

Europe - What's Next? A Journey through Latvia/In Focus (6:52 – 10:00)

Deutsche Welle

We head off southeast to Daugavpils, home to Latvia's largest ethnic Russian community. Their presence is the result of massive Soviet relocation campaigns following World War II when Stalin made Latvia part of the USSR. We are told that most ethnic Russians living here today were actually born here. While the older generation still tends to speak only Russian, more and more of the younger generation also speak Latvian.

Daugavpils appears to be much more colourful and lively than the first time we visited over a decade ago. This was how things looked in 2000 – grey, depressing and hopeless! We interviewed Margareta who teaches Russian school children. She firmly believes they should be fluent in Latvian. Now we hope to find her again and also Katia, one of her star pupils from more than 10 years ago.

Our search has borne fruit. Now 43, Margareta is still teaching Latvian. But in addition to the children she now also instructs adults at a private school. Right now, she is testing her pupils' speaking skills. She tells us a good working knowledge of the language is more important than ever when it comes to finding a job. It is far more difficult teaching older students but Margareta says the majority of ethnic Russians want to integrate.

She adds that those who have already gone to the trouble of learning Latvian have easily integrated into society. After class, Margareta meets with Katia. Ten years ago, Katia was a bright young student. Now she's married with a young child and working on her business degree. Katia tells us that she had no problems with prejudice but that mastering the language was essential. Most young ethnic Russians have had the same experience. We ask her how she will raise her young daughter.

She answers that the child will retain her Russian heritage since the grandparents cannot speak Latvian. That will force her to keep up her Russian but Katia insists her daughter also master Latvian and an additional foreign language.

But the integration process is not always so smooth. Some Latvians still see the Russian minority as a major problem. One of the biggest stumbling blocks is the language barrier with some Russians still unwilling even to change their street signs.