Information about interviewee:

Spokesperson at the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Interview conducted in Riga, Latvia

R= Respondent – Karlis Pantelejevs

I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton

I: The non-citizenship legislation is still relevant in contemporary debates about citizenship in Latvia. What is the latest from your perspective?

R: It is true that there are many pressures on Latvia to eradicate the non-citizenship status within Latvia. These pressures are sometimes internal, but mostly external as international institutions have persistently and consistently criticised Latvia’s non-citizenship status. The monitoring mechanisms such as the OSCE and the UN human rights convention have pressured us to adapt, which we have, consistently and systematically done. You know, there is always a negotiation, these organisations want us to abolish it instantly, which is an impossible position and we make amendments to achieve a compromise. On Thursday 9th May, an amendment is reaching our parliament to abolish the non-citizen status for children. This is of course a human rights and children’s rights issue to which we are of course, keen to rectify, but it is also a common-sense issue as it affects only 35 children a year.

I: Some I have interviewed have described dual citizenship as a national security threat. Do you share this position?

R: Let me be clear from the start that at the MFA we do not consider the Russian population in Latvia to be a national security threat. This would be a bad way to approach the issue. That being said, there are approximately 240,000 non-citizens in Latvia who are more connected to the Russian way of thinking and to the Russian Federation. Of course, there are security implications to this, and it is for this reason, along with some other principled reasons relating to emotion and history, that we cannot simply grant all these people with Latvian citizenship instantaneously. We are also aware that there are a number of the population who have both non-citizen passports and Russian Federation passports. We have heard estimates of around 50,000, however, with no accurate data it is impossible to verify this.

I: Some have called for the eradication of the Latvian language requirement in the naturalisation process. Others have suggested this would be a security threat. What is your position?

R: We have constantly facilitated the naturalisation process in line of our primary goal of societal integration and the eventually eradication of the non-citizen status. The parliament’s cabinet authorities have been dealing with this as their function, so it is an administration issue rather than one relating to our constitution. However, there are those within the government now, from the more conservative parties that systematically object even the most common-sense legislation easing naturalisation. These objections are based on their principles which, in turn, are based on the emotional memory, the emotional trauma from the Soviet Union. They believe that Latvian citizenship should not be given away for free. However, it is hard to imagine, for example, that children can be culpable for actions occurring 30 years ago, this of course is illogical, but it is a sensitive issue. One of the problems is that Russia has not accepted the contemporary situation.

I: How has the Russian ‘Compatriot Policy’ affected Latvia?

R: We are now engaged in a constant battle to tackle Russian disinformation and their powerful media policy. However, unlike Russia, we are a democratic state bound by European Union legislation and our own moral obligations. We simply cannot counter Russian propaganda with spreading fake news or disinformation and we are therefore limited in our tools. What we have done however, in line with our beliefs, is to consistently aim for society interaction of non-citizens by facilitating naturalisation processes. We have also introduced legislation aimed at promoting the Latvian language. As a result, there is more and more Latvian language spoken in schools and less and less Russian. For example, the last three years of all schooling for children in Latvia must be conducted in Latvian, except of course, Russian language courses.

I: What do you believe is the goal of the ‘Compatriot Policy’?

R: It is absolutely clear that it [Russia’s Compatriot Policy] is part of a long-term foreign policy goal and is a permanent feature of their foreign policy towards Latvia. The aim or mission to protect their populations has resulted in a situation where there is now constant and persistent strife between Latvia and Russia. They do this to create a platform where they can show their power against us. It is so extensive that within the citizenship department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that 90% of our work is done against Russia. The ‘Compatriot Policy’ is a tool to wield power and for Russia it is a very important tool to create a constant threat and is a strain on the relations between the two countries. This is their aim. Our work is basically to progressively defend ourselves through international fora. The pressure and work are primarily done through international monitoring mechanisms and even through these mechanisms, Russia is able to apply pressure and they maintain a strong presence through these institutions. This results in more work, but it is not a problem as we are transparent with our legislation and objectives. We receive thousands of letters from the so-called human rights activists, who are really Russian language speakers trying to further their agenda. The OSCE national minority rights commission makes frequent visits.

I: Is there a fear that an increase in Russian citizens within Latvia may result in more demands from Moscow to how they are governed?

R: We very clearly follow the recommendations from the Bolzano report, that states that there are no overlapping jurisdictions, where national minorities are concerned. There are very few bilateral relations between Latvia and Russia, apart from at a working level, because of the reasons I mentioned previously. It is also my belief that the problems in Ukraine have shifted the focus from Latvia to Ukraine with regards to resources allocated to the issue from Russia. We have seen a decline in Russian protestations in recent years, except in regards to key moments. For example, we received complaints from Russia a couple of weeks ago, when our Constitutional Court approved the Latvian language law passed by parliament. We also receive yearly protests and statements from Russia on March 16th when there is an unofficial remembrance of those Latvians that were forcibly conscripted to the SS army. I am sure we will receive some sort of statement on Thursday (9th May ‘Victory Day’).

I: Is there an institutionalised relationship between the Russian Federation and the Russian population of Latvia?

R: It is public knowledge, I think, that the Russian Federation finances some human rights NGOs who have a close working relationship with the Kremlin. They frame their work as being anti-fascist, but I must be clear that I do not think they do an effective job. The Human Rights Committee is a confusing title, as they do not work in human rights, but they are funded by Russia. This is done through the Russkiy mir policy and is part of the same thing that you are looking at and is one of Russia’s foreign policy tools. We can clearly see that many of the activities done by the Russian Federation with regards to the Russian people in Latvia is not done in good faith. Passportization in Donbas, Crimea, Georgia and Moldova are not done in good faith. It is a very important tool for the Russian Federation.

I: How does the dual citizenship debate affect Latvia?

R: Introduction and/or widening of the scope of dual citizenship, as well all decisions that pertain to the citizenship policies of a State, are complex and sensitive issues, especially in Latvia, due to our specific historical experience/context. As such, developments in these matters depend on the political will of the main legislative body – the Saeima. Latvia’s Citizenship Law of 1994 did not provide for the possibility of dual citizenship for Latvian citizens. This changed in 2013, when after scrupulous two year-long discussions that involved relevant experts, the Parliament adopted Amendments to the Citizenship Law.

 When adopting the Amendments in 2013, Latvia emphasized that the previous edition of the Citizenship Law (last amended in 1998) no longer reflected the current situation, and did not take into consideration Latvia’s membership in the European Union and migration processes. Inter alia, one of the main developments in the context of the Amendments was the introduction of dual citizenship. In this regard the Parliament emphasized – also within the text of the Amended Law –that the need for recognition of dual citizenship stems from the political goals and interests of Latvia and the need to preserve the community of Latvian citizens under conditions of increased mobility. The Amended Law enabled citizens of Latvia who acquire the citizenship of another member state of the European Union, European Free Trade Association or North Atlantic Treaty Organization to retain Latvian citizenship; dual citizenship is now also an option for Latvian citizens who have acquired the citizenship of a state that has signed an agreement with Latvia on recognition of dual citizenship, and permit dual citizenship with Australia, Brazil and New Zealand.

I: What is the MFA’s position on Russian citizens living in Latvia?

R: According to the latest official information from the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, there are 53,934 citizens of the Russian Federation residing in Latvia. However, Latvia’s authorities are aware that there is a group of persons - Latvian citizens or Latvian non-citizens (former USSR citizens who do not have the Citizenship of Latvia or that of any other state) that have acquired Russian Federation’s citizenship and have not renounced their Latvian citizen or non-citizen status, as they are legally obliged to do (Latvian law does not allow for dual citizenship with the Russian Federation). However, there is no feasible data available on this, as the Russian Federation does not disclose this information to the Latvian authorities. This attests to Russian Federation’s ambiguous policy towards Latvia, as, from one hand, it continually calls upon Latvia – including international organisations – to facilitate the naturalisation into Latvian citizenship of non-citizens; on the other hand, it grants Russian Federation’s citizenship to non-citizens.

I: Is there extraterritorial naturalization (“passportization”) here in Latvia?

R: It is hard to evaluate the “extraterritorial naturalization” process per se, as this is a relatively recent phenomena, according to academics, and, obviously, States might have different reasons and motivations for their willingness to expand the amount of its citizens abroad (see above Latvia’s example with regards to dual citizenship). However - and this is more from the perspective of international politics  -  looking at concrete examples when the “passportization” mechanism has been/is used by concrete international actors, we can see clearly that this can play a significant role in processes that have a profound effect on international order. In the context of the above mentioned, Russian Federation’s “passportization” policy (distribution of passports) in Moldova (Transnistria), Ukraine (Crimea and Donbass), Georgia (South Ossetia, Abkhazia)  has been condemned in various international documents such as United Nations, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe’s (PACE) and European Parliament’s resolutions. For example, more recently (December 2017), with regards to the conflict in Ukraine, the UN General Assembly adopted  resolution (RES/73/263) that, inter alia,  condemned  “the imposition and retroactive application of the legal system of the Russian Federation, and its negative impact on the human rights situation in Crimea, the imposition of automatic Russian citizenship on protected persons in Crimea, which is contrary to international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions and customary international law, and the deportation and regressive effects on the enjoyment of human rights of those who have rejected that citizenship”. It goes without saying that Latvia continues supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and consistently maintains a non‑recognition policy concerning the illegal annexation of Crimea. The same pertains to Georgia and its regions - South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This entails condemnation of all actions performed by the occupying force that – prior or after the occupation  –  consolidate the occupying  force’s presence at the occupied territory.