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A Latvian-Russian Identity? Qualitative research on the formation of identity of young Russian speakers in post-Soviet Latvia

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Abstract:
The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the dispersion of approximately 25 million ethnic Russians across 15 newly independent states, sparking inquiries into issues of nationality and identity. This study specifically focuses on the Baltic state of Latvia and examines the complex dynamics shaping the identity and integration of Russian speakers in the country. Drawing on a qualitative approach, the research involved eight narrative interviews with Russian speakers from Riga aged 22-33, delving into their identity formation. Emphasizing the interplay between the Russian speakers in Latvia, the Latvian state, the Russian Federation, and the broader international sphere, such as the European Union, revealed multifaceted relationships that shape the sense of belonging of these young Russian speakers. Additionally, the study highlights the significance of contextualizing the Russian Federation's previous foreign interventions and the persisting war in Ukraine, extending the analysis to encompass the period since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and their influence on the perceptions of young Russian speakers in Latvia. The findings reveal distinct generational differences in the situatedness within Latvian society and an increased sense of belonging to Latvia. Despite this, many participants still experience marginalization by the Latvian state and maintain a notable distinction from Latvian culture, thus displaying a certain attachment to Russian culture while still demarcating from today's Russian Federation. However, the respondents' positioning between Latvia and Russia also indicates an affinity towards the European Union, showing a nuanced and fluid sense of identity. The study recommends further research focusing on varied educational levels, rural regions, and the perspectives of young ethnic Latvians to foster a comprehensive understanding of societal dynamics.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Latvia, Russian speakers in Latvia, identity formation, ethnic minorities, impact of the European Union, generational differences

Table of Contents

List of Figures

1. Introduction

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent establishment of 15 independent sovereign states, approximately 25 million ethnic Russians were spread across the former Soviet States, now confronting entirely novel questions regarding nationality and identity (Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 2f.; Coolican 2021: 5; Dadashova 2021: 52; Kolstø 1996: 2). The implementation of varying strategies and policies in terms of the situation of Russian-speaking communities led to differing conditions of the latter among the vast territory of former Soviet countries (Brubaker 2011: 1786; Cheskin/Kachuyevksi 2019: 3; Kolstø 1996: 18-29).

In the context of Russian-speaking communities, the Russian minorities in the Baltic states Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia represent unique positions in the post-Soviet realm due to their substantially high proportion in relation to the majority population, which consequently influenced the countries' nation-building strategies and policies (Coolican 2021: 5). Research often couples Estonia and Latvia as one exemplary case, resulting from their comparable numbers of ethnic Russians within their societies as well as similar approaches to nationalization (Coolican 2021: 8). Nevertheless, although three decades have passed since the declarations of independence of the three Baltic states, it is still essential to consider the societal dynamics within these countries, embedded in contemporary domestic and geopolitical occurrences. For a better understanding of these dynamics, it is therefore crucial not to consider a single 'Baltic' entity but to look at the developments in each state separately.

In this research, Latvia has been chosen as a distinctive case study due to its particular significance, primarily attributed to its hosting of the second-largest population of ethnic Russians among former Soviet countries, following Kazakhstan (Cheskin 2015: 78). Hence, the 'Russian [language] maintains a more pervasive influence than in the two other Baltic states' (Pisarenko 2006: 752). The majority of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia arrived after World War II, primarily as part of the workforce from Russia and other Soviet Republics (Cara 2010: 124). In return, a notable decline in the percentage of ethnic Latvians between 1935 and 1989 has been stated, dropping from 77% to 52% (Cara 2010: 124; Cheskin 2017: 4). A significant part of the population that migrated to Latvia during the Soviet era and had already established multi-generational roots was subjected to rigorous and exclusive nationalization policies and laws implemented by the newly established Latvian government in the beginning of the 1990s (Cheskin 2017: 2; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 202f.). The Russian-speaking minority

included mainly ethnic Russians but also Ukrainians, Belarusians, and other people from the Soviet realm (Cheskin 2017: 4). Therefore, in the following, the term 'Russian speaker' will be applied to move away from a simple homogenous characterization of this group and generally describe the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia.

Russian speakers in Latvia quickly found themselves in a completely switched situation as they, and especially ethnic Russians, were the dominant group during Soviet times with primary use of the Russian language (Cheskin 2017: 2; Commercio 2003: 38; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 187f.; Cara 2010: 124). However, they were now placed on the opposite side, namely that of an ethnic minority. Latvian was established as the exclusive official language, accompanied by strict language laws enforced by the former Latvian government to support the public use of the Latvian language while restricting the prevalence of Russian (Cheskin 2016: 71ff; Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 3; Cara 2010: 125). Therefore, the status and rights of the Russian-speaking minority have been a subject of controversy and tension in Latvia since then. Due to the implementation of restrictive citizenship laws, initially, only residents with ancestors in pre-Soviet Latvia before 1940 were automatically turned into Latvian citizens (Cheskin 2017: 13). Consequently, many Russian speakers and former Soviet citizens became non-citizens (of and within Latvia) which led to limited rights and a particular exclusion from full participation in society (Cara 2010: 124; Cheskin 2015: 84, 2019: 2). This decision was legitimized by the understanding that the Soviet Union illegally occupied the Baltics (Cheskin 2015: 74). To acquire Latvian citizenship, non-citizens must undergo a naturalization process which entails demonstrating proficiency in the Latvian language and exhibiting an understanding of Latvia's history (Cheskin 2013: 290). Hence, a narrative delineating ethnic Latvians as the core ethnic group was established (Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019; Cheskin 2017: 13; Brubaker 2011: 1789). Since the aftermath of the Soviet Union, Latvia has been undergoing a crucial challenge of social integration among different ethnicities (Birka 2016: 219; Muiznieks 2010: 276).

Until today, approximately a third of the Latvian population is Russian speaking, and the ratio is even balanced in Latvia's capital, Riga (Coolican 2021: 6). Consequently, where do Russian speakers in Latvia find themselves situated three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union? On one side is Russia, frequently emphasizing its ties to the Russian speakers living abroad, depicting them as part of their 'homeland' through the term 'Russkii Mir' (Russian World) to consolidate as a singular cultural unit. Here, academic attention has been paid once more since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Birka 2016: 219; Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 3) and even

more recently since Russia's so-called 'special military operation' in the entire Ukraine as of February 2022. On the other side is Latvia, where a significant number of Russian speakers were born (surpassing 60% as of 2000) which makes it challenging to associate and identify with due to exclusive policies (Cara 2010: 124).

As Latvia accessed the European Union and NATO in 2004, the increasing impact of the European Union as an international actor was progressively factored into the processes shaping identity, particularly among the younger generation of Russian speakers born and raised in post-Soviet Latvia (Cheskin 2013: 290; Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 13; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 192). Moreover, it was explored that younger individuals in particular have increasingly demonstrated abilities to speak the national language, and a certain degree of integration occurred (Cheskin 2013: 309). Additionally, scholars propose that Russian speakers increasingly experience a sense of detachment from today's Russian Federation, especially in political contexts (ibid.). Nevertheless, a certain cultural affiliation towards Russia cannot be excluded (ibid). Consequently, a particular loyalty towards Latvia and an adaption of Latvian narratives is anticipated (Cheskin 2013: 290). Nonetheless, persisting segregation between ethnic Latvians and Russian speakers has led to challenges regarding their perception as full members of Latvian society (Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 201). Accordingly, an emergence of a 'Latvian-Russian' identity has increasingly been assumed, acknowledging a particular orientation towards Europe (ibid.). This phenomenon also implies a transformation of identity features extending beyond the national states (Cara 2010: 138; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 201).

A new dimension appearing in academia concerning Russian Speakers outside of Russia pertains to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 when the Russian Federation self-claimed as the protector of Russophones living abroad (Birka 2022: 54; Cheskin/Kachuyveski 2019: 4). Consequently, the emphasis on the Russian Federation as 'homeland' increased due to an expanding engagement as an agent of the Russian speaking 'diasporas,' which is also described as a crucial element of the country's foreign policy (Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 1). Therefore, it is necessary to closely monitor the reactions and interactions of the other sides, namely the effects on Russian speakers abroad. This has appeared increasingly relevant since the Russian military intervention in the entire Ukraine as Russia legitimizes this, among others, to protect Russian speakers from a subjected genocide (Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 4; Birka 2022: 54).

Building upon these considerations, the research aims to elucidate an understanding of the identity formation of young Russian speakers born in Latvia. This exploration is situated within the historical backdrop subsequent to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, accompanied by national and ethnicity-related developments and challenges. Moreover, this thesis endeavors to assess the impact of contemporary Russian political developments and interventions, particularly since the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, on the self-identification of young Russian-speaking individuals in Latvia.

In a broader context, this study seeks to investigate not only the formation of sentiments of belonging and affiliation among second-generation or subsequent immigrants but also the impact of today's Russian Federation on its purported 'Russian compatriots' - referring to Russians living outside Russia - especially as perceived by younger individuals who, despite their common language, may possess minimal direct connection with the country in question. The trajectory is anticipated to be shaped significantly by the internal progressions and policies within the 'newly' established nation-state, in this case Latvia.

This research commences with exploring the conceptual framework, offering an in-depth approach to the research subject (Chapter 2). Initially, a brief overview will elucidate the sociological classification of identity. Subsequently, the conceptual framework encompasses three sub-chapters: the first embraces the development of the situation of Russian speakers in Latvia since the disintegration of the Soviet Union (2.1). Here, the concept of nation and ethnicity will be outlined in the context of the 'newly' created nation-state of Latvia. Moreover, the concept of social and ethnic boundaries will be introduced (2.2) and applied to the Russian-speaking minority in sub-chapter 2.3. A quadratic model has been developed, acknowledging identity formation through an interplay between four actors: the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia, the state of Latvia, the Russian Federation, and the international, European, or 'Euro-Atlantic' space. Accordingly, the research questions will be elaborated in detail.

The third chapter outlines the methodology and empirical research approach of this thesis. It commences with a brief exposition of qualitative social research (3.1), followed by a description of the concept of the narrative interview as the chosen method for data collection (3.2). This chapter further includes the preliminary planning before conducting the research (3.3). Based on this, a detailed outline of the sampling and the research subject will be provided (3.4), encompassing the established sample criteria, the interview recruitment process, and an

overview of the resulting research sample. Further, the applied narrative interview guideline is briefly presented (3.5), followed by a description of the interview conduction, including the chosen locations and encountered challenges (3.6). The chapter ends with an exploration of the data analysis (3.7), including a presentation of the applied approach of Philipp Mayring's qualitative content analysis and the corresponding coding framework, which finally leads to an outline of the main categories developed in this study.

Subsequently, in Chapter 4, the results are presented, discussed, and contextualized within the academic discourse. Sub-chapter 4.1 addresses the complex relationship of young Russian speakers with Latvia. This is followed by Sub-chapter 4.2, titled 'The cultural affiliation towards the "homeland" Russia' which encompasses a range of statements concerning the multifaceted relationship with the Russian Federation on various levels. Further, aspects of the international sphere are highlighted (4.3). Subsequently, the presented findings are delineated, accompanied by an exposition of additional facets of identity articulated by the participants (4.4). The fifth sub-chapter consists of a critical discussion and reflection of the conducted research (4.5). Finally, this work will be completed with a conclusion and outlook on potential research questions.

2. Conceptual Framework

Identity is a complex, ambiguous, and demanding concept that has been the subject of academic research for many decades (Sekulic 2004: 455; Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 6). Traditional views classify identity as an 'individual characteristic' clearly distinct from the outside world (Sekulic 2004: 455). However, sociological understanding of identity blurs these boundaries between the individual and the outside world due to interaction, embedded and shaped by the social environment (Elias 1970: 14). According to this perspective, identity is not only influenced by the environment and inseparable from it as individuals but their identities are formed through continuous interactions with society as well (Smith 1991: 4). However, identity is undoubtedly not unchangeable; instead, it is shaped and defined by individuals and collectives through an array of ongoing processes (Kachuyevski/Olesker 2014: 306). Furthermore, once established and firmly rooted in society, identity can serve as a point of orientation for more support and security in society (ibid.). Moreover, individuals develop an identity within regular scenarios to understand themselves, their actions, commonalities, and distinctions from others (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 4f.). Therefore, on the one hand, the aim is to combine groups with similar interests to organize collectively, but on the other hand, pointing out differences to other

groups to keep a particular distinction (ibid.). A perspective, which is mainly established in research about social movements, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism, sees identity more as a required similarity that underlines mutuality among actors of a particular group, leading to a defined, delimited group with a certain sense of cohesion and a distinction or even aversion towards outside actors (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 7).

An individual is not bound to one single identity but can also coin several identities as affiliations to class, religion, gender, territory, and nationality, which can be intersectional and contextually dependent on each other (Smith 1991: 4). Ultimately, the choice of which identity to mobilize will depend on a variety of factors, including the prevailing social norms and values (Sekulic 2004: 455).

After a brief summary of different concepts of identity, the conceptual framework follows, embedding dynamics of identity formation into the research topic and the state of research.

2.1 Situation of Russian Speakers in Latvia since the Aftermath of the USSR

In Central and Eastern Europe, the fall of the Soviet Union led to an overhaul of former state structures and the establishment of ethnic autonomies and had, therefore, a significant impact on how minority groups define themselves (Cebotari 2016: 648). Furthermore, the increased rise of national identities in the region is perceived to be politically motivated and determined by the state, resulting in an ethnicity-based definition of nationality (Cebotari 2016: 648 f.)

Research on Russian speakers outside the Russian Federation, the so-called 'near abroad,' has been increasing since the 1990s (Cheskin 2012: 325). Furthermore, the development of citizenship questions resulting in the status of 'non-citizens' in Latvia became the focus of academics, and varying approaches evolved, which will be outlined in the following.

Terms as national identity and national belonging are prevailing in the debate on ethnic minorities in the post-Soviet realm; therefore, the construct of a nation will be pointed out briefly: 'Nation' has been serving as a prevalent framework within social and political dynamics since the 19th century (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 5). Initially, scholars viewed a nation as a collective of individuals who possess a certain collection of characteristics that both unite and differentiate the group from others (Shulman 2002: 2). Presumed 'nations' have been the ground for declarations and assertations to create a particular 'self-determination'

(Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 5). Nevertheless, the subsistence of nations as a crucial factor of identification can be analyzed without assuming the actual existence of nations as a rigid allocation (ibid.).

Until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many Russian speakers among the Baltics regarded themselves primarily as Soviet citizens rather than as 'Russians' (Latitin 1998: 91), and an 'ethnic identity was not easily replacing the Soviet supranational self-understanding' (Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 191). Here, it is crucial to explain that ethnicity and, therefore, ethnic identity are not single-layered terms that can be clearly defined. It can be seen as the subjective feeling of belonging that arises from the perception of a shared culture and common descent, highlighting the importance of history, shaping the actions of individuals in their everyday lives, the construction of networks, and their interactions with others (Alba 2005: 22f.; Brubaker 2004: 2; Hansen/Hesli 2009: 4; Stein/Shneiderman 2023: 1; Wimmer 2008: 973). Language has been considered an indicator of a shared ethnic identity, and certain cultural practices are seen as common and 'typical' (Lytra 2016: 135).

This historical-culturally-based, primordial view is divergent from Fredrik Barth's constructivist approach (1969), which defined ethnicity as the result of social processes rather than as culturally given because cultural aspects are likely to differ within time and place. Most researchers recognize ethnicity as a socially constructed concept instead of primordial given, depending on social stimuli and therefore consider socialization of an individual as the main trigger for identity development (Jaspal/Cinnirella 2012: 508; Barth 1969: 11; (Stein/Shneiderman 2023: 1). Nevertheless, the recognition of ethnicity as a construct does not limit its societal influence nor its impact in the everyday lives of individuals (Stein/Shneidermann 2023: 8). It cannot be neglected entirely as a concept but continues to be part of explanatory models of identity.

Different theoretical approaches subdivide nation and nationalism into a division of civic and ethnic. These perspectives stem from two parallel interpretations of nationhood: grounded in shared citizenship and rooted in shared ethnicity (Brubaker 2004: 133). In contrast, 'civic' (or also 'political' or 'territorial') identity is more likely to be set within a framework of residency, rooted in a specific geographic area instead of historical and cultural domains (Hansen/Hesli 2009: 4; Brubaker 2004: 137; Shulman 2002: 2). It is governed by a unified system of laws and institutions with shared cultural values and traditions, political wills, and equal rights

(Hansen/Hesli 2009: 4; Sekulic 2004: 461). Additionally, civic affiliation is considered an 'inclusive' identity without strong ethnic affiliations, which is defined as 'rather chosen than given' (Brubaker 2004: 137; Hansen/Hesli 2009: 4).

The transition due to the new nationalizing processes from Russians as a majority group during the Soviet times to a minority should not be neglected (Laitin 1998: 69; Cara 2010: 127). Nevertheless, former studies on this realm in the Baltic countries did not investigate an immediate strong identity formation in the aftermath of the Soviet Union (Cheskin 2015: 73). The question was posed whether it was possible to search for a generalizing identity to not neglect the diversity of the regarded group with for instance a constant diffusion of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, since many people had relatives hailing from various parts of the former Soviet Union, while others belonged to longstanding Russian communities in the region that existed before the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 198). Civic and ethnic identities, therefore, do not necessarily exist separately but tend to exist simultaneously, while one might be more significant than the other (Kuzio 2002: 36).

Thus, David Laitin's ethnographic research (1995) described the formation of a 'Russian-speaking nationality' in the Baltic States and applied a mainly linguistically focused approach instead of ethnically. Several studies here stress that this type of identification certainly differs from 'Russians in Russia' and ethnic Latvians (Cheskin 2013: 288; Kolstø 1996: 611). However, the role of Latvia's state policies in the citizenship issue after the collapse of the Soviet Union should not be neglected. The demarcation of those who had ancestors in Latvia before 1940 and those for whom this was not the case, and the establishment of the status 'non-citizen' revealed a strong rejection of the Russian speakers who had arrived during Soviet times (and therefore not entitled to the Latvian citizenship), as well as positioning them as second-class citizens (Cheskin 2013: 290; Commencio 2003: 44). According to Patsiurko and Wallace (2014) it can be considered 'an exclusionary policy, one which helped to harden ethnic boundaries between groups and caused resentment' (p. 195). The possibility of naturalization was also not necessarily desirable due to the framework conditions set for it, such as fluent knowledge of Latvian and certain skills about Latvian history (Cheskin 2013: 290; Commencio 2003: 44).

Not only official institutional established a particular focus and segregation on 'ethnic Latvians' as dominant core society, but perspectives on Latvia and its long fight(s) for independence

established a strong national identity (Cheskin 2013: 289; 2015: 75; Smith 1999: 82). Such identity embraces everything related to the period of the first independence from 1918 to 1940 which is considered as ‘a time of great prosperity’ and seen as ‘temporal normality’ (Cheskin 2012: 326). ‘Normality’ defines what it means to be ‘Latvian’ (speaking Latvian, holding Latvian cultural values and a particular loyalty to the Latvian state, also in terms of narratives). Russian speakers and the Russian language were put outside of the core nation and were seen as a threat to the portrayal of a Latvian (Cheskin 2012: 326, 2013: 288ff.). A so-called ‘homo Latviensis’ was constructed, which is predominantly seen as counterpart to the ‘homo Sovieticus’ (Cheskin 2012: 326, 2013: 289; Zepa 2006: 74). Thus, it can be undoubtedly stated that Latvian narratives are a crucial part within society, especially concerning historical perspectives and interpretations of the events of the 20th century, and the related collective memory (Cheskin 2012: 329, 2013: 288, 2015: 79).

In official Latvian memory, the Soviet Union represented an occupying power that oppressed, persecuted, and exported the 'ethnic' Latvian people (Cheskin 2013: 288). At the same time, the Soviets moved many Russian speakers to the country where it implemented a strong policy of ‘Russification’ (Cheskin 2013: 288; Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 11). On the Russian-speaking side, the focus was put on other issues: the Soviet Union is considered a liberator from fascism at the end of the Second World War and thus provided for the emergence of industry, provided jobs and welfare state structures, also due to the consumption of media from Russia (Cheskin 2015: 79). Many academics put this so-called ‘memory war’ in the Baltic states as a result of the state and nation-building policies implemented during the late Soviet and early independence eras (Cheskin 2015: 79, Golubeva 2010: 320).

Additionally, Latvia’s political system has been regarded as unique as it is mainly divided according to ethnicity, which means there is an apparent division between ‘Latvian’ and ‘Russian’ parties (Kažoka 2010: 81). One might contend that, aside from the primary ethnic distinction, all other differences among political parties are significantly less relevant, even from the perspective of the political parties themselves. This rationale clarifies why Latvia frequently witnesses political party alliances that would be challenging to imagine in other parts of Europe (ibid.).

2.2 Social and Ethnic Boundaries within Societies

Latvia's nationalizing policies regarding citizenship and language have been considered more forceful compared to other successor states, and thus leading to integrational issues (Brubaker 2011: 1787). Due to this, ethnic Latvians and Russian speakers have often been put as strict antagonists (Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 11; Brubaker 2011: 1787).

In order to better capture affiliations 'to those individuals who do not subscribe to identities that do not match the sole national or ethnic system of values of the host nation,' a four-category typology instead of a dichotomy has been introduced by Hansen and Hesli (2009) (Cebotari 2016: 649). Thereby, capturing variations in individual identification mainly involves two dimensions: the degree of attachment that minorities feel towards their community and the relation to their 'hosting nation' (Cebotari 2016: 648). Consequently, the four-part typology mentioned above encompasses the following dimensions: civic, ethnic, hybrid, and atomized identities (Hansen/Hesli 2009: 4). While the former two categories have been extensively addressed, the subsequent sections will expound upon the latter two.

A hybrid identity emerges when individuals cultivate an inclusive mindset towards external social groups while simultaneously retaining a sense of belonging to their own community (Cebotari 2016: 651). Embracing heterogeneous societal structures and recognizing the importance of minority rights are also integral aspects of this particular identity type (Hansen/Hesli 2009: 4). In contrast, an atomized dimension can be classified differently, whereby the individual exhibits no affinity towards either the 'ethnic in-group' or the 'societal out-groups' (ibid.).

The authors additionally investigated certain factors that potentially influence the formation of the above-mentioned identities. They suggest that the effects of socialization, a sense of belonging to the predominant religion within the ethnic community, a more regular use of the mother tongue, and experiences of discriminations could shape the direction (Hansen/Hesli 2009: 21). Notably, language is seen as a significant factor in understanding identity feelings (Cebotari 2016: 653).

For the development of specific identity types, it is essential to situate the shaping of identity and affiliation among Russian speakers in Latvia within a multifaceted interplay of what are

referred to as social and ethnic boundaries rather than simply setting the Latvian 'core nation' against the Russian-speaking minority. These boundaries serve to analyze and describe the processes and circumstances that foster specific affiliations within heterogenous societies (Alba 2005: 27; Kachuyevski/Olesker 2014: 304). It has been demonstrated that a generalization of boundaries is impossible, and owing to their varying nature, every society should be analyzed differently (Alba 2005: 21f.).

On the one hand, boundaries encompass categorial aspects by dividing people into distinct social groups, namely into ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Sanders 2002: 327; Wimmer 2008: 975). On the other hand, boundaries also include a social aspect, which refers to the relationships that develop through people’s interactions with these categories (Wimmer 2008: 975; Alba/Nee 2003: 59). Ethnic boundaries, however, are commonly perceived as a social construct, encompassing group values which are distinct in cultural convictions and behaviors (Sanders 2002: 327). The definitions of a group and its members within the broader society are highly influenced by the prevailing societal context and circumstances (ibid.). Therefore, a social group can never be regarded as a stand-alone construct within its own cultural values and beliefs, but the environment and its relationships must be considered as well as prior historical trajectories, making them path-dependent (Sanders 2002: 328; Wimmer 2008: 975; Alba 2005: 27).

Due to constantly changing societal structures, boundaries do not indicate complete closure and are better understood as dynamic processes (Sanders 2002: 328; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 190). Some boundaries are categorized as ‘bright’ (Alba 2005 :26), indicating that they are easy to assign and separate from each other. Conversely, others are regarded as ‘blurry’ (ibid.), allowing for potential points of intersection. The degree of blurriness or clarity of a boundary hinges on 'normative patterns' that dictate the interplay among different social actors (ibid.). However, not every group might perceive the boundary as similarly bright or blurry (Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 6). Subsequently, a multilevel process theory of ethnic boundary-making will be introduced, influenced mainly by Andreas Wimmer (2008: 1010). It encompasses various dimensions of analysis, extending from the national level to the micro-level processes involved in daily boundary disputes.

First, it is essential to highlight that the nature of boundaries is fluid, leading to the identification of various types of boundary changes. Wimmer (2008: 986) pointed out five different types on

the individual level: repositioning, blurring, expansion, contraction, and inversion. Repositioning or crossing boundaries denotes an individual transitioning from one boundary to another without altering the boundary itself (Alba 2005: 23; Wimmer 2008: 988). Secondly, boundary blurring illustrates a more dynamic process with more ambiguous lines of the boundaries (Alba 2005: 23; Wimmer 2008: 989). Expansion, or shifting, represents the ultimate process involving a complete shift from one group situated in a former boundary into another (Alba 2005: 23; Wimmer 2008: 987). Here, the opposite would be boundary contraction which advocates for more narrow boundaries than those currently in place within the social environment (Wimmer 2008: 987f.). Lastly, the concept of inversion does not involve the relocation of the boundary itself but rather a reordering of the ethnic groups' hierarchy within a society (Wimmer 2008: 988).

In the context of a distinct, bright boundary with clearly defined demarcations for individuals, the likelihood of boundary crossing is more probable than, for example, shifting (Alba 2005: 24). In contrast, blurred boundaries might arise when individuals are perceived as members of both sides of the boundary simultaneously or as shifting between one group and the other at different times (ibid.) One way in which boundary ambiguity can emerge is when the mainstream culture and identity are relatively permeable, accommodating the integration of cultural elements introduced by immigrant groups (Alba 2005: 25).

Concerning the research focus of this master's thesis, it is fundamental to consider boundary changes among second or subsequent generation members of an immigrant minority. These changes are primarily observed to occur between complete boundary crossings and boundary blurring (Alba 2005: 23). Individuals are certainly not capable of choosing how ethnic boundaries change and their positions within these (Wimmer 2008: 990). Additionally, it is essential not solely to look at individual factors but to perceive them as a complex interplay of different actors and influences characterized by continually evolving dynamics, which are also shaped by the historical and societal path-dependency of preceding conditions (Wimmer 2008: 1011; Alba 2005: 27). Wimmer highlights four central spheres that potentially influence the composition of ethnic boundaries and, therefore, contribute to varying outcomes of identity: various degrees of political salience, differing social closure and exclusion, cultural variation between groups and historical stability (Wimmer 2008: 972; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 190).

Moreover, individuals are situated within a social context, and their strategies can be influenced by a combination of internal factors and their positioning within the social structure. These internal factors primarily encompass institutional orders (provided mainly by the national state), power distribution, and social networks. Institutions and networks significantly contribute to shaping the prominence of ethnic divisions and the strategy chosen by the boundary making individual. Simultaneously, power imbalances and the degree of political salience influence the characteristics of the resulting boundaries and the location of the boundaries drawn (Wimmer 2008: 990, 995f.; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 190). This is particularly evident in the case of newly evolving states after the fall of the Soviet Union, as state institutions evolved just as ethnic communities did, rendering them to dynamic participants in the process (ibid.). Not only variating senses of ethnicity but also changing identities due to generational shifts should be considered when looking at boundary shaping within communities (ibid.).

Building upon this, mechanisms exist that can alter the structures of the social field and, therefore, the action of ethnic boundaries. External factors here encompass what are known as ‘exogenous shifts’ and ‘exogenous drifts’ (Wimmer 2008: 1005). The prior process includes significant institutional changes within society, like establishing a nation-state or transitioning to democracy. At the same time, an exogenous drift oppositely emerges due to the spread of new methods of defining boundaries from the international arena when the novel discourses or ideas of ethnicity propagate from foreign nations (Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 191; Wimmer 2008: 1004f.). Additionally, changes can be prompted by endogenous (or internal) shifts, which can be attributed to the strategies adopted by the actors within the social field (Wimmer 2008: 1005).

According to Alba (2005: 27), specific factors that further influence and create boundaries include citizenship, religion, and language. Citizenship is central in regulating access to fundamental rights within a society. Beyond political rights, citizenship is expected to facilitate more than just political rights; it also grants individuals greater mobility, allowing them to depart from and return to society freely (Alba 2005: 27; Brubaker 1992: 21). It is fundamental to acknowledge that language is more likely to contribute to a gradual, intergenerational assimilation process, particularly when individuals are proficient in managing two languages (Alba 2005: 35).

2.3 The Interaction of Four Entities

The newly evolved 15 national states among the former USSR and the novel distribution of nationality, territories, names, and administrations in a former multi-ethnic country brought prominent discrepancies between cultural and political boundaries. The prevailing shift towards the nationalization of political domains in the area resulted in tens of millions of individuals finding themselves outside their designated 'homeland,' while placing the 'national' identity of both individuals and territories under increased examination (Brubaker 1996: 55). Roger Brubaker (1996) introduced a framework that combines the previously mentioned concept of ethnic boundaries and the situation of Russian-speaking people in Latvia, called triadic nexus. It includes three intertwined and mutable actors that are constantly affecting and competing with each other: the nationalizing, newly independent state (in this context, Latvia), the minority group (in this case, Russian speakers), and 'the external 'homelands' to which they belong, or can be construed as belonging, 'by ethnocultural affinity though not by legal citizenship' (in this instance, Russia) (Brubaker 1996: 4; Cheskin 2015: 79).

Latvia officially entered the 'European cultural space' as it joined the European Union and NATO in 2004 along with the other Baltic states (Galbreath 2003: 36). As a result of its impact on minority policies in the Baltic States, the international sphere has been added as a fourth component to this model in previous research, thereby expanding Brubaker's original framework into a more applied quadratic nexus with four interrelated actors (Birka 2022: 53; Cheskin 2012: 325, 2015: 80, 2019; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 192). Consequently, Brubaker's (1996) 'single, interdependent relational nexus' (p. 58) was extended into a more layered quadratic nexus with four intertwined players and serves as a widely used theoretical framework in the field (Cheskin 2015: 82f.). According to Patsiurko and Wallace (2014: 192), Latvia's accession into the European Union has contributed to alleviating ethnic tensions. This results from the EU's membership requirements, which encompass the protection of minority citizenship rights and the promotion of integration, which improved the rights and status of Russian minorities in the Baltics (ibid.).

Rather than viewing every actor as a singular, uniform entity, the extended model impacts the complex, and sometimes contradictory effects of each node within the nexus (Cheskin 2015: 85). A more comprehensive description of the pillars and concepts of their degree to which individuals establish connections and identify with will follow. It is also relevant to acknowledge that the four elements are unstable entities. The quadratic nexus solely tries to

emphasize their dynamics and interconnected natures. They should not be objectified or approached in a substantialist manner (Brubaker 1996: 60).

The model does not consider a minority group as an internally cohesive, externally well-defined group determined by ethnic demographics but is shaped through a collection of interconnected political perspectives (Brubaker 1996: 64). Brubaker (ibid.) describes a dual conflict within a minority group. That means, on the one hand, there is an effort to establish and maintain a specific posture toward the homeland. On the other hand, the endeavor is to achieve and preserve a particular connection to the nationalizing state. It is an intertwined dynamic in the sense that the ability to maintain the stance of a mobilized national minority hinges upon asserting and sustaining the notion of the host state as a nationalizing or nationally oppressive entity (ibid.).

The recently established national state, or rather the 'nationalizing' (Brubaker 1996: 63) state as preferred by Brubaker, is described as a term that highlights 'a dynamic political stance – or family of related yet competing stances – rather than a static condition' (ibid.). Furthermore, a nationalizing state is not defined by the understanding and explicit articulation of several involved actors. Instead, it is characterized by how it is regarded within the national minority or the external homeland (ibid.).

A state initially emerges as an 'external homeland' or 'kin state' when cultural and political actors determine certain people living in foreign states as members of a unified transnational nation (Brubaker 1996: 5). This recognition asserts that a shared national identity entails a form of responsibility, extending beyond their citizens to encompass ethnic compatriots residing in other states (Brubaker 1996: 5, 67). The influence of the external homeland depends on several factors and certainly fluctuates: the degree of social integration of the minority group, the shape of the transnational identity, and whether the population perceives itself as a part of this 'external homeland' (Birka 2016: 2020). Sensitivity during contextual shifts, mainly due to significant political changes or scenarios of crisis or an unfavorable reception, can influence the perceived importance of the 'external homeland' and, for instance, create a coping mechanism in the sense that it promises a specific support (Guarnizo/Portes/Haller 2003: 1238; Portes/Guarnizo/Landholt 1999: 220). Thus, the focus on the Russian Federation as 'homeland' increased due to an expanding interaction as an agent of the Russian-speaking 'diasporas', which is also described as a crucial element of the country's foreign policy

(Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 1). Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, during which the Russian Federation declared itself as the protector of Russophones living beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, the focus on the role of Russia has intensified, particularly since the latest large-scale war throughout entire Ukraine (Cheskin/Kachuyveski 2019: 4; Birka 2022: 54). Consequently, the Russian language has been branded as the defining feature that shapes the sense of affiliation (Birka 2016: 221). The fear of a similar narrative justifying an invasion of Latvia has been present ever since, primarily due to the perceived influence of the Russian-speaking media that has been considered relatively strong (Birka 2016: 229).

The fourth node, the international level, has not yet undergone the same level of research as the previous three and, therefore, is not presented in equivalent detail. However, the preceding relationships and effects will be stated in the following section:

The relationships within the nexus are primarily characterized by varying stances from the nationalizing state, the external homeland and the international institutions, which can be perceived as either positive or negative attributes, creating tensions and a complex web of conflicting forces within the affiliations of Russian speakers (Cheskin 2012: 332, 2015: 81). Based on this, the three actors interrelating with the ethnic minority can be further divided into three different areas: political, economic and cultural (Cheskin 2015: 81). In the political realm, this is manifested through various indicators, including the perspective on their host country's independence, levels of belief and engagement in political representation channels, the extent of support for European integration, and the strength of their territorial affiliation with Latvia (Cheskin 2015: 82). Within the economic domain, socio-economic factors that either attract or deter individuals from aligning themselves positively or negatively with each respective node. Moreover, within the cultural branch, the focus shifts to how cultural perspectives and representations, such as memory orientation, linguistic practices, and ethnic traditions, influence individuals' alignment with the concepts of the three actors (ibid.).

Indeed, this is only a simplified explanatory model, which could never apply to all the Russian speakers in Latvia. First explanations allow us to assume that Russian-speakers might increasingly feel alienated from Russia and reject links to the Russian Federation (Cheskin 2013, 2015: 84; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 198). Nevertheless, this does not exclude a certain cultural affiliation to Russia, particularly for those who do not necessarily regard it as their primary 'external homeland.' Therefore, language has emerged as 'one of the most important

makers of ethnic identity in Latvia' (Cheskin 2012: 332). This situation fosters a connection to a Latvian or Baltic Russian identity that differs notably from Russians residing in Russia (Cheskin 2015: 83; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 198). This can be distinguished between cultural and political forms of identification and, therefore, being a part of the Russian cultural world ('russkii mir') but not engaging in the Russian political world ('rossiiskii mir') (Cheskin 2015: 74; Coolican 2021: 6). Being able to identify oneself with the Russian culture based on ethnicity does not simultaneously mean to identify oneself politically with today's Russian Federation (Cheskin 2013: 309). According to Birka (2016: 233), those who expressed stronger ties with Russia tended to show a preference for an exclusively Russian-speaking environment and even stated a reduced belief in freedom of expression in Latvia. Furthermore, a stronger attachment to Russia was associated with a negative attitude towards Latvia and Latvians (ibid.)

When examining the dynamics of ethnic boundaries in Latvia, they are perceived as rather bright, primarily due to reactions to contentious policies implemented by the host state (Cheskin/Kachuyeski 2019: 12; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 197). Therefore, non-porous boundaries are more attributed to the political level than to the civil society sphere (Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2019: 12). Notably, the impact of Latvia's restrictive citizenship policy is most pronounced (Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 197). Alba (2005) stresses that citizenship is an influencing aspect of ethnic boundaries as it 'governs access to fundamental rights in a society (…)' (p. 27). Furthermore, older and less educated Russian speakers experience heightened exclusion and often find themselves confined to local Russian-speaking enclaves (ibid.).

A significant factor for changing perspectives is generational differences. The latter creates more permeable and less bright boundaries despite being considered rigid (Brubaker 2011: 1785). Prior scholarly discourse has often overlooked this aspect, as emphasized by Cara (2010: 138) and Patsiurko and Wallace (2014: 203). Notably, younger people who did not experience the Soviet system are attributed to a more agreeable attitude towards the new nationalizing state (Laitin 2003: 218). Further investigations explored that these people have been increasingly using and speaking the Latvian language, indicating a notable trend toward a degree of integration or, at the very least, an intended pursuit of integration (Cara 2010: 130; Cheskin 2013: 291, 305). Consequently, rather than completely giving up the 'Russian Speaking identity,' there has been a notable adaption of Latvian narratives, leading to a hybrid 'Latvian-Russian' identity, thereby associating with both Latvian and Russian cultures (Cara 2010: 138; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 201).

Research also tends to downplay the impact of Europe as a transformative factor in reshaping societal boundaries. Apparent generational disparities among the Russian minority populations in Latvia concerning language proficiency, worldviews, integration into the host societies, and their encounters with Europe are expected. Self-affiliation as Europeans and a strong willingness to travel, study, and work in other European countries and on the global stage were opportunities to pursue younger peoples' interests (Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 201). Speaking several languages, especially English, has been regarded as an essential skill for the future (Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 200). Therefore, additionally, a specific identification with Europe and, therefore, a particular shift of identity features beyond the national state is expected (Cheskin 2013: 305; Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 201).

Russian identity in the Baltics cannot be simplified to solely linguistic or Soviet aspects, nor can it be confined to a narrow ethnic definition. Instead, it can be assumed that Russian speakers in Latvia tend to evolve somewhat hybrid identities as individuals redefine their affiliations with their host countries, Russia, and the global community. The inherent diversity within the Russian-speaking communities in the Baltics renders them more receptive to external influences, including especially those from the European Union (Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 199). The role of younger people who grew up in independent Latvia is of particular interest since it is here that newer, more fluid forms of identity have been explored, which go beyond simple ethnicity.

Although Russia's influence as 'external homeland' has been estimated differently, for instance, Commercio (2010: 19) considers it overvalued in Brubaker's nexus due to relatively low explicit influence at this time. Since then, new aspects of Russian speakers outside Russia have appeared in academia. Hence, it is necessary to closely monitor the responses and dynamics among the Russian-speaking people in Latvia, increasingly since the Russian war of aggression in the entire Ukraine, by legitimizing these actions, among others, to protect Russian speakers from the subjected genocide.

Based on the presented conceptual framework, several aspects will be explored in the following empirical part of this thesis. Notably, Latvia has been recognized as a state with firm ethnic boundaries prevailing due to the vital distinction between Latvians as a 'core nation' and the Russian speakers as a minority group. Given the highlighted generational transition, it is

necessary to draw attention to younger Russian speakers to possibly find more permeable boundaries. Therefore, the first question of this research will be formulated as follows: *How do young Russian speakers who were born and live in Latvia identify themselves*? While Latvia has been the place of birth and residence for multiple generations, further sub-questions could be investigated. These could refer to a particular hybrid Latvian-Russian identity mentioned in the literature, significantly demarcating from Russians in Russia. Due to the fourth node, 'international actors', newly added to the triadic nexus, the influence of the European sphere and its affiliation towards it will also be considered here. Of particular significance is the role of multilingualism and proficient English language skills among the younger Russian-speaking demographic in Latvia, thus warranting a focus on individuals proficient in English. This facilitates the opportunity to extend the analysis beyond the purview of the two principal actors, Latvia and the Russian Federation, potentially unveiling the emergence of a transnational European identity that contains mere civic and ethnic affiliations. Nevertheless, it remains pertinent to acknowledge that an individual's identity may also be significantly shaped by other defining factors such as gender or socio-economic class.

Furthermore, a comprehensive examination will be conducted to discern how Latvia's younger Russian speakers have been reacting to Russia's latest kin-state policies and interventions. Due to the increasing narrative of the 'Russian World' in the post-Soviet space used by the Russian Federation and the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is of high relevance to include these actions. Consequently, the following question will be posed: *How has the Russian invasion of Ukraine since 2014 affected the self-identification of these Russian speakers?* Changed dynamics in the nexus above are considered here, especially on the political and cultural level of the 'external homeland' of Russia.

3. Methodology and Empirical Research

The subsequent chapter will provide an in-depth exploration of the methodological approach applied in this study. This will encompass basic definitions of social research alongside an exposition of theories about qualitative thinking (3.1). Subsequently, the focus will shift towards an introduction to the method of guided interviews used in the research study, and its fundamental pillars will be discussed in more detail (3.2). Based on this, the research process of the present qualitative study will be described through the chapters planning (3.3), sampling and research subject (3.4), narrative 'guide' (3.5), conduction (3.6), and data analysis (3.7).

3.1 Qualitative Social Research

According to Flick (2009: 15), social research is the systematic analysis of specific questions using empirical methods such as surveys to verify or establish generalizable assertions based on empirical justifications. Social research can be a tool to provide knowledge and to solve social problems (Flick 2009: 21). Within the domain of qualitative social research, the primary objective is to uncover novel insights through explorative inquiries, thereby generating hypotheses or theories in the process (Flick 2009: 25). In contrast to quantitative research, it endeavors to maintain an open research environment and focusing on in-depth investigations of a limited number of cases. Its objective is to grasp the meaning that participants intend to convey about the subject of investigation from their perspectives (ibid.). A unique role in qualitative research plays the verbal approach, the conversation/interview (Mayring 2016: 66). Consequently, interview participants are integrated as primary subjects, serving to offer insights into their distinctive lifestyles and experiences (ibid.). Accordingly, the research field is not an artificial laboratory situation but rather transpires within the everyday scenarios and actions of the subject (Flick 2007: 27). Interview participants themselves have the opportunity to contribute topics that are relevant to them; therefore, the method should be kept as open as possible (Küsters 2006: 21).

Regarding the selection of method for this research work, it can be stated that ‘complexities of identity are best captured in qualitative work, while quantitative measures produce a hugely reduced presentation of identity multi-dimensionality and fluidity’ (Patsiurko/Wallace 2014: 194). Furthermore, the qualitative approach facilitates an examination of the intersection between individual life narratives and more considerable societal changes, offering insights that a singular emphasis on the present moment may fail to capture. It situates personal accounts within the context of pivotal historical events that significantly influence an individual's self-perception (ibid.).

Qualitative guided interviews are affected by similar challenges of bias as standardized surveys. Consequently, responses can be influenced by social desirability, the dynamics inherent in the interview interactions, and the structure and placement of questions within the interview format (Küsters 2006: 21). Another concern arises when asking about ‘sensitive’ topics, i.e., topics that may evoke emotions of guilt, shame, or fear of sanctions (ibid.).

The researcher's positioning within the research process and the research outcomes represents a critical aspect that warrants careful attention. Consequently, reflexivity is considered an essential aspect of qualitative research and commonly interpreted as the active consideration of the interplay between knowledge production and diverse contexts in which the production occurs. This notion also underscores the acknowledgment of the researcher's active participation in the knowledge creation process (Alvesson 2018: 10; Corlett/Mavin 2018: 379). The following sub-chapter presents the narrative interview method to create the most in-depth interview situation possible for this type of topic.

3.2 Narrative Interviews

Within the realm of qualitative research, a whole range of interview techniques has been developed, characterized by varying levels of structural rigidity (Mayring 2016: 66f.). One such approach, the narrative interview, which notably evolved under the guidance of Fritz Schütze diverges from standardized questionnaires by encouraging participants to recount their narratives freely. Central to this method is the notion that subjective structures of significance emerge during the storytelling, elements that may be neglected with systematic questionings (Küsters 2006: 18f.; Mayring 2016: 72). Narratives also play a prominent role in everyday life. Overarching contexts of action become visible through narratives, and the latter can serve to process, balance, and evaluate experiences (Mayring 2016: 72). Emerging from a critique of standardized surveys and open guideline interviews, this technique represents a mode of interviewing that grants considerable agency to the interviewee in shaping the discourse, but at the same time is also able to elicit sensitive information (Küsters 2006: 21). This technique is particularly applied when it is a matter of subjective structures of meaning that cannot solely be explored and asked directly (Mayring 2016: 74)

The narrative interview structure includes three fundamental parts, as outlined by Schütze (1983: 285). Initially, it entails a broad initial question, encouraging the interviewee to tell a story about a process that they have experienced without interrupting their narration with further questions (Küsters 2006: 44). Interviewees may be prompted to share their life story in its entirety, or specific anecdotes and experiences relevant to the topic at hand, a pivotal event, or a typical sequence of events (Küsters 2006: 46; Schütze 1983: 285). The interviewer does not intervene during the narration unless the story thread is lost. Only after a narrative coda, such as ‘So, that’s it,’ does the interviewer ask their follow-up questions (Schütze 1983: 285). These immanent questions serve the purpose of investigating deeper meanings, clarifying unclear

parts, and finding out about so far omitted details (Küsters 2006: 61). The immanent part is then followed by already prepared, more generalized exmanent questions. Subsequently, the interviewer can introduce topics into the conversation themselves (Küsters 2006: 63). These can be questions about descriptive characterizations of states, recurring processes and systematic connections, and the social frames of their experiences. Additionally, it consists of theoretical 'why' questions and their argumentative answers (Küsters 2006: 63; Schütze 1983: 285). A possible prejudice that narrative interviews may not provide the information necessary for the research questions completely underestimates the possibilities offered by this third part of the interview (Küsters 2006: 63).

Nevertheless, a narrative interview must be spontaneous, so-called 'Stehgreiferzählung' (Küsters 2006: 13). This implies that the interviewee is unaware of the forthcoming questions and is thus unable to prepare in advance (ibid.). The fundamental objective is to enable the interviewee to 're-experience' a past event (Küsters 2006: 22).

The limited amount of the interviewer's influence during the interview is supposed to create authentic, not distorted material, recreating an everyday conversation with a purposely created asymmetry of speech proportions (Küsters 2006: 13f., 22).

3.3 Planning

A comprehensive acquisition of theoretical knowledge was initially undertaken to elucidate the subject of interest. Due to a longer stay as a visiting student in Riga, the research interest in societal dynamics within Latvia was quickly established. After a brief overview of the given literature, the specific trajectories of the Russian-speaking minority after the disintegration of the Soviet Union emerged to be an essential research topic, given the constantly evolving circumstances stemming from shifting influences in their surroundings. Moreover, the newfound relevance and emphasis on Russian diasporas and Russian-speaking minorities abroad, precipitated by the Russian military intervention in Ukraine commencing in February 2022, further reinforced the significance of this research.

A large part of the examination with the theoretical background was predominantly conducted in March and April 2023, paving the way for the outreach and engagement process with prospective interviewees by the end of April.

3.4 Sampling and Research Subject

In selecting the qualitative study's sampling, specific steps were used to narrow the process down. Initially, the focus was directed toward refining the interest in specific demographic groups, aligning with the preceding theoretical knowledge and research inquiries (Helfferich 2011: 172). Thus, the sampling was selected based on certain characteristics. These include the following delimited characteristics for the research study: First and foremost, the selected individuals were required to fall within the age range of approximately 18 to 33 years at the time of the interview; hence, they should not have been born or grown up in Soviet Latvia. However, they should be born in Latvia. Additionally, the condition of Russian being the mother tongue, or first language was crucial to the selection process. To narrow down and evaluate the place as well, Riga as a place of residence/location of growing up was another parameter for evaluation. Finally, a high level of English was also essential, owing to the researcher's limited proficiency in Russian and to assume a certain degree of "Europeanness" and/or access to an international sphere. While a balanced gender distribution was deemed optimal, it was not considered a critical requirement.

In qualitative studies, the sample size can commence with a single interview, as emphasized by Helfferich (2011: 175). Nevertheless, at least six up to 12 interviews are often conducted as, in practice, the sample size is usually determined by accessibility (ibid.). Consequently, this master's thesis aimed to encompass a range of at least six to approximately 12 interviews.

Access to the interviewees was primarily facilitated through the snowball sampling method. This approach involves seeking individuals known to the researcher and inquiring whether they are acquainted with individuals who satisfy the criteria for participation in the interviews or if they are aware of individuals who may have such connections (Helfferich 2011: 176). Due to the researcher's previous stay in Riga, established contacts within the academic community, such as professors at the University of Latvia, and personal connections played a pivotal role in this process.

Additionally, efforts were made to broaden access through the engagement of gatekeepers. That means key persons in institutions or counseling centers were approached to facilitate the transmission of interview requests and aid in identifying potential interviewees (Helfferich 2011: 175). Institutions such as the University of Latvia, the Baltic Institute for Social Sciences,

and the Baltic-German University Liaison Office were contacted in this regard. However, with this approach method, no responses or feedback were returned.

Owing to the homogeneity observed within the groups formed through the snowball sampling method, primarily attributed to the predominant connections with academic institutions, specific Facebook groups were identified certain Facebook groups were identified as potential sources to enhance a particular diversity of the sample. A standardized message was drafted and posted in both English and Russian. Unfortunately, the administrators in all the identified groups did not approve the posts. However, following a suggestion from one of the contacted individuals, the group 'Feministu Forums' was recommended, where access was promptly granted, and the post was the sole one not declined. As a result of this access, in combination with the facilitation of requests through ‘snowballing’ and gatekeepers, a total of eight individuals (six self-identified as female and two as male) were enlisted within a few days, with the majority expressing their willingness to participate in the interviews unprompted.

Moreover, participants were allowed to choose between being interviewed face-to-face in Riga or online. Notably, seven individuals opted for face-to-face interviews. Owing to the unexpectedly high level of willingness in a short time, a period for the research stay in Riga was scheduled relatively quickly, namely between May 9 and May 12. Consequently, meetings were arranged primarily via email within this timeframe. Participants could select the interview location according to their preference, ensuring a comfortable setting conducive to open dialogue (Helfferich 2011: 177).

Except for two individuals, all participants were interviewed within this timeframe. One participant was interviewed the following week in Berlin due to a brief stay there. The final interview was conducted online at the end of May, as the participant was abroad until then. Having eight interviews planned was a promising starting point to ensure the fulfillment of the minimum target of 6 interviews, especially in case of unforeseen last-minute cancellations. However, this precautionary measure was ultimately unnecessary, and all interviews could be conducted as planned.

The final eight participants were exclusively Russian native speakers, born in or just outside Riga, aged 22 to 33 years. Among the participants, seven out of eight currently reside in Riga,

with only one living and studying in Germany. The majority held at least a higher education degree. A brief description of each person, presented under anonymized names, will follow:

- *Irina* (I1), 33 years old, is the daughter of parents who relocated from Russia to Latvia during the Soviet era. Her mother is of Russian ethnicity, while her father was of Jewish descent. Irina herself holds a master's degree and presently works in a call center;
- *Tanja* (I2), 25 years old, was born to a mother who relocated from Russia to Latvia three months after her birth and to a father, along with his parents, who are also ethnic Russians but were born in Soviet Latvia. She holds a bachelor's degree and is currently engaged in the social sector while pursuing her master's degree. Having experienced frequent relocations during her childhood, she returned to Riga in primary school;
- *Daria* (I3), 29 years old, her family comes from Latgale (Eastern part of Latvia). She has attained a master's degree and is presently pursuing a PhD at the University of Latvia;
- *Sofia* (I4), 33 years old, has roots tracing back to her mother's family's migration from Russia to Latvia after World War II. Limited information is available concerning her father. Holding a master's degree, she is currently employed at a company in marketing;
- *Anastasia* (I5), 29 years old, her mother is ethnic Russian and Latvian, and her father is ethnic Ukrainian, who arrived in Riga for educational purposes during the Soviet Union. She holds a master's degree and currently works in the IT sector;
- *Viktor* (I6), 22 years old, both parents were born in Latvia during Soviet times, but his mother is ethnic Polish and Latvian, whereas his father is ethnic Russian. Viktor possesses a high school diploma and is currently employed at a service-related job
- *Tom* (I7), 24 years old, his family is from Latgale. He holds a bachelor's degree and currently conducts a master's degree in a German city;
- *Magda* (I8), 25 years old, is the daughter of a mother of Russian and Ukrainian ethnicity who was born in Latvia, and a father born in Belarus. She holds a master's degree and is currently working in the field of art.

3.5 Narrative 'Guide'

The narrative 'guide' is formulated in accordance with the narrative interview method outlined in chapter 3.2. is presented in the Appendix. As instructed, the first 'narrative' part started with a vast question*: I would like you to tell me about your life in Latvia. All kind of events and experiences which you think that were important to you and made you the person you are now. You can start wherever you like for example with your birth or when you were a child. Please*

take all the time you need. I'll only listen for now, I won't interrupt, I'll just take some notes for afterwards.

Several preliminary ideas were drafted for the second 'immanent' part; however, this part is primarily based on the specific explanations of the interviewees and cannot be planned. For the third segment, the 'exmanent' part, nine questions were formulated according to aspects found in the theoretical foundation. Nevertheless, these queries were not universally posed, particularly if the topics had already been mentioned or discussed during the preceding narrative segment. The open-ended questions referred to individual dreams, aspirations, wishes, and future prospects. Additionally, questions were directed towards the further development of Latvian society and the perception of Victory Day, which coincided just at the time of the interview and thus represented a relevant topic, given its historical controversiality in Latvia. Finally, socio-economic data, such as birth year, education, current occupation, and citizenship, was gathered in case it was not mentioned during the interview.

3.6 Conduction

Seven interviews were conducted in person with a smartphone as an audio-recording device. The anticipated length of the narrative interviews was approximately one hour. Yet, the actual durations varied, ranging between 00:50h and 01:40h. The interviewees mainly selected the locations in advance to ensure their safety and comfort to the fullest extent possible (Helfferich 2011: 177). Consequently, most participants opted for public spaces such as cafés and parks. The chosen locations were primarily selected for their ease of accessibility for both parties, with outdoor venues chosen in light of favorable weather conditions. For the most part, there were no indications that the presence of others in the public setting inhibited the interviewees from making particular or sensitive statements. However, this was notably evident in the case of one participant (Tanja, I2), as she occasionally lowered her voice while discussing specific topics, particularly those about 'ethnic' Latvian individuals.

It is essential to highlight that the sole online interview (Magda, I8) can, unfortunately, only be marginally utilized in the subsequent analysis. On the one hand, the connection was often poor as the person was in a car at the time of the conversation. On the other hand, the language barrier was very high, resulting in a significant portion of the statements being of limited relevance to the research question. Furthermore, a third individual in the car occasionally

facilitated translations from Russian to English for the interviewee. However, it is generally advised to conduct interviews without third parties (Helfferich 2011: 177).

3.7 Data Analysis

Following the interview conduction, the audio-recorded conversations were transcribed, with line numbers added for better traceability to the exact place within the transcript. The transcriptions partially followed the rules based on Mayring (2016) and Kuckartz et al. (2008: 27). The spoken language was converted to standard written English, refining the overall style and correcting any sentence structure and grammatical inconsistencies. This approach was adopted to emphasize the thematic content and experiences conveyed by the interviewees (ibid.). Anything that would have allowed an inference to the individual was anonymized in the process (ibid.). Shorter breaks were transcribed with (.) and longer breaks with (..). In all transcripts, the interviewer was denoted as I (for the interviewer), and the interview participants were marked as N (for the narrator) (Kuckartz et al. 2008: 28). Each participant was assigned a unique numerical identifier corresponding to the order of the interviews, along with an assigned pseudonym. This practice was implemented to facilitate clear differentiation of the material and enhance the overall comprehensibility of the content. All transcripts, along with their corresponding pseudonyms, are provided in the Appendix. The subsequent coding and data analysis were conducted utilizing the MAXQDA software program.

In investigating the gathered data, the analytical framework employed was the qualitative content analysis method developed by Philipp Mayring (2015, 2016). This approach ensures a stringent and methodically controlled examination of the data (Mayring 2016: 115). The method offers the advantage that the procedure is step-guided and thus, in contrast to sole text interpretations, leads to strongly intersubjectively verifiable results (ibid.). In this context, the basic procedure of qualitative content analysis consists of the rule-guided assignment of categories to concrete text passages (ibid.). Consequently, this process is both selective and interpretative (ibid.). Mayring's qualitative content analysis can be differentiated into three techniques: Summarizing, Explicating, and Structuring (Mayring 2015: 67). Within this master's thesis, the approach of summarizing was applied, intending to reduce the material in a manner that preserves the essential content, thereby creating a manageable material through abstraction. However, this should still be an appropriate reflection of the primary material (Mayring 2022: 66). It is an inductive procedure that follows the basic principle of a precisely defined abstraction level, wherein the material transforms through the utilization of macro-

operators. As a consequence, this established level of abstraction can be progressively broadened, resulting in increasingly abstract summaries (Mayring 2022: 68). Initially, the individual coding units are rewritten in a shorter, descriptive form (paraphrasing) (Mayring 2022: 70). Subsequently, the determination of the level of abstraction from the initial reduction is based on the available material. Any paraphrases below this identified level must be generalized. Theoretical assumptions become necessary in cases of uncertainty throughout this phase and in subsequent reduction stages. Consequently, unimportant and inconsequential paraphrases can be neglected. Following multiple rounds of reduction, a novel, more comprehensive categorical system must be developed and subsequently subjected, which must be reviewed. This circular process can be repeated until the targeted reduction results correspond to the material (ibid.). However, especially with large amounts of material, several analysis steps can be determined, allowing for an immediate transformation of text passages to the desired level of abstraction (ibid.).

Inductive content analysis has gained substantial prominence within the realm of qualitative research, as it derives the categories directly from the material in a generalization process without referring to the pre-formulated theory concepts (Mayring 2022: 84). Therefore, this analysis approach treats each data set individually, ensures openness and prevents the influence of preconceived attributions on the results. However, acknowledging the inherent limitations arising from an unbiased perspective due to prior engagements with the theoretical framework, a completely indicative procedure can never be definitively assumed. Recognizing this, the present research placed this aspect as an asset, initiating an indicative assignment of codes and transitioning to a deductive allocation to ensure a more precise delimitation of the categories. Thus, the subsequent main categories were established based on the assumptions of the quadratic nexus, supplemented by additional categories evolved from the conducted interviews.

Two fundamental rules for inductive category formation must now be established: the category definition and the level of abstraction (Mayring 2022: 85). The underlying research question guides these rules, providing the necessary direction for the analytical framework.

- *Category definition:* Insights and experiences directly and indirectly associated with the sense of belonging and identity of the interviewed person; reflections on relationships and perspectives concerning Latvian society and state, Russia, and the international sphere, along with an exploration of these factors influencing these dynamics;

statements referring to potentially changing relations towards Russia over the last decade;
- *Level of abstraction:* The statements should be as general as possible but also case-specific for each young Russian speaker.

Furthermore, the units of analysis for this research still need to be defined (Mayring 2022: 87):
- *coding unit:* several words that are related in meaning
- *context unit:* the whole interview of a person
- *evaluation unit:* all eight interviews

Based on the research questions: '*How do young Russian speakers who were born and live in Latvia identify themselves*?' and '*How has the Russian invasion of Ukraine since 2014 affected the self-identification of these Russian speakers?'*, the inductive analysis steps above with a final deductive assignment of categories, lead to the following three main categories: *1 The ambivalent relationship with the 'nationalizing' state Latvia, 2 The cultural affiliation towards the 'homeland' Russia, and 3 The International sphere*. Several subcategories further characterize these main categories, allowing for a nuanced exploration. These levels of analysis and subsequent generalization can be understood as follows: The primary category *1 The ambivalent relationship with the 'nationalizing' state of Latvia* is composed of the following subcategories: *1.1 Strong implanted national identity, 1.2 Differing historical narratives, 1.3 Relation to the Latvian language, 1.4 Dealing with the citizenship situation, 1.5 Not 'our' culture, 1.6. Discrimination/exclusion* and *1.7 Feelings towards Latvia.* The second main category *2 The cultural affiliation towards the 'homeland' of Russia* includes the subsequent subcategories: *2.1 Clear demarcation from the Russian Federation and alignment towards 'Europe', 2.2 Affiliation to Russian culture, 2.3 Affection by the war in Ukraine,* and *2.4 Generational differences.* This is followed by the last main category *3 International sphere* with *3.1 Influence of the European Union* and *3.2 importance of English.*

4. Results and Discussion

The central results of the narrative interview study are delineated as follows. Based on the research questions, three main categories have been formulated. During the presentation of the results, the qualitative content analysis of the interviews is presented, intertwined with a comprehensive discussion and contextualization within the existing empirical research

landscape. Subsequently, the last section of this chapter entails a methodological reflection and critique.

4.1 The ambivalent relationship with Latvia

The first main category encompasses all statements about relations and influences regarding the ‘ethnic’ Latvian society and the Latvian state. Furthermore, it elaborates on which position young Russian speakers may inhabit within this context.

4.1.1 Strong Implanted National Identity

As previously stated by Cheskin (2012: 326), the Latvian 'national identity' of pre-Soviet Latvia and the first independence continues to be an omnipresent element for young Russian speakers in Latvia. According to Sofia, the ‘perfect’ Latvian identity is grounded in a national construct and traditions dating back to the 19th century, actively implemented into contemporary political discourse (I4, l. 358-363). The Latvian language and culture are the main focus here; therefore, a particular way of thinking is ascribed to the Latvian language as a ‘spiritual force’ which contrasts with the way of thinking as a Russian-speaking person (I4, l. 201-204).

Moreover, the Latvian national identity is perceived as an imposed construct upon the people residing in Latvia, exemplified by sentiments such as ‘you are supposed to treat the Latvian language as something with transcendental value’ (I4, l. 202-203) and as the primary determinant of individual identity (I4, l. 181-184, 201-204). Consequently, it is deemed essential to demonstrate patriotism and extend support to all endeavors undertaken by the Latvian state (I4, l. 172-174). As a result, Viktor states that for him, ‘it is about getting rid of the things besides what makes you kind of Latvian […]’ (I6, l. 311-312).

Hence, most of the interviewed people feel excluded from this prevalent national identity, which underlines the statement by Cheskin (2019: 11), who pointed out that ethnic Latvians and Russian speakers have often been put as strict antagonists. Furthermore, according to Viktor, a specific denial of historical occurrences and influences occurs (I6, l. 292-296). Daria, for instance, highlights the enduring presence of Russian speakers in Latvia spanning several centuries (I3, l. 264-269)

Furthermore, pervasive segregation of the two communities within Latvia is indicated, underscored by a profound ‘us versus them’ sentiment (I7, l. 173-176, 468-470), which,

however, is regarded as sad as Daria expresses: ‘And the Russians, those Latvians, I do not like that, because we live in one country where we should go forward to one goal somewhere because Latvia has so much potential […]’ (I3, l. 834-836).

Moreover, the national identity was emphasized in Latvian language classes in minority schools. As one interviewee describes, this meant that vocabulary from the 19th century was prevailing, the so-called time of national awakening, ‘[…] because it is supposed to be important for the Latvian identity […]’ (I4, l. 79-80) and ‘[…] to understand what the Latvian soul is about […]’ (I4, l. 387). However, that pedagogical agenda was perceived as senseless as ‘there is no point in memorizing all these words if you do not know how to navigate around the city’ (I4, l. 380). Consequently, this interviewee deemed this approach as insufficient for effective language instruction and pointed out that it would instead serve to show what the country and the nation are about, signifying that ‘you are just supposed to learn your place, and your place is not really high on the societal ladder’ (I4, l. 389-394).

While a certain degree of comprehension regarding the strong national identity can be expressed owing to Latvia's history of occupation and the imperative of preserving its culture as a small nation, coupled with the persistent concern of a potential attack due to its proximity to Russia, there remains a profound sense of incomprehension regarding these nationalizing policies (I2, l. 498-50; I7, l. 176-182). Latvia must recognize itself as a nation where individuals with diverse cultures and perspectives can coexist harmoniously (I2, l. 437-440). However, the construction of national identity has been centered on excluding rather than including new facets within a changing society, as perceived by two interviewees (I2, l. 496-496; I6, l. 308-310).

Despite prevailing hopes for potential changes in the future, the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 is perceived as a legitimizing factor for the Latvian state to reinforce further its excluding national identity (I6, l. 345-348). Sofia underscored another turning point in the trajectory of Latvian politics. She stated that the political climate shifted around 2012, as ‘even though we were poorer and maybe a lot of things in the social environment were still hungover from the 90s, some things were definitely better. Society was definitely less nervous and more open to everyone’ (I4, l. 117-119). During this period, processes such as naturalizing Russian speakers were more accessible and endorsed. Despite the persistence of numerous social, economic, and political challenges, it seemed to go in the ‘right’ direction (I4, l. 119-124; 134-147). Sofia attributes reasons for the change of direction to start primarily external, such as the

annexation of Crimea, as well as internal factors, including a language referendum that sought to establish Russian as a second language in Latvia during that time (I4, l. 140-142). Consequently, she states that things started to shift after that referendum, marked by the escalation of negative attitudes towards Russian speakers, intertwined with external events orchestrated by Russia, also resulting in a limitation of freedom of speech (I4, l. 143-145, 166-168, 258-265). Additionally, Sofia alludes to another influence regarding the current developed preamble of the Latvian constitution:

> ‘A very nationalistic preamble stating the many things about Latvians as an ethnic group. About Latvian being the only language in this country and claiming that the sole purpose of the Latvian state is to maintain and preserve the Latvian language […].’ (I4, l. 147-150)

One instrument of this national identity is manifested in the form of Latvian ‘anti-propaganda,’ serving as a counterpart to the Russian propaganda that a significant number of Russian speakers in Latvia tend to follow, as Tom describes (I7, l. 281-282). Nevertheless, the Latvian news also exhibits bias, often portraying news coverage related to Russia negatively and stigmatized. For instance, rather than employing neutral terms such as 'Russian armed forces,' they use terms like 'occupiers.' Similarly, instead of referring to the 'Russian president,' they use 'Russian dictator Vladimir Putin' (I7, l. 268-277). Moreover, both Sofia and Tom go so far as to draw parallels between the freedom of expression and agenda-setting in Latvia and Russia. However, it is essential to note that while the former pertains to a democratic setting, the latter operates within an authoritarian regime (I4, l. 174-178, l. 293-302).

Consequently, particularly Sofia and Tom express a sense of pessimism regarding the future, anticipating a significant rightward shift and a deepening embrace of nationalism within Latvia. In their view, an excluding preamble poses considerable challenges for Latvia’s integration within the European Union, especially given the prevalence of migrant communities and refugees across the region (I4, l. 159-161, l. 569-571; I6, l. 470-472). This progression has led to coalitions between parties with divergent ideologies, all unified in safeguarding the narratives of the national identity, as Tom describes (I7, l. 238-242). Sofia further notes that even the newly emerging progressive party is incorporating nationalistic narratives, with the difference that they try to hide it in their more progressive view of the world (I4, l. 239-244). According to her, this subtle approach is potentially more dangerous than parties openly exposing nationalist agendas (I4, l. 332-339).

4.1.2 Differing Historical Narratives

The ongoing ‘memory war’ concerning divergent historical narratives of the occurrences during the Second World War and the era of Soviet Latvia (Cheskin 2015: 79) stands as a notable challenge confronting the interviewees. Sofia highlights that in Latvia, ‘there is only one correct version of the events, one correct version of history and only one correct way to be a good citizen’ (I4, l. 178-179). Hence, the interviewees continue to encounter situations where they are labeled as occupiers, as illustrated by Tom: ‘I’ve been called occupants, you know, like when you are eight years old, and you are just being called a word like Soviet pig or like this from other kids’ (I7, 187-189). Similar incidents have occurred in educational settings, with Latvian teachers also engaging in such stigmatization (I2, l. 72-75; I4, l. 49-63). This one-sided stigmatization and the intergenerational transmission of such biases can hold dangerous consequences, further fueling discrimination against Russian speakers born in Latvia. For example, “we have some parents teaching their kids just say, ‘If you meet a Russian boy or girl, tell them they have to leave the country.'” (I7, l. 197-202). Although the general public does not necessarily hold such perspectives, these narratives are promoted by the Latvian government, particularly in the context of shaping the national identity, as discussed in subchapter 4.1.1. (I4, l. 203-204).

The perception of these narratives is significantly shaped by the immediate environment, as highlighted by Anastasia, who asserts that extensive interactions with Latvians have enabled her to comprehend Latvia's extensive history of occupations. This understanding might not be easily accessible to others (I5, l. 304-305). Hence, individuals with limited or no exposure to 'ethnic' Latvians may be more susceptible to being influenced by the Kremlin's propaganda (I5, l. 303-304).

An inevitable separation and exposure to differing narratives also emerge from the attendance of Russian minority schools, a shared experience among almost all the interviewees. Viktor contends that this experience significantly impacted his life compared to what it might have been if he had attended a Latvian school (I6, l. 14-15). Similarly, Anastasia highlights the influence of attending a Latvian school, mainly since she was the only Russian-speaking student there (I5, l. 38-39, 71). Consequently, the interviewees note that during their schooling, evident connections to Russia and the Soviet Union persisted. For instance, Viktor describes how the teaching style of his pro-Soviet history teacher was heavily influenced by her personal opinions

(I6, l. 209-301). Sofia mentions using a textbook designed for individuals living in Russia during her first-grade studies (I4, l. 30-42). However, aspects of Russian culture and traditions were also taught in Russian minority schools, such as the celebrations of Victory Day (I2, l. 52-53, l. 174-175). Since adolescents may be easily influenced, these narratives could be brought to them more easily (I3, l. 352-355). For Tanja, the instruction on Russian culture and traditions served as a means to preserve her ancestral stories and to establish a connection (I2, l. 174-175).

4.1.3 Relation to the Latvian Language

Latvian language proficiency and usage in daily life varied considerably among the interviewees, consequently influencing their respective attitudes and connections towards the Latvian language. In particular, moments when they were not recognized as Russian speakers while speaking Latvian were expressed with great success (I1, l. 112-117; I3, l. 740-747). This recognition was accompanied by a sense of gratification, with some expressing a particular sense of pride in having attained such a level of proficiency in the Latvian language (I3, l. 758-760; I7, l. 41-43). Those who had early exposure to Latvian, whether through familial interactions (I6, l. 48-50), participation in sports (I4, l. 53-72), or attendance at Latvian schools (I5, l. 29), displayed more rapid linguistic assimilation and appeared to encounter fewer difficulties and pressures later on, thus articulating positive sentiments toward the language. Nevertheless, primarily individuals who have acquired Latvian proficiency outside the school environment demonstrate good knowledge (I4, l. 82-84).

The sentiment emphasizes that proficiency in Latvian is crucial, ‘I think, of course, knowing the language is important, and I think it is also good’ (I6, l. 314-315). It is particularly important in the labor market context because that is where the absence of a language certification makes it nearly impossible to find employment (I1, l. 182-183; I4, l. 102-104). Consequently, young individuals, including classmates with limited Latvian proficiency, often tend to relocate abroad due to the restricted opportunities within Latvia, as Daria notes (I3, l. 49-51).

The transition to university notably brought about a substantial increase in exposure to the Latvian language, particularly for many interviewees who had previously attended Russian minority schools. This marked their initial experience within an educational institution where the medium of instruction was entirely in Latvian and where the student body was perceived to be more diverse (I1, l. 124-128, 437-438; I5, l. 49-50). Several difficulties were articulated, including challenges associated with acclimatizing to academic Latvian and composing

scholarly texts (I3, l. 30-32; I6, l. 75-77). Challenges with Latvian, in general, were primarily expressed among individuals with limited exposure to the language, particularly in interactions with Latvian native speakers (I2, l. 39-41; I8, l. 49-50). These challenges were attributed, in part, to a lack of early childhood exposure: 'I mean, I am scared when I speak Latvian that I will say something wrong. So yeah, it's a kind of barrier in Latvian I have. Mainly because I did not use this in my childhood. In my early years.' (I2, l. 145-147). Consequently, a certain pressure to make mistakes in Latvian is described ('I can speak Latvian, but I feel this language barrier and just pressure from Latvians' (I2, l. 279-289)) leading to a preference for using English where the fear of making mistakes is less pronounced (I2, l. 141-143).

Such diversity in experiences with the Latvian language, alongside variations in social environments, is evident. For the majority of the individuals, Latvian serves as second language, integrated into both professional and free time activities, thus aligning which Cheskin's (2015: 82) notion which considers this as approaching the Latvian cultural sphere in terms of linguistic. Consequently, the use of the Russian language is frequently limited to familial contexts or interactions with friends from their former minority schools. However, a distinct minority, primarily immersed in Russian-speaking environments, encounter challenges with its usage, exhibiting markedly restricted proficiency, which is further weakened by a certain pressure they feel emanating from native Latvian speakers.

4.1.4 Dealing with the Citizenship Situation

All participants possessed Latvian citizenship, either by birth or acquired through the process of naturalization. Notwithstanding the recent adjustments to Latvian citizenship regulations, which have curtailed the birth of new non-citizens (I5, l. 446-448), a certain lack of understanding of these state procedures is still expressed and why it had to be handled in such prioritized manner. To be born as a non-citizen felt bizarre, like '[…] aliens […]' (I8, l. 243). A prevailing sentiment among respondents underscores the conviction that individuals who have spent their entire lives in Latvia ought to be granted citizenship automatically 'because (.) it is like a natural thing. You are born here. You get the citizenship' (I1, l. 590-592). Additionally, Sofia articulates her perspective, emphasizing:

> 'I have always perceived citizenship as something practical and pragmatic, like why would I become a citizen of this state? Because I live here, I was born here, ok? By some strange coincidence of historical events, I am not a citizen.' (I4, l. 195-198)

Consequently, the acquisition of citizenship is perceived as a pragmatic pursuit motivated by practical considerations, whereas in Latvia, 'being a citizen is almost a religious experience' (I4, l. 201). Notwithstanding, the naturalization process did not pose significant obstacles for most respondents, particularly those with a good knowledge of Latvian (I1, l. 570-575; I4, l. 107-111). Recalling the early 2000s, around the time when Latvia accessed the European Union, Sofia still remembers a different spirit occurring:

> 'But in general, in the communication, in the attitude, it was clearly perceived like learn the Latvian Language to a certain extent, pass the exam, become a citizen, and then you are accepted. Then you are an equal part of the society, like us. And people did believe it. Many people in my generation believed it.' (I4, l. 130-133)

As mentioned in subchapter 4.1.1, this previously optimistic stance on the status of Russian speakers and the endorsement of naturalization underwent a substantial transformation around 2012. Of particular significance is the recent policy mandating that Russian citizens residing in Latvia must pursue permanent resident status to retain legal residency. Meeting the eligibility criteria for this status necessitates demonstrating a proficiency level of A2 in the national language (Demidovs 2023). However, the language exam is not considered a neutral query because "I do not know if it is true, but […] like these exams are actually not about the languages but their ideology. One of the language questions is 'who do you think Crimea belongs to,' you know, which is like, very provocative […]" (I7, l. 263-266). These developments are apprehensively regarded as there are concerns that similar regulations for Russian citizens could be applied to individuals who have obtained citizenship through naturalization. Regardless, there is an anticipation that these measures mark only the initial steps, with the Latvian state likely to implement further initiatives to impede the lives of Russian speakers (I4, l. 504-511).

Notwithstanding the theoretical premise that citizenship can function as an agent capable of changing ethnic boundaries (Alba 2005: 27), they should now seem more permeable on a political level, at least through this aspect of simplified conditions of obtaining citizenship. However, this transformation remains nominal mainly, as the historical treatment of citizenship as a privileged entity continues to persist, perpetuating an enduring dilemma that remains embedded within the perceptions of the interview subjects.

4.1.5 Not 'Our' Culture

In terms of cultural traits, it becomes apparent that bright boundaries are still occurring. The prevailing sentiment among most interviewees underscores the fundamental disparity between Latvian and Russian cultures, as articulated by Tanja: 'Yeah, like 100% different. So, we are totally different, I think' (I2, l. 192) and Irina: 'Because well Latvian culture is kind of different' (I1, l. 311). As an example, Tanja describes that the ways of making music differ (I2, l. 409). Notably, differences in mentality also emerge. However, Irina struggles to label how the differences in mentality exactly differ. This manifests a subtle contradiction wherein, on the one hand, she articulates a clear distinction between the cultures while, on the other hand, she contends that these differences are challenging to define precisely:

> '[…] at some point, I stopped distinguishing this. It is like we are just one society; of course, we mix and interact, and it influences us in some ways. We want to be influenced or not. It happens. So, I really do not think about the difference' (I1, l. 380-382)

A certain disappointment surfaces among individuals who could not be raised amidst Latvian cultural traditions and festivities. Daria, for instance, recounts situations in which she spent time with Latvian people at fireplaces, and they sang Latvian songs she did not grow up with, leading to a partial exclusion within the group (I3, l. 731-740). In contrast, Tanja acknowledges her detachment from commemorating Latvian Independence Day, emphasizing, 'I and my family would not really celebrate that day, because (.) I mean, it is just not our history or our culture, so we do not usually celebrate this day' (I2, l. 386-390). Similarly, Tom adds a general sentiment of not feeling entirely Latvian, asserting that he is 'never going to be part like integrated fully into the society just because [he is] not coming from that culture (I7, l. 438-440).

Anastasia presents an alternative perspective. She and her family have consistently embraced the Midsummer traditions as they were '[…] celebrating it like every other Latvian family […]' (I5, l. 208-217). Despite the evident distinctions between the cultures, a notable sense of affinity and resonance surfaces as she progressively grows to appreciate Latvian cultural traditions once more (I5, l. 180-184). Notably, her experience attending a Latvian school rather than a minority school, leading to more extensive interactions with Latvian speakers during her teenage years, exemplifies a heightened level of assimilation compared to the others.

Despite the demarcation of both cultures, thereby exhibiting bright boundaries on a cultural sphere, a certain spectrum of affiliations emerges here as well: On the one hand, Tanja completely separates herself from Latvian culture and speaks of Russian culture as her culture (I2, l. l. 285-286) (see subchapter 4.2.2). This alignment, as emphasized by Hansen and Hesli (2009: 4), can be attributed to what is commonly termed an ethnic identity, which, in this context, primarily manifests in cultural terms. On the other hand, when referring to Anastasia's situation, more fluid boundaries emerge, giving rise to a more hybrid identity within the cultural sphere (ibid.).

Such assignment to one culture was the reason for Tom's decision to depart from Latvia and pursue his master's degree abroad. He was motivated by a desire to reside in a place where linguistic heritage or cultural allegiance holds less significance (I7, l. 424-426, 430-432). He portrays this issue not as exclusive to Latvia but as a prevailing challenge within the broader post-Soviet realm (I7, l. 429-430).

4.1.6 Discrimination/Exclusion

Each participant has shown particular experiences of discrimination and/or exclusion based on their Russian-speaking attribution. Tanja, in particular, perceives a strong aversion against all Russian people and Russia, and for her, '[…] it is hard to, I think, survive in, in a world where everybody is against you […]' (I2, l. 275-276). This sentiment, coupled with perceived political pressures due to Latvian fixed narratives, prompted her to swift her studies, focusing on politics and culture, from the University of Latvia to a Russian-speaking university. She elucidates that her decision was led by the realization that her former academic environment was 'too political, too Latvian' (I2, l. 81-83). Sofia stresses that the political pressure emanating from the agenda-setting of the Latvian state to such an extent that she finds herself engaging in self-censorship, limiting discussions on political matters to individuals she trusts, to avoid potential repressions (I4, l. 226-229, 302-305). Similarly, Viktor describes a period of brief self-restraint in speaking Russian publicly, particularly in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, his hesitation is primarily rooted in internal unease rather than stemming from explicit instances of discrimination (I6, l. 350-353, 379-392).

A prevailing pattern emerges among the interviewees, wherein they do not feel personally unsafe or discriminated against but rather attribute their experiences to a general antipathy

directed towards Russian speakers, as earlier indicated by Tanja (I3, l. 117-124; I4, l. 28-30; I5, l. 47-49, l. 165; I6, l. 385-389). Situations of such bias include being categorized as occupiers, as previously discussed in subchapter 4.1.2, as well as moments where Latvian speakers express surprise at their fluency in Latvian or where Latvian classmates express jealousy due to their ability to secure better summer employment opportunities due to their proficiency in Russian (I1, l. 459-460; I5, l. 39-42). Nevertheless, positive shifts were also encountered through interpersonal dialogue with acquaintances, as exemplified by Anastasia: 'because we are living here, we can coexist. And he actually agreed with me. So, I think I was like this example that probably turned down his like negative views' (I5, l. 45-47).

Daria describes her coping mechanism for uncomfortable situations as not taking these incidents personally and trying to avoid them through critical thinking (I3, l. 139-144).

4.1.7 Feelings Towards Latvia

The final chapter of the first main category critically underscores the complexity of the affiliation of young Russian speakers in Latvia. The previous sections tended to indicate strong boundaries between 'Russian speakers' and 'Latvians,' generated by the narratives of a robust national identity and cultural distinctiveness on both sides; a particular sense of attachment to Latvia emerges through learning and exposure to the Latvian language. It becomes evident that a positive, rather civic, sense of belonging towards Latvia certainly occurs among these young Russian speakers. Hence, it is perceived as 'home' (I2, l. 340; I3, l. 37), as 'my country' (I1, l. 556) and Anastasia even expresses that '[she] love[s] it here' (I5, l. 568). Furthermore, sentiments of 'attachment' (16, l. 322), 'connection' (I5, 423-424), and 'belonging' (I6, l. 325) towards Latvia were expressed. Nevertheless, this sense of belonging does not extend to Tanja as she does not feel like she belongs to Latvia and perceives no significant distinction in living in another European country (I2, l. 516-517).

In such context, Tom describes himself as 'being Latvian' (I7, l. 460) with 'Latvian qualities' (I7, l. 450) and that it is a special feeling because it is an unfamiliar place (I7, l. 520-521). Irina similarly emphasizes the positive changes within the country as one of the reasons for her appreciation of living in Latvia (I1, l. 552-554). Conversely, Anastasia and Daria adopt a somewhat different standpoint. They desire Latvia to make more significant progress, recognizing its considerable potential (I3, l. 836-838; I5, l. 567-569). Anastasia notes that if the country regresses in the future, she would contemplate relocating elsewhere (I5, l. 569).

In addition to these positive feelings, sentiments of concern and uncertainties are also articulated. Current political decisions, particularly, give rise to a notable sense of distance and apprehension regarding prospects (I4, l. 457-458; I5, l. 426-429; I6, l. 323-325). Hence, Sofia chooses the term ‘sad’ to express her feelings towards Latvia (I4, l. 532). For Tom, the negative aspects outweighed the positives, leading to his departure from Latvia due to the personal experience of growing up as part of the Russian minority, leading him to feel like a second-class citizen (I7, l. 422-424).

As Cheskin (2015: 82) regards the potency of territorial affiliation with Latvia as an indicator for identification in a political realm, it can be stated that this is present to a particular degree among young Russian speakers. However, the profound ethicized polarization of recent political events generates concerns, especially for the future.

In light of this, it is essential to consider the connection to the ‘homeland’ Russia, as all aspects must be perceived within the context of a complex interplay.

4.2 The Cultural Affiliation Towards the ‘Homeland’ of Russia

The second main category encompasses a range of statements concerning the multifaceted relationship with the Russian Federation on various levels. This category is particularly significant in addressing the second research question, which aims to examine the responses of young Russian speakers to Russia's recent policies and interventions.

4.2.1 Clear Demarcation from the Russian Federation and Alignment Towards ‘Europe’

‘And I can say the difference between Russian Russian, Latvian people and Russian Latvian like we are all different’ (I2, l. 440-441) is how Tanja articulates the affiliation structure of the young Russian speakers in Latvia. Hence, the initial demarcation is drawn between Russians in Russia, accompanied by a distinct disassociation from an identification with Russia (I7, l. 183-184). Daria, in her description, acknowledges that despite speaking Russian due to historical developments, she does not consider herself Russian because Russians in Russia also communicate differently. However, it is the same language (I3, l. 299-302). Furthermore, she delineates this differentiation regarding mindset, stating, ‘like I do not have this mindset, I am Latvian’ (I3, l. 92-93). On the other side, Tom recalls being informed that he is unequivocally

not Russian but rather ‘like European Latvian’ (I7, l. 440-442), a thought that Tanja further expounds upon, emphasizing that ‘we are like in a small country but also, we travel in different parts of Europe, and we are more European. With different views.’ (I2, l. 449-450). Hence, Anastasia concludes: ‘So yeah, so in the end, not really Russian. But we are Russian speaking so.’ (I5, l. 61). Consequently, the term ‘Latvian Russian’ is described as:

> ‘We are like more used to be Baltic and like we are like Russian Latvian; we are more with European view because Russians they are more like just Russian. Yes, with the Russian culture and maybe not so familiar with European culture and the European way of life, so they are just in their own circle.’ (I2, l. 441-444)

Therefore, Latvian Russians are considered somewhere in between (I7, l. 182-183), which is also illustrated by Tanja how this shows for her:

> ‘And I mean for me, I do not celebrate Latvian Independence Day. But also, I do not celebrate many Russian historical days because I just do not know them. […] So, I am kind of between those two […] cities and countries.’ (I2, l. 397-401)

Somewhere in between and certainly a sensitive topic is the opinion and observance of Victory Day on May 9, which coincided with the timing of the interviews and consequently emerged as a pertinent subject for discussion. While most interviewees had previously participated in the celebrations during their time in Russian minority schools, their engagement with the day's commemorations has significantly diminished in recent times as their sentiments towards the event have evolved. Tom, for instance, experienced a shift in his perspective following the annexation of Crimea when he was confronted by people questioning him: ‘What the fuck is wrong with you? Like what, you do not know what this means?’ (I7, l. 335-336). Magda’s perspective, however, has changed since the outbreak of the war at the beginning of 2022 (I8, l. 144-146).

The interviewees’ critique does not refer to the purpose of having a Remembrance Day for people and veterans who were victims of World War II (I7, l. 330). Nevertheless, contemporary observations indicate that ‘this celebration tradition emerged. Obviously, it was imported from Russia, where it was also getting stronger and exploited in a nationalistic way’ (I4, l. 419-420). In Riga, the central event on Victory Day was an important day with festivities at the Soviet Monument, commemorating the liberation from Nazi Germany (I2, l. 192-194). However, the

celebrations are perceived to get ‘wilder,’ including Nazi paroles and slogans (I5, l. 240-245; I7, l. 330-332). Hence, a lack of understanding emerges regarding this celebration: ‘Celebrating? Like seriously, how many millions of people have died? How can you celebrate and be joyful and sing songs? You can remember it’ (I1, l. 486-489). Therefore, Irina and Daria conclude that the 9th of May should be treated as a Day of Sorrow and Remembrance instead of being utilized for celebrations and happiness (I1, l. 465-466; I3, l. 345-348). Nevertheless, in the last two years, within the frame of war in Ukraine, all Victory Day celebrations in Riga were strictly prohibited and controlled. In addition, the Soviet monument was demolished in summer 2022, which, accordingly, caused additional controversies. While some interviewees expressed acceptance of the monument's removal, citing reasons such as the prevention of an escalated glorification of militarism (I3, l. 360-363; I5, l. 278-280), for others, it signified a novel legitimization for the Latvian state to continue erasing everything 'non-Latvian' from the past, serving as a clear political statement against the Russian regime (I4, l. 426-427; I6, l. 277-278; I8, l. 149-150). For Viktor, the primary focus lies on the economic aspects, with the significant financial resources allocated to the monument's demolition raising concerns, as these funds could have been directed towards alternative endeavors, such as educational initiatives (I6, l. 278-281). Similarly, Sofia perceives the destruction as unnecessary and ‘bitter,’ given the existence of prior proposals aiming to repurpose the area around the monument into an exhibition space, encompassing elements of political education, without necessitating the monument's destruction (I4, l. 440-446). Therefore, a concrete distinction from Russian political narratives is established towards a hybrid identity between Russia and Latvia, which will be further elucidated in the subsequent subchapter.

4.2.2 Affiliation to Russian Culture

In addition to the demarcation from Latvian culture, and yet notwithstanding this explicit embrace of 'European' values and perspectives, a sense of belonging to the Russian cultural sphere is also articulated: ‘So yeah, I feel that I do not belong to that country but culture, so it is more about culture, not about country’ (I2, l. 32-33). Furthermore, a particular interest in studying Russian history, literature, and language is expressed (I2, l. 31; I3, l. 91-92; I4, l. 193-194). Tanja, for example, enjoyed spending time in Moscow, including museums and theaters, an experience she finds unparalleled in Latvia (I2, l. 317-319).

Despite the existing interest in the Russian language as a component of cultural engagement, some perspectives, nevertheless, state its role as a tool of expression rather than as a formative

element of identity, as expressed by one participant: ‘Russian as language, it is like for it is very important because I can easier express myself’ (I3, l. 93-94). In alignment with this sentiment, Sofia highlights that her primary ‘identities’ revolve around being a woman, a socialist, and a European, and only after these attributions would she define herself as a Russian speaker (I4, l. 192-193). Additionally, Russian serves as a communication tool (‘lingua franca’) in the post-Soviet realm or even more precisely, among the Baltic States, especially with older individuals who do not speak English (I2, l. 481-490). Tanja, however, finds it challenging to comprehend the pressure to speak Latvian in Latvia, especially when all parties involved understand and can communicate in Russian: ‘[…] but who cares if you understand Russian and I can understand Russian why we cannot speak in Russian. So, what is the point?’ (I2, l. 509-512).

The significance of belonging to a Russian community or the importance of the orthodox belief, both integral components of Russian culture for Tanja (I2, l. 101-103, l. 220), play a relatively minor role, if any, in the lives of most respondents.

Nevertheless, not all participants identify with aspects of the Russian culture. For instance, while also demarcating from Latvian culture, Tom characterizes himself as ‘a cultureless person, you know, it is like I have my own thing’ (I7, 442-443). Similarly, Irina illustrates that her family has established their holiday traditions (I1, l. 397-406). Creating one’s cultural traditions can be added to the spectrum of cultural affiliations mentioned in 4.1.5, representing a form of atomized identity at the cultural level (Hansen/Hesli 2009: 4; Janmaat 2006: 52).

4.2.3 Affection by the War in Ukraine

Given the topicality and relevance of the research question concerning the ongoing war in Ukraine, the interviewees’ reactions are explained in this separate subcategory. The young Russian speakers demonstrate both condemnation and affection, thus a clear demarcation from the actions of the Russian Federation: ‘So about that Putin is evil, that invasion of Ukraine is completely unjust’ (I5, l. 137). The time since February 2022 has been challenging and stressful, particularly for those with relatives in Ukraine (I1, l. 515-516; I8, l. 118-119). However, it can be asserted that a stronger affection and disputation has been ongoing compared to the 2014 invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine because the participants describe themselves as too young at that time to grasp the significance and exhibit an interest in geopolitics (I3, l. 625-629; I5, l. 150-155; I6, l. 342-344). Anastasia, nevertheless, outlines that while she was shocked, she was not exactly surprised about the full-scale invasion, as it merely

confirmed her previous assumptions (I5, l. 327-335). Consequently, her outlook for the future has become rather pessimistic; she expects that 'it will always get worse from that point' (I5, l. 335-338). In contrast, Tanja maintains a more optimistic mindset, as little has changed since she does not live in Russia. She firmly believes that everything will eventually turn out well and is confident that Russia will never invade the Baltic States (I2, l. 293-296, 336-337). According to Sofia, the Latvian state is also using the Russian war of aggression for its benefits:

> '[…] The Ukrainian war is a very good pretext to do whatever they want to do and justify it with hey, but there is a war in Ukraine. […] I cannot really imagine what exactly, but they will definitely find new ways to make our lives more difficult' (I4, l. 502-506).

4.2.4 Generational Differences

When examining the participants' parents' opinions and values, particular generational differences can be traced, especially regarding political views regarding the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, as they see their parents as '[…] the product of the Soviet Union', and some of their perspectives remain influenced by it (I5, l. 507-508). Anastasia perceives that her parents are primarily nostalgic about their youth, recalling when everything appeared better, 'which is probably a little bit brighter than it was really there' (I5, l. 515-519). Sofia is more critical of the Soviet Union than her mother (I4, l. 545). Conversely, the interviewees perceive themselves as generally more influenced by Latvian culture and consequently possess better proficiency in the Latvian language (I4, l. 548-549; I5, l. 508-509) which, according to Alba (2005: 35) can be regarded as an intergenerational assimilation process in terms of language, or at the very least, an indication of a certain level of integration through improved Latvian language skills (Cara 2010: 130; Cheskin 2013: 291, 305).

The consumption of Russian media and exposure to Russian state propaganda can be marked as a clear difference between the generations. Most interviewees note that their parents have consistently followed news from the Russian Federation, leading to the development of pro-Russian mindsets (I5, l. 88-92; I6, l. 358-359). Attempts have been made to engage them in discussions and broaden their perspectives, yet success has often been limited, emphasizing generational disparities and limited life experiences (I3, l. 163-165). Consequently, political discussions within their families are often deliberately avoided (I5, l. 92-93; I6, 362-363; I8, l. 187-191). Anastasia has observed an inevitable shift in mindsets since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, as even her father could no longer deny Russia's attack on Ukraine, given that his

mother lives in Ukraine and he has been personally affected (I5, l. 143-149). This ongoing generational change keeps Viktor hopeful as he is experiencing the vast majority of younger people ‘having no problems with these nationalistic things. I mean, had no problem, so they were not actively supporting it actively, so’ (I6, l. 504-505).

The transition from a Soviet affiliation to a particular identification with Latvia as the country of birth has led to a favorable, agreeable attitude towards the new nationalizing state, a phenomenon previously stated by Laitin (2003: 218). Consequently, generational differences can be perceived as contributing to establishing more permeable boundaries (Brubaker 2011: 1785).

Nevertheless, different generational affiliations can be found on the cultural level. As previously outlined in chapters 4.1.5 and 4.2.2., it can be summarized that contrasting to a demarcation from Latvian culture as not theirs, a partial alignment with the Russian cultural sphere is apparent among young Russian speakers. Furthermore, despite this alignment, no political identification with the Russian Federation is currently recognizable. Even before the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, there appears to have been no sense of belonging outside of the cultural realm, as the young Russian speakers in Latvia identify themselves as European, distinct from Russians residing in Russia, with 'European' values and perspectives on the world, distinct from Russians residing in Russia. This contrasts with their parents' generation, who continue to be influenced by Soviet values in addition to contemporary Russian propaganda.

4.3 The International Sphere

As anticipated in the theoretical framework, the international sphere is considered a factor shaping the identity of young Russian speakers in Latvia, with the former ‘Soviet’ identity no longer playing a prominent role. Consequently, two crucial aspects are further elucidated and described in more detail below: the influence of the European Union and the importance of the English language.

4.3.1 The Influence of the European Union

Identification with the European Union is evident in the sense that the concept of it is particularly valued: ‘I feel for me, like now, Europe is like home. Well, because we do not have kind of borders. We are easily crossing, going everywhere, and I really enjoy that’ (I3, l. 465-467). Furthermore, Sofia highlights that she can identify as European if it embodies ‘[…] pro-

European Union, pro-democracy, pro-human rights, pro-integration, openness and other things like that' (I4, l. 188-192). Moreover, she emphasizes the significant role the European Union plays in Latvia. Specifically, EU membership has facilitated various opportunities for Russian speakers and ethnic minorities in Latvia, notably through simplified naturalization laws. Furthermore, Sofia regards this support as an anchor that has prevented what she perceives as potentially 'ugly' things such as deportations. Therefore, 'we are really great patriots of the European Union because it brought us so many opportunities' (I4, l. 576-585). Hence, she hopes that the European Union will remain because, without it, she cannot expect any positive development within Latvia (I4, l. 584-586).

4.3.2 Importance of English Language

As the English language has gained significant popularity, particularly as the preferred first foreign language for Latvian speakers over Russian, several interviewees also opt for English in their daily lives and workplaces (I1, l. 317-320; I2, l. 137-138, 527-531; I8, l. 50-51). Additionally, English serves as a medium for watching online videos and movies. Tom recalls watching TV in English during his childhood since only a few cartoons were translated into Russian (I7, l. 49-53). At present, it serves as a conduit for accessing various videos and content, offering exposure to progressive liberal ideas concerning women's rights and minority rights, as noted by Anastasia (I5, l. 80-83). Consequently, English provides a means to be informed about global developments outside the political landscape in Latvia and to be influenced by diverse values and ideas. Furthermore, it is considered a gateway to residing in other countries, prompting a stronger inclination toward improving English language skills than Latvian (I2, l. 517-520; I3, l. 49-52).

Furthermore, the European Union has undeniably influenced the living conditions of young Russian speakers in Latvia. It is evident that there is a distinct identification with the political sphere involving support for the European Union's values and the opportunities it provides. Moreover, it has served as a guarantee of security through its minority policies. However, it cannot be assumed that the international sphere has significantly reduced ethnic boundaries within Latvia, as described by Patsiurko and Wallace (2014: 203). Instead, there appears to be a shift toward the European Union, alongside a growing distance from identification with the Latvian state, resulting from the all-encompassing legitimization of the national identity and the Latvian states' policies stemming from it.

4.4 Summary and Other Forms of Identity

A simplified figure of the results just discussed is shown below (Fig. 1). It portrays the relationships of the young Russian speakers toward the three other nodes, separated in political and cultural spheres. Notably, the economic sphere was initially considered by Cheskin (2015: 82); however, in these contexts, it is omitted as it received minimal emphasis from the interviewees. The feelings of affiliation in different spheres to the respective actors are depicted as either positive (indicating a sense of belonging) or negative (implying a lack of belonging). The solid, dark arrows illustrate robust, distinct boundaries between the nodes that persist among the different actors, indicating strong identifications or demarcations. On the other hand, the lighter arrows represent weaker, more permeable boundaries, influenced by varying dynamics of identification within the young Russian speakers. Notably, the affiliations with the European Union appear blurrier, suggesting an alignment with the concept of values and the possibilities it offers rather than a genuine sense of belonging to the institution.

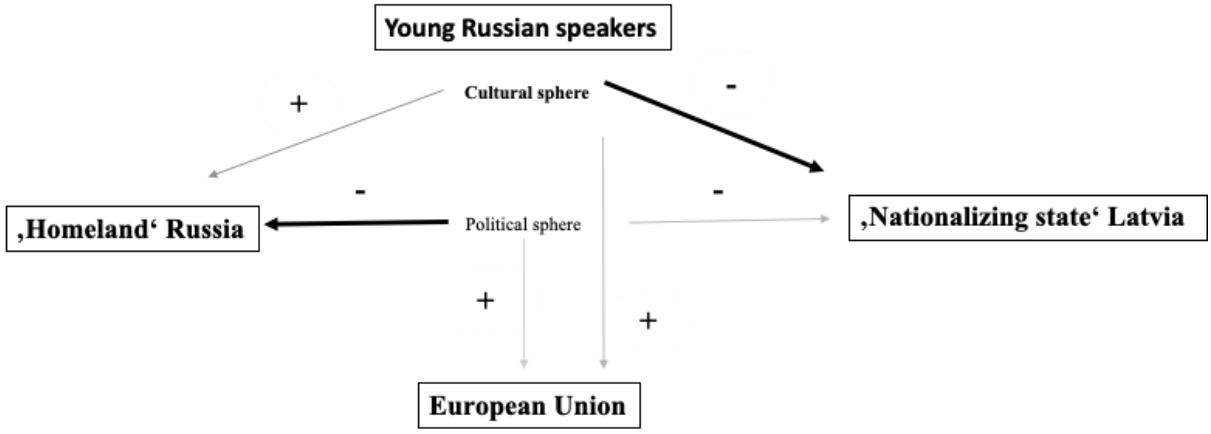

Figure 1: Simplified model of young Russian speakers' affiliations in different spheres

Source: Own figure

Indeed, it must be acknowledged that identity is a multifaceted construct, and an individual can undoubtedly embrace multiple identities that extend beyond affiliations toward one or more national states. These identities can encompass language and other cultural aspects, territory, and political actors (Smith 1991: 4), which are the primary focus of the preceding categories of this analysis. Nonetheless, it is fundamental to consider the additional affiliations and identifications of young Russian speakers to fully grasp what shapes their lives and actions on a broader scale. Consequently, these will be briefly explored in the following section.

Sofia articulates that national identity has never held significance for her (I4, l. 183-185). If prompted to define herself, she would primarily identify as a woman, as this aspect has profoundly impacted her life (I4, l. 185-187). Following this, she aligns herself with movements such as socialism or feminism, although she asserts that these affiliations are unrelated to her sense of belonging to Latvia (I4, l. 537-538). Tom emphasizes that his identity has been significantly shaped by his passion for music (I7, l. 24-27). Additionally, he and Sofia highlight the importance of interpersonal connections and groups, including friends and involvement in sports, in identity shaping (I4, l. 535-536; I6, l. 413-414). According to Viktor, people hold more significance than places in forming one's identity (I6, l. 517-521).

Contrastingly, Anastasia recalls nostalgic memories and emphasizes her emotional connection to certain significant places (I5, l. 462-471). Furthermore, since identity is inherently shaped by the external world and continually influenced by its environment and societal interactions (Smith 1991: 4), this plays a crucial role in forming the identities of Irina, Anastasia, and Viktor. Thus, their behaviors and viewpoints are predominantly influenced by the environments in which they were raised, including their country and family. Consequently, only certain aspects of their identities can be traced back to cultural distinctions inherited from their ancestors (I1, l. 392-293; I5, l. 171-177; I6, l. 137-142).

4.5 Limitations and Methodological Reflection

Based on the material analysis conducted, it is essential to critically reflect on and review the research procedures to meet the quality criteria of content-analytical research.

The qualitative research design can be evaluated as constructive for a discussion in the context of the experiences of the young Russian speakers, which have been identified as influential in forming their identities. This approach has enabled them to capture their experiences and facilitated the revelation of their subjective perspectives and mechanisms of action, leading to significant insights for interpreting the results. Unlike a quantitative approach, the qualitative method utilized in this study has allowed for identifying and interpreting subjectively experienced situations. Although these findings may not represent the broader population of Russian speakers in Latvia, they have facilitated an in-depth exploration of the research topic, leading to profound insights and nuanced findings.

In the context of a critical analysis, the generalizability of the results is crucial and must be considered. Given the small sample size (n=8), the ability to generalize the findings is limited. The results cannot be representative of the entire population of young Russian speakers in Latvia and only provide insights into the specific experiences of the interviewees involved in this study. In addition, the sample itself can indeed also be criticized. Despite the small number of cases, the research captured diverse experiences and perspectives. However, it is essential to note that the interviewees are well-educated, with all but one having obtained at least a bachelor's degree. This observation may be linked, among other factors, to the necessity for strong English language skills and the sampling strategy through university channels. Therefore, the findings might have been notably different had individuals with a lower level of education been included in the study. The interviews underscored the university's role as a point for interaction with Latvian-speaking individuals and the Latvian language. However, considering that the English language was also perceived as a factor contributing to a sense of "Europeanness," it can be regarded not only as a weakness but also as a strength of the research.

Moreover, the location selection, focusing solely on the capital, Riga, should be critically examined. This approach introduces a specific bias into the research. The results might have differed considerably had individuals from more rural areas been included, as the Russian-speaking community in such regions could be more visibly demarcated, potentially fostering stronger affinities toward it and the Russian Federation.

The researcher's positionality is unavoidable in qualitative research, which must be considered and critically reflected. As a researcher, one is an active part of the research process, and personal experiences, presuppositions, and values inevitably influence the topic selection, conduct, and analysis. The researcher's lack of background in Latvia or Russia undoubtedly enabled a certain level of objectivity and can thus be viewed as a partial advantage. Nevertheless, this position can also be criticized, as it may lead to potential limitations in comprehending specific structures and dynamics, consequently impacting the relationship with the interviewees and their statements. Nevertheless, knowledge and a deep understanding of the dynamics within the researched society are essential for selecting a topic, which was the case to a certain degree due to previous stays in Latvia. The latter was also an advantage to gain access to the field.

Most interviewees agreed to participate in response to general requests, indicating a certain self-motivation and interest in discussing this personal and sensitive topic. However, this high level of engagement and reliability among the interviewees could have limitations, as it potentially represents a specific subgroup of individuals willing to share their perspectives (Helfferich 2011: 176).

The selection of the narrative interview proved to be a viable method. However, there were some challenges, as it was utterly dependent on the person whether the first narrative 'monologue' could be carried out as planned. In some cases, follow-up questions, as an essential part of the narrative interview, were only necessary after a while; in others, the exmanent, more general questions had to be used very quickly to serve as conversation stimuli and elicit responses. Consequently, the selection of questions cannot be universally criticized, as a pre-selection of broader questions was beneficial in navigating the interview process. In retrospect, it can be concluded that more specific questions could have been asked in the immanent part to elaborate further specific points made by the interviewees. While a substantial amount of material emerged, which undoubtedly highlights the strength of the less structured and more open narrative interview in providing participants with the space for their statements and interpretations, many parts of the material could not be included in the final analysis due to the focus of the research framework and the research questions. Additionally, the language used during the interviews can also be critically examined. As the interviews were conducted in English, which was not the native language of either the interviewees or the researchers, a particular language barrier must be acknowledged. However, the language proficiency was generally excellent, and comprehension issues with the questions were rare. Only in interview 8, as discussed in Chapter 3.6, did difficulties in understanding the questions and challenges in articulating responses prevail due to a more significant language barrier, resulting in the interview being used only marginally.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

The primary objective of this empirical study was to investigate the positioning of young Russian speakers born and raised in post-Soviet Latvia and to discern the influences on their sense of identity. The study employed a qualitative research design to address the research questions: '**How do young Russian speakers who were born and live in Latvia identify themselves?'** and **'How has the Russian invasion of Ukraine since 2014 affected the self-identification of these Russian speakers?'**. The starting point was an in-depth literature

review. Based on this, the research questions were formed, and the specific research object was determined. Subsequently, the empirical segment of this study entailed conducting eight narrative interviews with Russian speakers aged between 22 and 33 years. This research work builds upon prior studies, aiming to present and analyze the situation of young Russian speakers in interaction with various actors while providing insights into their perceived future developments.

Based on previous research in this field, the initial premise assumed that the identity of young Russian speakers in Latvia could not be reduced to solely linguistic or territorial aspects but is influenced by the interplay with three critical actors within a quadratic nexus: the 'newly' nationalized state of Latvia, the 'homeland' Russia, and the previous added 'international' node represented by European institutions. These actors, in turn, can be categorized into three different areas (political, cultural, and economic), which form an essential part of the analysis of this work. Furthermore, so-called social and ethnic boundaries can be found in this interplay, the strength of which can significantly impact the individuals' sense of belonging.

Thus, it can be summarized that young Russian speakers in Latvia exhibit a certain attachment and sense of belonging to Latvia due to the influence of growing up and living within the country's structures. Notably, distinct generational differences can be observed, with the parental generation often associating themselves with a Soviet identity, as described by the interviewees. These generational shifts are further reflected in the fact that many study participants do not encounter substantial issues with the Latvian language and demonstrate a notable degree of integration, as their daily lives align closely with those of the Latvian majority society. The use of the Russian language is often limited to contexts within the family and interactions with friends from their former Russian minority school. Although instances of discrimination and stereotyping are occasionally encountered, they are relatively infrequent and exert minimal influence on their relationship with Latvian civil society. Moreover, these discriminatory experiences are commonly attributed to a broader issue affecting Russian speakers rather than being perceived as personal affronts.

The relationship with the Latvian state is notably complex. Ethicized and nationalized politics, including a strong national identity that is deeply rooted in a historical context and traditions originating from the 19th century, with definitive delineations of acceptable and unacceptable narratives, contribute to the division of Latvian society into distinct groups. Ethnic Latvians are

perceived as the core nation, while the Russian-speaking minority is regarded as the 'other.' As a result, young Russian speakers tend to view such national identity as exclusionary rather than inclusive, rendering it challenging for them to politically align themselves with the 'nationalizing state' of Latvia. This sentiment is also underpinned by the perceived downward spiral since the early 2010s in the Latvian state's prioritization of all things 'Latvian,' particularly promoting the Latvian language and culture as the ultimate societal virtues. Varying expressions and interpretations of these political and societal shifts are evident. While some people perceive these developments as much more present and dystopian, even going as far as labeling themselves as 'second-class citizens,' others generally feel at ease and consider themselves as rather integral parts of Latvian society. Nevertheless, a distinct demarcation is not only apparent at the political level but also significantly evident in the cultural realm. This segregation is not solely enforced by an exclusive national identity. Still, it is reinforced by the prevalent sentiment among the interviewed Russian speakers, emphasizing fundamental disparities between Latvian and Russian culture. The respondents regard these circumstances as unfortunate.

Contrastingly, an emphasis is placed on a certain sense of belonging to the Russian cultural sphere, and therefore, a rather ethnic cultural identity prevails. Despite the clear boundaries demarcating from the Latvian cultural sphere, various nuances of cultural affiliations continue to emerge. Thus, expressions of no particular allegiance to either culture, described as 'cultureless,' are evident, as well as tendencies toward a more hybrid identity, leading to the adoption of certain Latvian traditions.

At the political level, there is no identification with the present-day Russian Federation, and clear demarcations from ‘the Russians in Russia’ become evident. Here, a distinct tendency and affiliation as ‘Latvian Russian’ is used through an association with European values and perspectives, which are notably different from Russian ideals. While their parents exhibit clear inclinations towards consuming Russian media, thereby being exposed to propagandistic influences, the young Russian speakers' affiliation with the Russian Federation has always been rather nonexistent. During the 2014 annexation of Crimea, their limited affectedness was attributed to their young age and inability to fully comprehend the significance of geopolitical events. Nonetheless, a general disapproval of the Russian war in Ukraine is expressed. However, the relationship to the ‘homeland’ does not seem to have diminished due to the previously low affiliation level. This sentiment arises from the perception that certain ethnically

charged policies, exemplified by the plan to destroy the Soviet monument in Riga in August 2022, are justified by the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Due to a sense of exclusion, limited representation in Latvian politics, and a clear separation from the Russian Federation, certain affiliations with the European Union as international actor can be identified. On the one hand, the theoretical concept of the EU is valued, particularly in terms of open borders and liberal values. The importance of the English language also becomes evident, providing access to more progressive perspectives and serving as a means to pursue opportunities for living in other European Union countries. Due to the framework conditions given by the European Union regarding minority rights, EU membership has facilitated various opportunities for Russian speakers and ethnic minorities in Latvia, notably through simplified naturalization laws. The European Union is thus regarded as a particular guarantee for security. Hence, there is a shared hope for Latvia to maintain its ties with the European Union, given the current perceived pessimism regarding the political landscape in the country, primarily due to rising nationalism. Despite this, the economic sphere in Latvia is largely viewed with concern rather than optimism, leading to considering the possibility of moving to another country in case of deteriorating political and economic situations.

The presented research results indicate that a notable sense of affiliation with Latvian society exists among the young, educated Russian-speaking population in Latvia, particularly at the personal level within their daily experiences. However, at a political and cultural level, a prevailing sentiment of being marginalized as a collective by the Latvian state persists. Despite the particular references to Russian culture, there is a distinct lack of identification with the contemporary Russian Federation. This feeling of being 'in-between,' commonly referred to as the 'Latvian Russian' identity, facilitates an inclination towards a broader international context, specifically 'European,' which holds an increasingly significant role in their lives.

Therefore, several avenues for future research can be discerned. Given the predominantly well-educated interviewees in this study, it would be advantageous to introduce greater diversity or focus on different educational levels to investigate whether a stronger ethnic affiliation with the Russian Federation exists in contrast to an alignment with the European Union. Additionally, including more rural regions, as opposed to solely urban areas such as the capital city of Riga, would offer valuable insights. Moreover, to counterbalance the one-sided representation of solely Russian speakers, exploring the perspectives and perceptions of young ethnic Latvians

could contribute to a more comprehensive societal analysis. Investigating the extent to which divergent and shared perspectives exist and whether similar perceptions of prevalent issues prevail would be intriguing. Furthermore, examining the scope of international identification for this latter target group would be of interest.

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Annex

a. Narrative Guide

Name of Interviewee	
Place	
Date	

At the beginning, the consent. I would like to ask you to grant your consent to the recording, transcribing and archiving of the interview and to the use of its fragments after removal of information that enable identification for the purpose of sociological research.

If you like I could briefly tell you bit about myself and about my research:

I'm doing my master's degree in East European Studies in Berlin. Originally, I'm from the south of Germany and afterwards I moved to Cologne to do a bachelor's in Social Sciences. During that time, I travelled several times to Central Europe, Eastern Europe and Russia and therefore started to be interested in especially the post-Soviet states, that's why I chose to focus on that area during my masters. For my Erasmus semester in 2022 I picked Riga because I haven't been to the Baltics before and was very curious. After I was done with the studies part, I also did an internship in Riga, therefore, I lived in Latvia for about 8 months. When I came back last October and had to choose a topic for my thesis, I really wanted to focus my research on Latvian society. After I've done some reading, I chose to conduct a qualitative study on young Russian speakers in Latvia. I want to investigate the self-identification and sense of belonging of a generation which was born or/and grew up after the fall of Soviet Union in independent Latvia.

The following conversation is going to focus on your biography. The first part is going to be a very opened question you can answer to as long as you want. Afterwards I will ask you some question which are related to what you just said. And the first and last part contains some more general question that I already prepared. Please let me know if you have any questions.

1. Initial question:

I would like you to tell me about your life in Latvia. All kind of events and experiences which you think that were important to you and made you the person you are now. You can start wherever you like for example with your birth or when you were a child. Please take all the time you need. I'll only listen for now, I won't interrupt, I'll just take some notes for afterwards.

2. Immanent questions/notes
    - For example, what your childhood looked like → how did it happen that you are the person you are taking into account your childhood experiences (or later)
    - Were you interested in anything when you were at school, apart from sport, did you have any hobbies?
    - Relations to family etc.

3. (Possible) exmanent questions:
    - How do you feel about this week's victory day?
    - Did something change for you since February 2022 or even since 2014 when Russia started to annex Crimea?
        - Your way of thinking, friends, relations
    - How would you describe Latvia's relationship to Russia?
    - How do you feel as Latvian?
        - Proud, connected, sad, excluded, or nothing at all, just normal?
        - Citizenship?
    - Are there specific places, people, or even groups that were or are important/essential for your sense of belonging?
        - Childhood already?
        - Are you a member of (or take action) in some kind of (political) organizations? (Sport) Clubs? What do you do in your free time?
        - What are your views on the world? On politics?
    - What do you think are the biggest differences between you and your parents/grandparents?
        - Mindset, affiliations, opinions
    - What do you want to happen in the future? / If you could dream, what three things would you change in your country?
    - What direction do you think Latvian society will take in the next few years?
    - How will your life look let us say in 10 years? How would you like to be?

4. Socio-demographic data
    - year of birth/age
    - education (degree)
    - current occupation
    - citizenship