



## RESOURCE 10

**‘Non-citizens, aliens in their own country’, article by Camille Petit**



**‘They were citizens of a country that does not exist anymore. They are not stateless, nor foreigners. They are called ‘non-citizens’. Today in Latvia, about 280,000 people have this complicated status, due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The issue is representative of the integration problems of the country’s Russian minority.**

‘In 1993, I lost my citizenship. I couldn’t work for the Riga City Council anymore. I couldn’t buy a land anymore. I couldn’t work in a political party anymore. I understood that I was a citizen of second-class.’ Aleksandr Gaponenko has been living in Latvia for sixty years, but is considered a ‘non-citizen’ in his home country. Having this status means that he has no political rights, and some professions related to the public and judiciary sectors are prohibited to him. Apart from these exceptions, he enjoys the same rights as every Latvian citizen.

### **A complex identity**

His identity has multiple roots. It is torn between his mixed family background, the Russian culture he grew up with, and Latvia, his homeland—where he has always lived. He identifies himself as Russian first.



<http://www.euroviews.eu/2014/2014/04/29/aliens-in-their-own-country/>

Audio recording of Aleksandr Gaponenko (32 seconds)

Others consider themselves as Latvian and Russian. This is the case for Elizabete Krivcova, who co-founded the Non-Citizens’ Congress with Aleksandr Gaponenko—an NGO promoting full democratic rights for them. She naturalised in the nineties, in order to be a lawyer.



<http://www.euroviews.eu/2014/2014/04/29/aliens-in-their-own-country/>

Audio recording of Elizabeth Krivcova (36 seconds)

### **‘The exam is very ideological’**

These multiple and complex identities are an obstacle to naturalise as their Russian heritage is in contradiction with the Latvian one. To receive the Latvian citizenship, non-citizens have to pass a test of fluency in Latvian and a test of knowledge about the national anthem, significant facts of history and the basic principles of national constitution. It is considered to be unfair by many non-citizens.

‘The exam is very ideological. You have to recognise that Latvia was occupied by Russia. The questions about Soviet times are only about its dark side. Concerning the economy, it’s about industrialisation and forced collectivisation in the agrarian sector. When it’s about people life, then it’s about repression. A friend of mine explained me how he prepared it. He said, ‘I know what I think about the history but for the exam I have to think exactly the contrary to have the correct answers’,’ explains Elizabeth Krivcova.

For Aleksandr Gaponenko, who always refused to naturalise, taking the Latvian citizenship means complying with the policy of the government. ‘To pass the examination it is necessary to confirm that I agree with this model of society, and I completely disagree. I don’t want to accept that Latvia is only for ethnic Latvians.’

Valerij Komarov is also a former non-citizen who naturalised when his first child was born, about ten years ago. ‘Passing the exam meant that I recognised that I was an immigrant, even though I’m born in Latvia and I have always lived there. It is not my fault if the geopolitical situation changed. So I did it for my son, to avoid him getting this status as well,’ he says.

### **The influence of Russia**

The naturalisation process is even less enticing since the Russian government decided to offer visa-free travel to Russia to non-citizens in 2008—an attractive offer for some of them, who still have family in Russia. The influence from the East is also indirectly revealed through a difference in retirement system and economic benefits granted to Russian citizens that push non-citizens to opt for Russia. Since 2010, it has exceeded the number of those receiving Latvian citizenship and has continued to rise. Although, there is no research about the reasons why non-citizens choose the Russian citizenship rather than the Latvian one, the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs admits that earlier retirement age may be the reason. According to Gaponenko, it is also a form of protest against the policy of the Latvian government towards the Russian minority.

### **An issue in deadlock**

Today, the issue remains unresolved as the government doesn’t consider non-citizens legitimate enough to automatically receive the citizenship of Latvia. In almost twenty years, the number of non-citizens has decreased from 730,000 to 280,000. It is mainly due to death as only 140,000 have



been naturalised since the creation of the status. Karlis Eihenbaums, the Foreign Minister's Press Secretary, explains why the issue is not as easy to solve.



Audio recording of Karlis Eihenbaums (1:44)

Even if the automatic naturalisation is out of the question for the Latvian government, it continues nevertheless to encourage non-citizens to apply. Throughout the years, the Latvian language and history exams have been simplified and the Citizenship Law amended in order to facilitate the procedure. The naturalisation fee has been reduced several times for some people (low-income, unemployed, retired) and abolished for politically repressed and disabled persons. But the Non-Citizens' Congress wants much more than an easier naturalisation process. A material compensation, another policy towards ethnic Russians and less restrictions regarding professions would be the first step. Yet the dialogue is totally cut with the Latvian government. People working in this organisation even have the conviction that it 'is waiting for the death of all non-citizens.'

### **The European elections, next hope**

The next hopes for changes are on the European side. 'There is a prospect that social democrats and left wing parties will come to the head of the European commission and parliament after the elections,' says Elizabete Krivcova. But as Aleksandr Gaponenko points out, 'as a non-citizen without political rights, I couldn't influence this.'

See the interactive timeline to learn more about the historical background of the creation of this status at the end of the article.

Source: [Euroviews 2014](#)

- What are the main challenges faced by the ethnic Russians in Latvia?
- How has history contributed to the current situation in the country?
- What has been the Latvian Government's response to this situation?
- What suggestions would your students put forward to resolve some of the issues?