Information about interviewee:

Legal expert at the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs at the Latvian Ministry of Interior. Interview conducted in Riga, Latvia

R= Respondent – Legal expert at the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs

I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton

I: Last week I met with the Estonian Ministry of Interior at the Migration and Citizenship policy. They described dual citizenship as a threat to national security. Do you share this position?

R: Yes partly. We can say that prohibiting Latvian-Russian dual citizenship is a legislative, regulatory approach connected to the national security interest of Latvia. It's not the case that dual citizenship is not entirely prohibited, you can still have it. There are certain countries within which dual citizenship is allowed, and it is quite a wide variety of them the countries of the European Union, the NATO member states, and the countries from the European Economic Area, there are also two countries where there are a significant historical Latvian minority, Brazil and New Zealand, and there you can also have dual citizenship. All the countries that are not in this list, also Russia, you can't have dual citizenship. However, even though you cannot have dual citizenship with Russia, there are certain exceptions as well, one if them is that if I child is born into a mixed family, Latvian-Russian. Until you are 25 you can have this dual citizenship, but after 25 you have to make a choice, Latvian citizenship or Russian citizenship. There are also exceptions regarding the people who have been forced to move to other countries during Soviet occupation, like refugees, deportees, or those who left to escape the Soviet crimes. Also if we look at Russia, people who were born in Russia before 1914, they can also have dual citizenship. The overall approach is that dual citizenship with Russia is not allowed. No one is hiding it. The reason is because it is a national security threat. We have to remember that Russia is now conducting an aggressive foreign policy approach, and one of the instruments of this foreign policy, are the Russian citizens living in foreign countries. Basically, we tried to avoid the situation where Russian citizens are becoming more numerous inside our country as they can gain more influence through them.

I: Is the number of Russian citizens in Latvia increasing?

R: We don't have the data. We don't know whether they are increasing or not, but there are in certain regulations, procedures, they are losing their status of dual citizenship if they are Russian citizens. There is a tendency for people to try and to hide the fact they are Russian citizens here in Latvia. We have a situation where there are certain utilitarian considerations for the Russian minorities living in Latvia, where they try to get Russian citizenship in order to get certain state benefits from Russia. Pensions are one reason, for example. This tendency was mostly apparent five to eight years ago. In this time frame, I can agree that the number of Russian citizens in Latvia increased. This trend is most applicable to the group of people aged 50 to 55, those who of pension or retirement age. Currently Russia has increased its retirement age, so it’s possible the situation could change accordingly in Latvia. They have increased the retirement age and the interest in Russian citizenship decreases. The reason why the number of Russian citizens might decrease, is because they understand they have to go through certain procedural measures, like residence permits and also certain amount of legalisation done in order to stay here, which is why it might be a hindrance and the desire to take Russian citizenship might decrease. I would like to remind you that these are not political considerations as to why take Russian citizenship, these are purely utilitarian measures, as a lot of people want to get retirement money from the Russian Federation and for a lot of people, they have relatives living in Russia, which is another reason to take Russian citizenship, but we haven't seen any political considerations under these reasonings.

I: The number of those with undefined citizenship or grey passports in Latvia has decreased. What explains this decrease?

R: One part began the naturalisation process. In the 1990s a certain amount of people left Latvia to Russia. A small or tiny part of them have a third country citizenship. Those remaining, those are people who are not naturalising due to certain reasons and we have done some research regarding those reasons. Mostly those are people who are over 50 or 60, there is also a part who have indicated that the current status is acceptable for them. They are also waiting for certain legislative moments, that certain procedures will be cancelled and citizenship will be granted automatically. Such hopes are cultivated by certain political powers since the 1990s. Both from external influencing agents and internal ones. They are hoping in certain moments, that these requirements will be cancelled, and citizenship will be granted just like that. There is also one group which would like to naturalise but the hinderance for them is the requirement to know the Latvian language. The interesting thing, that from those people, a lot of them could be able to pass this exam, but they are very self-critical and they believe their language knowledge is not sufficient. We have also organised certain information campaigns, but we have tried to use this open-door policy, so they can come in and try this test themselves, without any repercussions or anything. Those people who are answering that they would naturalise but language is a hinderance for them, those people are in retirement age. For people over sixty-five, the difficulty for the exam is lower, but because of their age, they have certain barriers to learning the language.

I: How has Russia's decision to allow visa-free travel for Latvian non-citizens affected naturalisation and demographic numbers?

R: A certain part of the people said that the non-citizen status is acceptable for them because it is possible to travel to Russia without any hinderance, but the simple answer is not a big impact. We are not talking here about hundreds of thousands of people, we are talking here about tens of thousands of people max.

I: How has European Union membership affected Latvia's citizenship policy?

R: Well actually the largest number of applications for naturalisations were received between 2004 and 2007. As you know 2004 is when we joined the European Union and we believe this provided a significant stimulus for people to naturalise. There were thousands of applications. That was exactly at this time frame, and the prevalent factor was joining the European Union.

I: What is the process if someone is found to have an illegal second citizenship?

R: First step is that we inform the person that we have discovered this situation. In Latvia it’s an administrative procedure which is under the judicial control. Taking into account is that our judicial capacity is not big and all the procedure goes from prosecution, defence, everything, it can take up to 5 years. Even during this procedure there is still a possibility for the person who is being prosecuted, they can still say no to this illegal citizenship. They have to start this process of renouncing this citizenship. In that case, we are dropping this procedure this person is not becoming stateless.

I: Are there any regional specific challenges in Latvia's citizenship policy?

R: Actually there is not a big difference in the situation between Riga and Daugavpils, and it is not like the case of South Ossetia in Georgia on the eve of invasion it was discovered that approximately 90% of people had Russian citizenship. Of course, we don't know, but we have found any such symptoms which could be the same as the case we mentioned before. One of the reasons why there might be an increase in Russian citizens, then five years ago, is that people in our country, also reached retirement age an increasing amount. They also began to look for opportunities about how to get more money. We have conducted demographic research and we are looking at the non-citizen community, we can see that the trend of the aging population than it is in the rest of Latvia, so there are a lot of people who are reaching retirement age and less and less young people.

I: What is the biggest challenge for the department?

R: To advocate for the desire to obtain Latvian citizenship and spreading information so that people would know that the process is not as complicated as they think it to be. After information campaigns we have seen there is a positive tendency that there are an increasing number of people applying, just after this action we are conducted.

I: Since Latvia became an EU member state, has there been a large number of people leaving the country?

R: Yes, however, it is more likely after we joined Schengen Agreement in 2007.

I: How long is the naturalisation process in Latvia?

R: According to legislation it is up to one year. However in practice, usually it is 3 or 4 months, if applicant does all the necessary procedures and submits all the necessary documentation.

I: How has language impacted Latvian citizenship policy?

R: In 2013 there were amendments to the naturalisation legislation, so if both non-citizens have a child, they just have to check a box and the naturalisation procedure is simplified at the time of birth. You can indicate that you want the child to have Latvian citizenship and it will be granted. Currently there is a discussion ongoing in the Latvian parliament, that we should stop granting non-citizenship status that are born to non-citizens. So at birth they are automatically Latvian citizens. It’s an initiative from our president and its currently submitted to the parliament, but we do not know whether it will be successful or not. However the amount of such children is pretty minimal, there were only 33 people of this kind. One of the requirements of Latvian citizenship is that you have lived here for 5 years. If I child is raised here, there is usually no problem with that. In certain cases, school exams are taking into account, in some cases the language exam is easier and sometimes you don’t have to take it at all.