compatriots, with regards to Hungary, for example. So Russia the talked several times about the introduction of a formal legal status for their compatriots, this was done by Hungary, they issued Hungarian passports to Hungarians living in Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Serbia in a protracted controversy, also internationally. Russia has some very mystical compatriot status. I have no idea what it is about. I am afraid no one knows. But of course this policy is very important for consolation of the nation and I got an impression, this is my personal view that for Russia, the situation of Russians abroad is better. On one hand, those people who really have to leave, to escape, who are really persecuted, so, this is a cheap labour force, sometimes quite qualified labour force, this is first of all the case for Central Asian republics, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan to a much lesser extent, but still, and economic considerations, this is first of all Moldova and to the Baltic states, immigration to Russia was not very popular. The peak of was recorded in 1992, when migration balance was minus 52 000. Some of these was related to the collapse of the Soviet army and the collapse of big factories, which employed many people who arrived Latvia quite recently, they were never properly established here, they lived in dormitories, and after that immigration rates were not very high at all and quite soon the immigration of Russian speakers to the EU member states was substantially exceeded immigration to Russia. This was particularly after accession to the European Union, so since the beginning of this millennial we’ve lost 300 000 people. Now population of Latvia is below 2 million. 1 point 9 million while in the last year of the Soviet, the period before independence this was 2 point 66 million. Also natural increase is negative so mortality rates, exceed birth rates, but still immigration dominant is a factor. Russian citizenship was available, but relatively few people made use of this option and the exact figures is not known for a quite a long time because Russia didn’t disclose those figures. Although Latvian legislation guaranteed that those having status of non-citizens, that if they obtained Russian citizenships, they are automatically granted permanent residence permit, with some exceptions, like former military serviceman and so on. But, generally not that many people did this in practice in stark contrast with Estonia, where I guess even now the number of Russian citizens exceed the number of naturalised Estonian citizens and there is a number of non-citizens, people with no status, it is quite small. It is below 30 000. In Latvia on the contrary, much more people chose to naturalise rather than to opt for Russian citizenship and still we have much more of those who keep their status of non-citizens. And this is mostly they were retired military servicemen, people with some strong connection with the Russia, close relatives in Russia, some working connections in Russia, those people have clear motivation for Russian citizenship. And this was like this until the crisis in 2008, 2009, when the number of Russian citizens sharply increased. I am not speaking about immigration from Russia, so, particularly, national immigration, about 15 000 people, mostly Russian citizens, but this is a different story. A lot of those stayed in Latvia, so, and the reason was very simple, or Russian pensions because the retirement age for women was still 55, at that moment in Russia and already 60 in Latvian, and very many people lost their jobs at that time and particularly for women who reach retirement age and no prior-knowledge of Latvian and they have absolutely no opportunity to get another job to Latvia and they didn’t have the right yet to receive a pension in Latvia too. So, Russian citizenships, they got some pensions which at that moment was still decent. Maybe not for Riga but for the eastern part of Latvia and many of these people were patriots, who had Latvian citizenship but withdrew from Latvian citizenship and obtained Russian citizenship. This process continued for a couple of years and the number of Russian citizens living in Latvia substantially increased. Reportedly there was actually quite a substantial amount of people who actually received both passports. There are different versions about relations between Latvian and Russian competent authorities with this regard. I guess it depends on many factors including general political relations with Russia. Regularly some cases are reported with people with two passports are caught and were punished and Latvia citizenship is usually withdrawn, but allegedly there are many more who still secretly keep the passports and how they manage in crossing borders and so to change passports when it expires and so on. But this is all informal, this is completely grey area and I doubt the any reliable data could be obtained. But generally, to sum up, yes the security considerations are quite valid particularly after 2014 and we see it in some cases Russia really used its citizenship in some situations as a weapon, like Abkhazia and South Ossetia for example, they just asked Russia recent to open its citizenship to people in Donbas, and apparently this is a sort of legalisation of having this territories, having full control all over these territories, so this is why and I am not sure that it exactly Russian citizens that played a crucial role in Donbas. So, in principle, yes of course, these are Russian citizens but military servicemen it is quite clear that those have captured Crimea. But in Donbas, it was implemented military operations. Servicemen was sent there, so, security guys and so on, whether presence of Russian citizens, citizens of Russia on the spot, was meaningful with regards to success of this operation? I have serious doubts, no asked to help them. In now times, during these hybrid wars, with manipulation, so it was done by force. But it is perceived as a threat as a danger. And all these debates about citizenship, one of the strongest arguments is that we should liberalise our citizenship policies, in particular, because the need to prevent mass acquisition of Russia citizenship because it will be a select. No, no Estonia has a bigger number of Russian citizens, so I wouldn’t say it is integration problems are much bigger in Estonia. But of course it run in a public discourse, it is perceived as a legitimate motive why your citizenship is Russia is restricted and given relations with Russia, yes, it might make some kind of provocations and Russia much easier also. I don’t see great potential for the deterioration of the situation because they are bad enough already. On the Russia side I am not an expert on modern Russia, what is going on there looks simply disgusting to me. It seems to me that actually Russia and the Soviet Union never cared about their people, those inside the country and abroad, so I don’t think that humanity considerations play any role in its policies, but the so-called compatriot policies for the Russian world and so on, for me, it was just on the one hand propaganda for domestic consumption and the other in general, a lot of money was stolen because a substantial part of this money was allocated reportedly for the compatriots abroad. But it was stolen before they crossed the border of Russia and now it seems as though it reduced somewhat. So, this is very bad situation for the people first of all. But, I don’t expect any improvement. So, on the one hand it is clearly nationalistic and ethnocentric citizenship policies by Latvia. On the other hand It is a policy with a clear disregard for human considerations. It creates an instrumentalisation of citizenship and puts enormous pressure on neighbouring states.

I: I have spoken with people in the government, the Department of Citizenship, Immigration and someone from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and they have said to me that one of their primary goals is to eradicate the non-citizenship status.

R: Bluff. But no, it is people who work in this citizenship area, immigration department are quite decent civil servants. They do what the law allows them to do, so they can completely change early 90’s when it was absolutely politicised. The department was filled with non-professional but very nationalistic minded people. To have my citizenship I had to go to court trials for two and a half years. Mostly was with non-citizens passport because they didn’t like me first, because I am not ethnic Latvian and second already active in NGOs and criticised, the government. Finally I won the court case and got my passport, now it is incomparable better but then there’s those that actually define the policies. And for politicians right today, we had this very small amendment about the stateless as children, but, simply for many years, Latvia legislation was in very clear violation of the convention of the rights as a child. Because a child has a right to citizenship at birth. Yet still, 1998, we introduced this amendment, that so that they can register a new born baby as a citizen of Latvia, but, if they don’t want to, they are allowed to live here without any citizenship, which is clearly not in the interest of the child. So, paradoxically have law prohibiting smoking by the parents near the child, but parents are asked to allow baby to live without citizenship. So, hopefully now they will be fixed, but today we have very heated debate for three hours and two of our governmental parties voted against. So the draft was adopted in the first reading only because of the support of the opposition. And this is completely non-issue because it has no retractive obligation, although of course we will submit amendment to make it retroactive. Now president as the suggests to apply it to only babies who are born in January 2020 and according to our estimates, maybe 20 babies but still it is a matter of principle. They say we have a threat, and we should not sell our citizenship and blah, blah, blah all this nationalist bullshit as usual. So, there is no such goal. Politically, there is no such goal, there is a goal to get rid of such people. And what nationalists agree it is a status of non-citizen in the beginning was only a temporary solution. But they already recognise as status people but not to give them citizenship. This is also a difficult story because a couple of years ago I met with one of the guys who are experts in the citizen debates and what they did 90’s and already then, it warned them about the danger of such solutions. They said the only reasonable compromise, which was impractical, achievable, this guy told me yes of course, he relocated his status, but nightmare, imagine 20 years, 25 years and after this, you will have hundreds of thousands of citizens of Latvia. But, after the accession to the European Union, there is no lureage anymore, so, political nationality is not on the table anymore longer. So, of course this is a problem to normal Latvia. In comparison with other states, which is much more problematic, so, unfortunately the international community tends to turn a blind eye on the issue as long as everything is more or less quiet. So, there is absolutely no promotion of citizenship. So, moreover, these nationalistic policies clearly demonstrate that non-citizens are not welcome here, they are associated with Russia and all the historical concepts, but victimisation on ethnic basis, which is simply not true, because deportations in Latvia were implemented by ethnic Latvians who deported ethnic Latvians, but this was presented as genocide and so on, but in the meantime issues, such as Jewish holocaust was downplayed and it is not denied, it is recalled twice a year on memorial days but it is not present in public discourse. Roma holocaust is not mentioned around here. So, it is clearly ethnocentric concept and actually/ But because this is not racial approach, our nationalism implies it is open. So, people are welcome to assimilate. And what I suggested actually was the choices between assimilation and marginalising. But this all the language restrictions, elimination of minority education, and this nationalistic and political discourse and of course, it is repulses people and for practical purpose, of course nationalistic parties did not want Russians to nationalise because they realise they will never vote for them. By facilitating naturalisation, they shoot their own leg. This is why contrary to Estonia; non- citizens do not vote in municipal elections. So, this is sort of expert policies that we want to nationalise. No. Practical policies discourage people from naturalisation. Despite this, there is big number of naturalisations that was now, the number of naturalisations is negligible and that is about 1000 a year, a whole majority that naturalise to make it easier to leave for the UK or Germany or other neighbouring states. So, naturalisation is a certain deadlock. More and more persons among naturalisation are those that apply for naturalisation are those that are not non-citizens but recent immigrants from different countries, but mostly from Russia, but those more recent arrivals.

I: You mentioned language rights, there seems to be a tightening of Latvian language requirements at schools, for example, how has that affected the Russian population here in Latvian?

R: Very negatively. It certainly increases competitiveness in the labour market, because in order to get a job, so for our language requirements are all for jobs. In many cases they are obviously excessive, it was criticised by the advisory committee and some others, but of course, with no effect. Why is level two required for cleaners? Strong, clever people become stronger. They out compute Latvians because they speak one more language and employers are interested in having them because they may not for example like services with Russian tourists. So, the nationalists are angry about this and they try to introduce various regulations to prohibit employers, to require knowledge of other languages, which is stupid, because the client is always right. But according to legislation for example, a native is not obliged to you in another language other than Latvian. In a good cafeteria here in central Riga, you can talk with the waitresses in any languages and they will speak with you, but in other places, for young Russian you cannot learn another language this is a big problem. With schools, it is a simply a disaster because the quality of education will suffer immensely, because we don’t have teachers and we have steered a lot of teachers to teach mathematics and to teach physics and chemistry in Russian who learn Latvian, not at the perfect level, it is impossible. Most teachers are in their late 50’s. For a teacher, language is main instrument, you must speak it absolutely perfectly. For them there is nowhere to go, there is no one to replace them because we have no teachers, last year only one person graduated from the physics teachers, just one, in the entire state. But besides Latvian teachers, ethnic Latvian teachers are not very enthusiastic to go to minority schools. So, actually as a result of this reform, we obtained a real segregation system where schools were left for language instruction for ethnic culture and schools for language instruction for minorities. Of course strong and ambitious students, with parents can ensure some additional training for personal teachers and so on. They all go to good Latvian schools and this will be marginalised like immigrant schools, some New York and Paris suburbs, that effect has already manifested. Of course these students will speak much worse Latvian than current graduates. So, it is a bad idea to learn Latvian in the lessons of physics and maths. There is a huge shortage of teachers of Latvian too, even in Latvian schools, and in minority schools, it is a disaster. So, this is again, large scale marginalisation of Russian youngsters. And of course, for these guys to haven’t received proper education with no profession, you can’t leave for the UK to do some blue collar work, why would you naturalise?

I: The day before yesterday I went to Daugavpils to meet with the mayor, and he said the same thing, the policy of marginalising people in his communities is quite clear. And he said that Latvia’s neighbours will be noticing this in Russia and that this is the case and they will take advantage.

R: And this they do already. For example the natural suppression of the local media in Russian. So, lead to the complete domination of media from Russia. Which is quite aggressive but people have no choice? When quotas were introduced in private media and tv, radio they in the late 90’s and 2003 won the case in the constitutional court recognising language quotas unconstitutional. But anyway it was already too late. So, the long elimination of local broadcasting in Russian, people would switch to programmes in Latvian because it didn’t happen, because of technology development it became very easy to watch tv from Russia. This is what people can do, in fact, and all of this at times to at least restore something new and this information war started, it was doomed to fail, it was insufficient. It was very easy to lose audience, it is extremely difficult to regain the audience, in particular when competing with extremely rich and powerful Russian channels. It is not only about politics, it is not only about propaganda, it is about talk shows, certain music and performance and all kind of amusement in Russia and how can you prevent this? There is a practice in some states, China, Turkmenistan and Russia too, saw it on the internet. I hope it is still not possible, like, we still have our limits of generally democratically roots, establish our limits more and more flexible, extended but it is also technical impossible to just cut off internet. So yes, this is one more confirmations that nationalistic policies are not that profitable because people who try to defend, allegedly, must benefit from these policies, it only leads to lower competitiveness, now most professional people are leaving for Europe, bigger salaries, better social protection, parochialism generally, again, so, there is adverse consequences for naturalistic policies, there is also regard to citizenship.

I: Some people have implied that Russian federation funds are providing financial support to the ethnic Russian community. Do you believe that to be the case?

R: No. There may be some minor sums. Russian Federation is not interested in strong Russian communities here. Russian propaganda is interested in showing Russians being prosecuted and oppressed to facilitate internal consolidation. They know this feeling about being surrounded by the enemy, by a hostile world. Now the official line is, ‘what can we do for you? We can evacuate you. We can protect you’. Maybe some people who work in Russian propaganda, the provocateurs and so on. Systematically. Community, there is no communities, several organisations which compete with each other, also maybe grants for Russia world foundation but as I told there is more money stolen in Russia than UN, how to Russian communities and all of that. So, this is just intimidation and all of that. Intimidate people.