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Labour Migration, Neo-liberalism and Ethno-politics in the New Europe: The Latvian case

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Abstract

The accession of the new EU member states of Eastern Europe has highlighted ambivalence towards migration both within the older member states, but less frequently discussed, in the new. The former Soviet republic of Latvia serves as a case-study. Outward migration is a factor undermining social and economic progress, while generating pressures towards inward migration to meet labour shortages. Confounding appropriate political and policy responses is the sensitive issue of 'ethnic balance', a troubled 'legacy' of Latvian history. In the context of changes in the global migratory landscape there is potential for a renewed regime of discrimination based on ethno-politics with wider European resonance.

Keywords: Ethno-politics, xenophobia, European Union enlargement, neo-liberalism, labour migration, Latvia.

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INTRODUCTION

As Europe's labour force shrinks, labour migration and issues of racism, nationalism and xenophobia have become topics of policy concern within the European Union (EU) (Favell and Hansen 2002). Accelerating labour migration is occurring in ways that are affecting social solidarity throughout the European Union. Where notions of citizenship and ethnicity are interlinked, and where a precarious sense of national identity exists, the response of the host community to inwards migration can be what Stephen Castles (1995) has described as 'differential exclusion'. Increasing racism and xenophobia are of concern not simply in the old EU member states, but less frequently discussed, in the new.

The focus here is on Latvia which since its independence from the Soviet Union, along with its Baltic neighbours of Estonia and Lithuania, has applied neo-liberal policies with particular enthusiasm, even 'religiously' (Pabriks and Purs in Smith *et al* 2002), and at least until recently, with apparent success (Bohle and Greskovits 2007; Crowley 2007). In terms of its internal domestic social development, the path of radical free market economic reconstruction has meant only the most meagre provisions of an inclusive welfare state system has emerged in the post-Soviet era. Latvia's population is largely economically and, in reality, politically disenfranchised, by the failure to realise the potential benefits of democratic nationhood.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, in little more than a decade, Latvia has become both an EU member State and part of the NATO alliance. As Hans Overbeek has noted, with their integration into 'the hegemonic structures of the West', post-communist new EU member states such as Latvia, are 'themselves becoming destination countries for migrants from the outer layers of the emerging new regional geo-hierarchies' (2002: 12). Latvia is simultaneously experiencing domestic labour shortages in key sectors, occasioned by outwards migration following EU enlargement in 2004, and by demographic imbalances, which, in turn, are creating pressures for recruitment of replacement labour, both from among near-neighbours in the territories of the Former Soviet Union, and from even further afield. The issue of how to respond to incoming replacement migrant labour is creating deep resistances based on an ethno-politics of an uneasy kind.

The present article is a contribution to the debate recently called for in the pages of this journal (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008), for the theorisation of contemporary post-communist Eastern Europe to be developed in an ethnographically-informed perspective that critically interrogates and synthesises everyday 'grounded' experiences. An attempt is made here to connect the developing literature of labour studies (or the new 'working class studies') specifically addressing issues of international migration (for a recent review see McGovern 2007), with ongoing debates concerning the nature of citizenship and nationality in a European context. It draws on the insights concerning nationhood, migration and ethnicity in the seminal exchanges of John Rex (1996) and Gerard Delanty (1996). It also acknowledges the important theoretical work of John Foster and his colleagues (2002) in historical studies of class formation, immigration and ethnicity in nineteenth century Britain, of Robert Miles (1993) regarding the 'imagined' construction of racialised national identities, and of Satnam Virdee (2000) demonstrating the ultimate contingency of racialised exclusionary practices in the labour market. Finally, our argument is informed by the path-breaking studies of W. Rogers Brubaker (1992, 1996) of ethnocultural 'nationalizing', or the 'reframing' of national identities in the

post-communist states of Eastern Europe against the background of European enlargement.

The analysis of Latvia's specific 'nationalizing' project, to use Brubaker's terminology, adopts the viewpoint Hughes (2005) who has argued that contemporary Latvia can be characterised as a 'regime of discrimination', exercised towards its Russophone minority inhabitants. These Russian speakers are mainly, but not entirely, migrant workers who arrived during the period of the incorporation of Latvia into the USSR from the end of World War II. Hughes anticipated that one outcome of this regime of discrimination was likely to be labour 'exit', given the opportunity. Hughes argued that denial of 'voice' in terms of citizenship and economic rights to the Russophone minority would likely to lead to 'exit' as a response to perceived discrimination.

Labour exit of the workforce is creating serious shortages in certain sectors now necessitating the admission of foreign workers from third countries to fill vacancies. Problematical ethno-politics in Latvia has produced a restrictive citizenship policy towards the significant Russophone minority in the period since independence. The present article follows Hughes, but suggests that new discriminatory practices may be initiated against the next wave of incoming migrants. This fear of 'outsiders' who may further 'dilute' the 'already-threatened' Latvian national identity is compromising necessary appropriate policy responses. Latvia is struggling to come to terms not only with its troubled past, but with the challenges of the present presented by a globalising economy, in which labour migration is an integral aspect. Questions of who is 'Self' and who is 'Other', always problematical in Latvian history, have yet to be resolved and are now being given a specific heightened sensitivity by the issue of labour migration. This article suggests then that xenophobia and racism are likely to grow in intensity as labour migration creates the potential for a new regime of discrimination to be initiated against incoming replacement migrant workers.

Arguably, at a broader level, Latvia's difficulties and ambivalences mirror, albeit in a distorted manner, what Schierup, Hansen and Castles have recently identified as 'a *European dilemma*' (Schierup *et al* 2006). Caught in the vice of a simultaneous need for, but rising hostility towards migrants, especially from outside the EU, the European project is itself struggling to come to terms with the contemporary contours of the new global labour migration landscape. Like Europe itself, Latvia, having taken 'the neo-liberal turn', is a case study in microcosm of the implosive potential of the new ethno-politics of labour migration.

LATVIA: A REGIME OF DISCRIMINATION

Among the most impoverished of the new EU member states (Dennis and Guio 2004), Latvia with a population of around 2.3 million, has had one of the highest percentages of its population migrating abroad for work since EU accession in 2004 (World Bank 2006). The adverse consequences of this unanticipated labour exodus are compounded by unfavourable demographic factors. Birth rate in Latvia has declined by about 40% over the first decade of transition, a fall second only to Romania (Ivlevs 2007a, p. 5). Added to this, male life expectancy at 66.39 years is about ten years below the EU average, again second lowest in the EU (EurLIFE database). In common with a number of post-communist states, Latvia can anticipate a considerable decrease in its population, by some estimates as much as 13% between 2000 and 2025 (Chawla *et al* 2007). In real terms, the overall population is aging and is predicted to decline from below 2.3 million to just over 1.8 million by 2050 (Lanzieri 2006: 4).

These demographic imbalances impact directly on the wider issue migration and the problem of maintaining sustainable labour resources. Latvia, having become a major exporter of labour, now contemplates becoming the site of a substantial inward migration, both from geographically close neighbouring (Slavic) states, and from even further afield (in Asia and perhaps sub-Saharan Africa). Despite the growing objective need for such replacement labour, ethno-political considerations appear to be short-circuiting appropriate policy responses.

Conventional explanations ascribe Latvian resistance to the arrival of migrants as rooted almost exclusively in Latvia's 'entirely different experience with immigrants thanks to the Soviet period' (Krišjane 2007: 226). Long-standing tensions over questions of 'ethnic balance' and migration, arising from Soviet times, have made the question of Latvian national identity particularly 'sensitive' (See Pabriks and Purs in Smith *et al* 2002: 45-88; Riekstiņš 2005). In Riga, the capital city, Daugavpils and other cities, where many of the immigrant Russians congregated for work in the large Soviet-built enterprises, Russian language may still be heard on the streets as often as Latvian.

By 1989, on the eve of independence, Latvians constituted a bare majority (52%) of the population. Aasland and Fløtten have argued that in Latvia 'a fear of demographic extinction and a perceived need to protect the core nation from its unfavourable demographic situation has been a dominant theme in the nationalist discourse' (Aasland and Fløtten, 2001: 1028). A more nuanced situating of the 'legacy' of Latvia's history, however, reveals a complex dynamic. The Baltic States, by virtue of their spatial location, have constituted fluid zones of rivalry between the big powers, notably Sweden, Russia and Germany, contesting for dominance in region that, from the early eighteenth century onwards, was settled in favour of Russia. While the domination of a small country by its powerful neighbours reveals much of relevance with regard to the foundations of Latvian national identity, Latvian history, especially of the inter-war years of the twentieth century, provides more significant pointers to contemporary paradoxes. Despite current nationalist 'reaching back' in order to establish continuities with the first independent Latvian state (while simultaneously de-legitimizing the 'illegal' years of Soviet occupation), the democratic character of this state was never secure. Latvia's brief inter-war experience of political independence was not a particularly successful one in terms of establishing the foundations of an inclusionary concept of democratic citizenship and nationhood.

Having seen the spectre of Bolshevism briefly on its own soil – Riga's proletariat was one of the most class conscious in the Czarist empire – Latvia's chaotic parliamentary system in the 1920s, produced ruling elites impatient with the democratic process. Indeed, following a coup in May 1934, independent Latvia was authoritarian, even 'proto-fascist' under Karlis Ulmanis, its leadership imitating and inspired by developments in National Socialist Germany (Pabriks and Purs in Smith *et al* 2002: 18-22). In the celebration of the infallible supreme leader, 'vadoņa princips' (Latvian term for the widely known German 'Führerprinzip' and a 'Latvian Latvia', Ulmanis was eulogised by leading nationalist intellectuals who had long espoused openly anti-democratic and pro-authoritarian political conceptions of purifying the nation (Zake 2007). These rhetorical imaginings were embellished with an anti-ethnic character that embraced Russians, Germans and Jews, while assuming the prevailing taxonomies of race to provide a 'scientific' basis for ordering their world (national) view. This was a legacy 'crystallized' in the very origins of the Latvian 'nation-building' project (Brubaker 1996).

This is not the place to dwell on the horrors of the Second World War, of successive occupations, of collaboration and of the mass exterminations for which Latvia was distinguished as a favoured site of the Reich. Following its annexation by the Soviet Union in 1945, Latvia underwent rapid industrialisation. Already existing powerful anti-immigrant sentiment received new momentum in the era of Soviet Latvia. Indeed, Latvian historians argue that the process of the 'sovietization' of Latvia 'had an ethnic Russian character', a process that was intimately linked with issues of migration (Strods 2005: 210, 220 ff).

The massive industrialization that the USSR undertook in Latvia under the name of 'internationalization of industry' was a form of colonization. Latvia did not have the necessary raw materials, which had to be imported, and its labour pool had been decimated by the war and the Soviet repressions, including the 1949 deportation. Therefore, tens of thousands of workers, engineers and technicians were recruited and imported into Latvia. Large complexes of apartment houses (and even whole new towns) were constructed to accommodate them. By 1989, Latvia had received an influx of 712,000 ethnic Russians, who, together with the already residing 193,600 ethnic Russian inhabitants (10.5%), constituted 34% of Latvia's population (2005: 219).

These workers and their families came to Latvia attracted by one of the highest standards of living in the Soviet Union. The period of Soviet Latvia also saw the emergence of so-called 'national communists' such as Edvards Berklaivs, raising ethno-cultural demands for a halt to further inward migration from other parts of the USSR. Such individuals were later to play leading roles in the independence movement and in the (re-)foundation of the new post-communist Latvian state. With the collapse of the Soviet system, a process in which the Baltic States played no small part, many of the ethnic Russian-speaking population, left the country. Those who remained – and by 1989 as many as 56% of Latvia's Russians were born in Latvia – were now victims of a double legacy: viewed as representatives of the former occupying power and, at the same time, subject to exclusionary ethno-politics by Latvian nationalist forces.

Questions of national identity and language had provided a pivotal point of political mobilisation during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which 'the struggle for national rights was perceived by ethnic elites as the one for control of local economies and...later, for complete independence (Korobkov and Zaionchkovskaia 2004: 489). However, the question of immigration now added a particularly potent dimension in discourses of fear concerning 'national extinction', 'minoritization' and even 'genocide' (Brubaker 1992: 273). Anti-immigrant sentiment was, therefore, not only an integral part of the ideological and political debates of the pro-independence movement, but in the post-independence period 'proof' of being a 'real patriot' (Pabriks and Purs in Smith *et al* 2002: 47-8, 56, 59, 72ff). Ironically, considerable support for independence was provided by the Russian-speaking community living in Latvia, both those who had arrived in Soviet times, and from the earlier communities, comprising descendants of 'Old Believers' and White Russians. The brief 'honeymoon' period for inter-ethnic relations of the *Tautas fronte* (Popular Front), lasting between 1990 and 1991, was to be quickly forgotten. The new 'titular' elites regarded Russophones as a potential 'fifth column', against whom institutionalised barriers of non-citizenship were quickly raised (Pabriks and Purs in Smith *et al* 2002: 61, 63, 73).

If the citizenship question in post-Soviet Latvia was intrinsic to the formation of the new Latvian state, its resolution was contingent on the secure grasp of political power by the new ethnic Latvian elites (Brubaker 1992:282-284). From the initial resolution of the Latvian Supreme Council to the eventual passing in 1994 of the Citizenship Law by the new Latvian parliament, the exclusion from political rights of immigrants of Russian origin was the main objective. Only those persons who enjoyed citizenship rights prior to 1940 and their direct descendants (something the majority of ethnic Latvians were able to claim, but the most ethnic Russians could not), were recognized as citizens of Latvia with full rights. Russians (as well as other minority immigrant groups such as Ukrainians, Byelorussians) were allowed to exchange their former USSR passports for documents containing their personal code of Latvian residency. However, such persons were deemed to be 'non-citizens' without the right to vote, to be elected to public office, or to work as civil servants and were thus effectively stateless or 'aliens', often in the country of their birth. An absence of inclusionary universalistic values of social citizenship, and by design of political citizenship, therefore prevailed since the inception of Latvia's political independence.

CITIZENSHIP AND NON-CITIZENSHIP IN LATVIA

The plight of Latvia's non-citizens following the disintegration of the USSR was by no means unique. The collapse of the Soviet system left twenty five million former Soviet citizens of Russian origin outside the motherland. They comprise what the Russian authorities now view as the populations of the 'near abroad'. This is a simultaneous ethnic and geographic demarcation of perceived legitimate interest, but as non-Russians would see it, of unwarranted interference, or in the case of Georgia, of 'open aggression' from Moscow. The conflict over South Ossetia, whatever its other longer-term ramifications prove to be, was an important moment in re-defining geo-political relations in the wider European political space, in particular, with regard to the Russian-speaking Diaspora – one of the themes of this article. In the Baltic States, unlike Georgia, following their early acquisition of NATO membership, territorial demarcation is today a settled political question. Nevertheless, active Russian interest in the status and fate of its compatriots in the region continues, adding a heightened sensitivity to the issues of discrimination, and making rational debate difficult.

That said, it is important not to exaggerate the inter-ethnic tensions that exist in the region, whether deliberately played upon by outside forces or not. Nevertheless, in 2007, such tensions erupted in a riot with a fatal outcome, occasioned by the removal of a Soviet-era war memorial, the 'Bronze Soldier', from the centre of Tallinn, capital city of neighbouring Estonia. A sudden and sharp polarisation of communal opinion along ethnic lines took place in Latvia, following the incursion of Russian armed forces in the South Ossetia conflict in 2008, with the separate local ethnic media reflecting two very different pictures of the situation. On the streets outside the Russian embassy in Riga, while counter-demonstrators wrapped themselves in the Russian flag, solidarity placards proclaimed 'Hands off Georgia – Russians go home!' and an angry chorus of 'Russians out!' could be heard. As one local journalist observed, 'the double meaning of many chants was not lost on the participants' (*Baltic Times* 2008). For Latvia's non-citizens, such manifestations of anti-Russian sentiment were, to say the least, disturbing, and perhaps an indication of underlying unresolved tensions.

As of January 2008, 372,421 persons in Latvia were officially classified as ‘non-citizens’, two-thirds of whom are of Russian origin, and a further 46,353 were classified as ‘aliens’, comprising a total of 418,774 out of a total population of 2,272,282 (Naturalization Board of the Republic of Latvia 2008). Naturalisation procedures have been liberalized since the late 1990s following a referendum, and there is strong official encouragement to non-citizens to undergo modified citizenship tests. As a result, some 127,000 non-citizens have been naturalised since 1995, while children of non-citizens born after independence in 1991 may be registered as Latvian citizens. Hopes that the issue of citizenship would resolve itself as an older generation died out seem not to have been fulfilled and the take-up of registration opportunities for the children of non-citizens has been less than expected (Feakins and Białasiewicz 2006). Currently, the overall rate of naturalisation is slowing down, following a brief post-enlargement surge in 2004. Many from the minority community regard the requirement to register as invidious, and reject the interpretation of Latvia’s recent history in the citizenship test.

Table 1. Population of Latvia by Citizenship Categories (Percentages)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Citizens	74.46	75.40	76.26	77.07	77.80	78.88	80.09	81.02	81.70
Non-citizens	21.20	21.85	21.24	21.64	20.77	19.61	18.25	17.20	16.37

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia

Non-citizens are excluded from the exercise of basic rights of citizenship, with restricted representational and voting opportunities in referendums as well as in municipal, national and European elections. In fact, resident non-Latvian EU citizens (who can vote in European elections), have more voting rights in Latvia than Latvian non-citizens born in Latvia. Scrutiny and concern over Latvia’s citizenship policies from the Council of Europe, and from the European Union, particularly as Latvia sought EU accession, has led to some modification of the more extreme elements of previous exclusionary measures (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2007: 43-55; PACE 2007). Nevertheless, the personal testimony of those subjected to the current citizenship regime is a compelling record of injustice (Mitrofanovs *et al* 2006). One recent case regards a Latvian non-citizen, a pensioner whose appeal was due to be reviewed in the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in 2008. The pensioner sued the government of Latvia for refusal to pay her pension for 17 years employment. The state authorities had refused to pay the pension because a factory where the woman was employed, although located in Latvia, was registered in Ukraine and later in Russia. Years of work ‘outside of the country’ are not included into the total length of service of non-citizens when calculating pensions. The pensioner considered that this discriminated against her on ground of citizenship (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights, 2008a).¹ Exclusionary policies such as these are the result of the imposition of ethno-political considerations by the new political elite. Contemporary social surveys and focus group studies reveal deep resentment towards such ethnic policies (Zepa *et al* 2004; Zepa *et al* 2006). In day-to-day terms, the impacts are pervasive. Restrictions exist regarding property rights, land ownership and employment (Brande-Kerhe and Pūce 2005; Mežs 2005).

By its very nature, discrimination on whatever grounds at the level of the workplace is difficult to substantiate empirically, since much of what is active

discrimination can be hidden behind managerial decisions and routine work practices. There is evidence that labour market opportunities are adversely affected by ethnicity-based occupational segmentation. Non-Latvians are disproportionately concentrated in private business, with Russian ownership or management to be found in all sectors of the economy, while among the workforce a significant sector of the less skilled labour force in industry is Russian-speaking. Ethnic Latvians, on the other hand, are over-represented in public sector and civil service employment (49% of Latvians are employed in the public sector compared to 35% of non-Latvians). A study by Mihaels Hazans (2005a) based on Labour Force Survey findings for 2002 suggested that 'Latvians average net earnings were 10% higher than those of other ethnic groups (mainly Russians)' (Hazans 2005a, p. 39). On average, an individual with higher education earns 80% more than an individual with basic education. These findings mirror an earlier study of ethnic exclusion by Aasland and Fløtten who identified education level as a key differentiating variable (2001: 1031). Holding education equal, the returns were significantly larger for Latvians compared to non-Latvians (86% as against 64%) (Hazans 2005a: 30-31). However, data based on officially declared earnings should be treated with caution. Perhaps 40% of employees receive wages in 'envelopes' to avoid taxation and employer liability for social insurance contributions, within a sizeable black and grey economy in Latvia (OECD 2003; European Employment Observatory Review 2005). Hazans also found 'unemployment is higher amongst non-Latvians than among ethnic Latvians' (by a ratio of 1.5 in 2002), while non-Latvians constitute 58% of the long-term unemployed, a figure disproportionate to their population size. The chances of becoming unemployed were also greater among non-Latvians than Latvians (Hazans 2005a: 16-17). In part, findings such as these can be explained by the fact that those who came to Latvia during the Soviet period did so, in the main, to take up employment opportunities in the large industrial enterprises that have since disappeared in the processes of privatization and transition to the market economy (See also Pabriks, 2002).

A related aspect of exclusionary practices is the impact of state language legislation. The fifty years of Soviet Latvia are typically but inaccurately portrayed in official historical sources as marked by the wholesale subjugation of Latvian national identity and the 'russification' of language and culture. Nevertheless, there was what has been described as 'asymmetric bilingualism', whereby Latvians were bilingual in their mother tongue and Russian, but Russophone migrants had little incentive to learn the local language (Metuzāle-Kangere and Ozolins 2005). Language laws explicitly privilege Latvian as the official state language and demands for Russian to be granted legal equality, or the status of an officially recognised second language, have been staunchly resisted. Strict language requirements have been imposed in education, for example, in controversial reforms to promote Latvian language usage introduced in predominantly Russian-speaking schools (Van Elsuwege 2004). In 2008, a law was adopted proscribing teaching in institutions of higher education using foreign languages, apart from those of other EU states (in other words, effectively banning instruction in Russian in higher education).

The use of Latvian in communication is mandatory as a condition of employment in public institutions and specific private occupational spheres performing public functions. The extent of state language proficiency is approved in the official procedures for testing language fluency in the public sector for around 3,500 professions. In the private sector, state language proficiency is also required for nearly 1,300 posts. Professions covered include aircraft engineer and designer,

locksmith, housemaid, photographer, as well as officer-on-duty at a dump-site, medical staff, lawyers, notaries or their assistants and advocates, taxi drivers and sanitary technicians, (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2008b; Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2008: 18). The Cabinet of Ministers' Regulations Nr.296 also stipulate that employees in private enterprises and self-employed whose professions are not included in the list and who are in close contact with consumers should be able to provide information on goods and services in the state language.

In 2008 the Ministry of Justice finalised a new state language requirements for representatives in an additional 250 posts and professions. The fourteen page-long list includes professions such as guards, street sweepers, electricians, jewellers, dentists, and is sufficiently extensive to arouse employer concerns. The requirement for knowledge of the state language at the highest level is extended to managers and engineers, as well as to teachers of private minority education establishments (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2008d). Proposals to lower language proficiency requirements for fire-fighters and border guards have resulted in heated inter-ministerial controversy. The regulations envisage penalties such as fines or employment dismissal for lack of a state language proficiency certificate, or for failure to communicate in the state language according to the required level of proficiency. Employees from bus drivers and nursing auxiliaries, but even enterprise directors, have found themselves subject to fines for insufficient use of the national language under the Administrative Violation Code, vigorously enforced by the State Language Centre inspectors. A café menu, written in Russian, was recently deemed a punishable offence by the authorities (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2008e).

The objective result is a set of perceived discriminatory practices against ethnic non-Latvians with insufficient language skills. The Employers' Confederation, fearing further emigration of the workforce, has argued that these new requirements will send a 'negative signal' to employees (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights, 2008c). The Latvian authorities, however, have pointed to the successive easing and simplification of language test requirements, including the provision of a national programme of free Latvian language classes and a growing number of Russian speakers who have now acquired Latvian language competence, or at least sufficient for employment purposes. Exclusion of Russophones from labour market or other forms of civic participation in Latvian society, it has been argued, is not so much the result of active discrimination policies by the 'titular' Latvian majority, as the result of self-imposed isolation, a 'psychological' consequence of 'inflated post-imperial linguistic and other expectations' (Muižnieks 2005: 27).

EU ACCESSION AND 'EXIT'

There can be no doubt about the scale of regime change, whatever the balance of the argument concerning direct or indirect discrimination against the Russophone minority. Hughes (2005) has previously suggested that 'exit' driven by feelings of social and political exclusion among the Russophone group would be the likely outcome of the regime of discrimination. More recently, Ivlevs has analysed survey evidence to suggest 'Russian speakers are on average two times more likely to emigrate than Latvian speakers' (2007b). However, both ethnic Latvians and their Russian-speaking counterparts share common problems of securing a decent wage

and living standards in a society that has among the largest income inequalities in the European Union (Eurostat, 2008a). With the highest percentage of the population in the EU at risk of poverty (23 per cent after social transfers), among the longest working hours (Hazans 2005b) and lowest wages (up to three or four times below older EU member states), with minimal levels of social protection, weak collective organisation at the workplace and poor health and safety, it is unsurprising that many, of whatever ethnic origin, have migrated to find a better life abroad (Woolfson *et al* 2008). Emigration, in this sense, may be viewed as a 'silent form of resistance' of a disenchanted and disempowered labour force (Akule 2008).

Predictions of the scale of likely outward migration from the eight Eastern European post-communist new member states to the older member states have proved to be significant underestimates (Alvarez-Plata *et al* 2003; Boeri and Broecker 2002; Kancs and Kielyte 2002; Krieger 2004; Schneidewind *et al* 2003). From the Baltic States and Poland the volume of labour outflow has been particularly significant. From Latvia alone, estimated numbers range between 50,000 and 100,000 workers, perhaps as much as 9 or 10% of the total workforce (EIRO 2005; World Bank 2006). Since a substantial proportion of this migration flow is unregistered, official figures do not provide an adequate guide. The main destinations in the EU include Britain and Ireland, countries that permitted free movement of labour to new accession state nationals, with around 35,000 registered in the former and around 26,000 in the latter by 2007 (Home Office UK 2007).

Surveys of the potential for future outward migration suggest better-educated men and women in the ages 25-34 from Latvia are four times more likely to migrate to another EU member state than equally well-educated men and women in the same age group from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia (Krieger and Fernandez 2006). Neighbouring Poland, Estonia and Lithuania are reported as having similar or even higher proportions of the workforce ready to emigrate. Together with Latvia, the Baltic region countries are classified as 'high mobility' new EU member states. For Latvians expressed motivations are 'work-related factors' such as higher household income (59% compared to 37% average for the EU25), and better working conditions (57% compared to 36% average for the EU25) (Krieger and Fernandez 2006: 8, 15). Overall, 7.4% of those interviewed in Latvia indicated preparedness to move to another EU country (Krieger and Fernandez 2006: 11-12).

From the standpoint of Latvian society, labour force exit on the current scale is not costless. Social surveys, investigative articles and at least one celebrated novel record the negative consequences for the social fabric of Latvian society (Bilefsky, 2005; Strieff 2007a; Galickaya 2007). On the plus side however, in part due to migration, male unemployment in Latvia fell to 6% in 2007, just below the average for the EU 25. While domestic unemployment rates have declined, worker outflow has created labour shortages in the economy. Such shortages are now significant, with an increasing number of vacancies unfilled not only in construction and lower skilled sectors, but also in medical and allied professions, and in other high qualification sectors (EIRO 2006; *Latvijas Statistika* 2007a). In consequence, hourly wages costs have spiralled with a staggering 31.6% increase in the second quarter of 2007 on the same quarter in the previous year (*Latvijas Statistika* 2007b). The greatest increase in labour costs was in construction, up 37.4% in 2007 on the previous year.

Within the Latvian government there seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge the social and economic costs of the outward migration. Claims by government that

up to one third of the emigrant workforce may return appear to be optimistic, while patriotic appeals to those who have left Latvia to return home have also fallen on deaf ears (*Baltic Times* 2007a: 2007b). Supporting evidence for 'non-circulatory' migration comes from a study of Central and East European immigrants to the UK (Spencer *et al* 2007). This suggests that whatever their initial intention, with the passage of time, new arrivals become increasingly less likely to return to their country of origin. One of the few critical commentaries by a Latvian labour expert, Professor Raita Karnīte, suggests the 'problem of emigration is far more serious than the Latvian government cares to admit' (EIRO 2005). Karnīte notes:

The government insists that emigration facilitates the improvement of labour force quality, as emigrants can learn a language, master skills, earn money and return home more economically better-off. The fact that many emigrants engage in unskilled jobs that frequently do not correspond to their level of education, and that they do not wish to return home has never been addressed by the government.

Doubly ironic, therefore, is the suggestion that in their Diaspora the migrants of Latvia, if nothing else, may have achieved an ethnic reconciliation that has eluded them in their homeland. As the acclaimed Latvian novelist Laima Muktupavels has acutely observed: 'There are no Latvians and no Russians. [In Ireland] everyone is an individual person from Latvia' (Strieff 2007b). Whatever the new-found unity of Latvians abroad however, it is somewhat contradicted by developments at home suggesting new fault lines appearing in an already ethnically fractured society.

RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA IN LATVIA

The exit of labour is creating a growing secondary migration throughout the wider region as workers (many 'illegal') from other parts of the former Soviet Union and from even further afield embark upon a 'chain migration of labour from the East to the West' (Renooy *et al* 2004: 145). This consequential migration is exposing some of the darker fears within Latvian society over its national identity, expressed in both xenophobic and racist terms.

A recent episode vividly illustrates contemporary xenophobia and racism. In April 2007, a major retail supplier of 'do-it-yourself' building materials in Riga, *Buvniecības ABC*, was fined a record 5000 lats (approximately 7000 euros) for a breach of advertising ethics. This followed a prosecution initiated by the Consumer Rights Protection Centre, a State institution under the supervision of the Ministry of Economics. The case arose from an advertisement prominently displayed in the streets of the capital in March 2007. This featured a dark-skinned supposed construction worker of Middle Eastern or perhaps North African descent. Incongruously perched atop swathes of kaffia was his over-sized construction helmet, a neat juxtaposition, presumably signifying his inability to understand that hardhat and headscarf cannot both be worn. In a bubble of broken Latvian, he proclaims, 'I want build yours house'. The company caption for the advertisement **reads**: 'Everything (needed) for construction and home repair work at *Buvniecības ABC* - except imported foreign labour'. With the company fined in the courts, the matter would seem to have ended. However, in the last days of December 2007, the Latvian press reported that *Buvniecības ABC* had appealed the decision in the Administrative Regional Court, with unknown outcome at this time (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2007a).

The advertising agency, Inorek & Grey, which conceived this advertisement, claims to be one of the top ten in the world, with parent company Grey Worldwide having its corporate headquarters in New York and representatives in eighty-three countries. The director of its Latvian office initially suggested that he had simply wanted to draw attention to 'the problem of the illegal workforce in Latvia' (*dpa*, 2007). However, the company gave an undertaking not to use this kind of material in future advertising campaigns. The undertaking is somewhat qualified by the fact that over one year later (July 2008) Inorek & Grey Riga still featured the offending advert on their website in their portfolio of recent work, both in preliminary draft form, and with a photograph of the final street display (See Inorek & Grey website).

An indication of the more usual official reluctance to enforce sanctions in the area of racially and ethnically motivated crimes is the fact that it was only in 2005 that the first officially recognised incidents of racial violence were recorded. A series of attacks on foreigners and people of colour in Riga had led the US State Department to issue warnings to US citizens visiting Riga to beware of potential assault (*Baltic Times* 2005). It is likely that the scale of incidents of racial abuse and violence is significantly underreported, while most of the few prosecutions have been either re-qualified as incidents of 'hooliganism', or have failed to come before the courts (Lukumiete 2005: 33).

The non-governmental agency for monitoring racism and xenophobia at European level, notes Latvia has 'been very slow in adopting the necessary legislation in compliance with the (Racial Equality) directive' (*FRA* 2007: 20, 28). In 2006, two years after EU accession, the principles of non-discrimination were introduced into the labour code and administrative law in line with EU Directive 2000/43/EC (European Council 2000). However, employer concerns over possible limitations on 'freedom of contract' caused intense criticism of the measures. A leading Baltic law firm noted that the judiciary has applied legal remedies prescribed based on Common Law only 'warily' (*bnt Newsletter* 2007: 3). The first case in Latvia where a court recognised the existence of racial discrimination was heard in May 2006. The complainant, a Roma woman, was represented by what is now the office of Ombudsman (formerly the National Human Rights Office). It resulted in the court sanctioning the employer with a fine. Such cases are rare however, as most employees do not know their rights and lack the financial resources to engage legal services. The Latvian judicial authorities have more recently shown a greater willingness to prosecute incidents of racial harassment and assault under more serious criminal charges, considering racism as constituting aggravating circumstances under Article 48 of the Criminal Code.

In a landmark judgement in 2008, the Riga Regional Court sentenced a prominent neo-Nazi, Andris Jordans, to one year and six months of imprisonment for incitement to ethnic hatred arising from statements during a public discussion in which he stated that Jews and Roma people were 'non-humans' whom it would be preferable to exterminate (*Diena* 2008). The public prosecutor had previously dismissed criminal proceedings, arguing that such statements were an expression of freedom of speech protected by the Latvian Constitution and the European Convention for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. After appeal to the General Prosecutor's Office charges were reinstated. As fines had been imposed for prior offences, this left the court little option other than to impose the more severe penalty of imprisonment. Nevertheless, despite this exemplary conviction, sanctions,

even for acts of racist violence, are rare. The usual penalty is a fine or, at best, a suspended prison sentence.

The pervasive character of racism and xenophobia relate not just to the wilder public pronouncements of nationalist politicians calling for 'repatriation' of 'Russian colonists' and a halt to the naturalisation procedures for non-citizens. The far-right Latvian National Front's newspaper, *DDD (Deoccupation, Decolonisation, Debolshevisation)* is notorious for its anti-Russian and anti-Semitic rhetoric, routinely calling for mass deportations (and even suggesting the number of railway wagons that would be required). This is only one of a number of highly vociferous such groupings. Racist sentiment is visibly present in graffiti in the alleyways of the Old Town of Riga, in the verbal abuse of foreigners on the street, and in the torrent of racial vituperation on the internet to which the authorities have at last begun to react (Eglitis 2005; Lukumiete 2005: 26-28).

Survey evidence suggests that compared to the rest of the EU, 'Latvia has the strongest resistance to multicultural society and strongly believes that migrants should not be granted civil rights' (Lukumiete 2005: 3). Prejudice was observed as very high against people from the Caucasus, Chinese, Africans and Kurds, whom two-thirds of respondents wished excluded from entry altogether, or accepted only as short-term visitors. Antipathy towards Muslims was especially high, and, disturbingly, shared almost equally by ethnic Latvians and Russophones: 38% Latvians and 39% 'non-Latvians' answered that they should not be allowed to enter the country, and an additional 45% and 44% respectively, considered contact acceptable only as tourists. The more dissimilar their appearance, the higher was the level of prejudice against foreigners. The study revealed 70% of respondents in Latvia, again irrespective of ethnic origin, admitting to being negative or very negative towards the arrival of new labour migrants (SKDS 2005). Unpublished data, from SKDS social research company, suggest that 62% of respondents do not approve of guest workers as a solution to Latvia's labour shortages, and more than 70% disapprove of the idea that state funds should be used to assist the integration of guest workers into Latvian society (cited in Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2008: 14). Likewise, a Eurobarometer questionnaire sought responses to the statement – 'Immigrants contribute a lot to (our country)'. Only 16% of Latvians agreed – second lowest in the Europe Union after Slovakia (13%) (Eurobarometer 2006: 44) Findings such as these have prompted international observers to comment:

This negative attitude is worrying in a context whereby labour immigration is likely to increase due to the recent entry of Latvia into the European Union and against the background of the use of intolerant discourse by the media and politicians towards immigrants, particularly newcomers (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2007: 20)

The application in Latvia of key international conventions and charters designed to address discrimination and xenophobia is less than complete. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities has been ratified since 2005, although with certain reservations. In a detailed study, the Latvian Centre for Human Rights has recently drawn attention to important deficiencies in its implementation (Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2008). In addition, Latvia has still to ratify a raft of international conventions: Protocol N° 12 to the European Convention on Human Rights (signed but not ratified), providing for a general prohibition on discrimination; the European Convention on Nationality (signed but not ratified) providing for multiple nationality; the 1990 United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of

their Families. Parliamentary Bills submitted to adopt the first two conventions were rejected in 2006. A new draft law on the ratification of the European Social Charter (Revised) will be submitted to the Latvian parliament by January 2009. However, the authorities have indicated that other key human rights conventions, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level, and the European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers are unlikely to be ratified in the near future (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2007: 7). The view of those within Latvia monitoring these issues is salutary:

The issue of racism and xenophobia remains poorly addressed at national level. There is a lack of instruments and effective mechanisms to deal with discrimination, racism and xenophobia. There are clear signs of lack of political will to address the issue, instead the denial of the problem is widespread at various levels, including key officials (Lukumiete 2005: 3).

These concerns have been reiterated by Doudou Diène, UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, following a visit to Latvia (UNHCR 2008). His report, tabled during the 7th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, singles out Latvia for particular attention among the Baltic States. Acknowledging that progress had been made, Diène was nevertheless moved to comment that the existing legal framework ‘contains protection gaps’ regarding the prosecution of crimes of racial hatred, which ‘undermines an important deterrent against the future increase in this type of crime’ (UNHCR, 2008: 19). Against this background, the protection from discrimination of both existing minorities and of incoming migrants is a matter of concern.

INWARD MIGRATION

The numbers of foreign workers entering Latvia legally and being granted official temporary residence permits, according to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, to date have been relatively few (less than 0.5% of the total population) (Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs 2007). In 2007, 3,113 foreigners received official work permits to enter Latvia. As of 1 July that year, a total of 42,511 foreigners, including 6,940 residents of the EU and 22,700 ex-Latvian ‘non-citizens’ (mainly ethnic Russians now citizens of ‘other countries’), resided in Latvia with valid residency permits (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2007b). There are of course unknown numbers of ‘illegal’ foreign workers, mainly from Ukraine and Belarus, typically found in construction, shipbuilding and forestry work (Krišjane 2007: 141). These are vulnerable workers, outside of any form of social safety net. In turn, they tend to occupy the most precarious work positions in the shadow economy. This informal sector, estimated to account for around 20% of Latvia’s GDP, comprises up to 40% of total employment in sectors such as building and construction (Woolfson 2007). The problems of the informal economy, especially in the construction trades, are well known, but seem to invoke little rational policy response apart from occasional government ‘crackdowns’. Where incoming foreign workers are found to be without legal contracts they are liable to refusal of entry by the State Border Guard which in 2007 excluded 2,663 foreigners including a thousand Chinese workers, or if subsequently discovered without correct documentation, are liable to deportation.

One reason for the often-illegal status of migrants is that procedures for the granting of official work permits are expensive and bureaucratically cumbersome for most categories of guest worker. Permission to undertake paid employment generally involves approval by both the State Employment Agency, as well as residence permission from the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs. The previous residence and work permit fee was 533 lats (around 750 euros) per employee, while compiling the necessary documents could take up to three months. The government has, as of July 2008, decreased the fee for the employment of guest workers to 148 lats (210 euros) and reduced the work permit charge from 35 lats (50 euros) per month to the same amount per year.

A new 'Concept on Migration Policy in the Context of Employment' has been prepared by the Ministry of Interior. It entails modification of existing bureaucratic obstacles and the restrictive system of temporary permits for emigrants in specific occupations and regions (Cross-Border Co-operation/Söderköping Process 2007). However, much to the frustration of the Latvian Employers' Confederation (*Latvijas Darba devēju konfederācija* LDDK), the full implementation of this proposal has been subject to continuing delay and official prevarication (LDDK 2007; EIRO 2007). As it stands today, in order to employ a foreigner, the employer needs first to register a vacant position at the local employment office for one month and it can be offered to a foreigner only if there is no local employee for the position. An employer who wishes to hire third country nationals can do so only if there is no Latvian citizen, Latvian non-citizen, or EU national who seeks the post.

From the point of view of employers, imported labour from third countries outside the Baltic region, especially from China and the Far East, has significant advantages, not least in offering a supply of low cost labour. For example, the demand for Thai workers in Latvia is reportedly high. The representative of one recruiting company has pointed out that import of Thais is profitable and desirable 'because they are silent, hard-working, reliable, and they are not looking for permanent residence in Latvia' (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2008f). The majority of Thais in Latvia, for example, are employed in meat- and fish-processing, timber industry and clothing manufacture. They may also have the additional advantage of dampening down wage rates within the domestic Latvian labour force. While these migrant workers may be well-rewarded in comparison to their wages back home, they are reportedly paid only the legally required minimum monthly amount, which in the spring of 2008 amounted to 398 lats (566 euros). They also allegedly kept in circumstances in which they remain under close employer supervision, allowed to leave the designated living quarters which are in the territory of their workplace only once per week, and then only when accompanied by an employer representative (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2007c).

Individual migrants such as these, with temporary residence permits, are legally tied to one employer and a certain position, with no option to freely change employers or their employment position within the company. If the immigrant worker loses their job, rigid administrative criteria require that he or she needs to leave Latvia (Kešāne and Kaša 2008: 49). Given this asymmetry in legal relations, opportunities for labour abuses are legion. For example, it is mandatory that applications for work and temporary residence permits for guest workers should be completed by the employers themselves. Failure by the employer (sometimes deliberate) to process the necessary official paper work compromises the legal status of migrants, and leaves them liable for deportation and subject to possible penalty of exclusion from the

Schengen area for up to five years. The employer is not subject to sanction however, and the burden of liability for unpaid wages is conveniently removed. Again, as permit costs are much higher in Latvia than in neighbouring Lithuania, employers can use the opportunity to bring guest workers and register them in Lithuania, and only after that employ them in Latvia, arranging their visit as a business trip. This practice enhances the temptation to employ migrants on an illegal basis, although how widespread it is, is difficult to verify (Kešāne and Kaša 2008: 52). Redress, in the case of these and other labour abuses is virtually impossible for migrants, since they lack knowledge, access and opportunity to avail themselves of basic legal services. A detailed study of the legal disadvantages facing migrant workers in Latvia observes:

The most vulnerable are those third country nationals who reside in Latvia on the basis of a temporary residence permit. These immigrants are not eligible to receive state provisions such as health care, social aid and unemployment benefits. However, legally employed third country nationals, holding a temporary residence permit pay the same amount of income tax and national insurance as local residents. The immigrant holding a temporary residence permit and his children also don't have access to state funded education. These immigrants cannot receive state funded legal aid either (Kešāne and Kaša 2008: 39).

Some of these legal impediments are removed following the acquisition of a permanent residence permit, or, in certain cases, the status of long-term resident of the European Community in Latvia. A person then assumes the same formal rights as Latvian non-citizens, at least in terms of access to health care services and unemployment benefits, job placement services and retraining. However, permanent residency status itself requires a prior period of residence of five years and the passing of a Latvian language test, and is therefore out of reach for the majority of incoming migrants. Immigration policy in comparison with other EU countries, even according to Latvian experts is therefore 'strict and conservative' (Indāns *et al* 2007: 22). A European wide-survey of integration policies for migrants in twenty-eight countries, the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), found 'migrants in Latvia have the worst legal security as workers, family members, long-term residents, and naturalised citizens' (MIPEX database 2007; See also Huddleston 2008). In short, the legal architecture to support a new regime of discrimination, particularly against temporary migrants, is already effectively in place, and carries in its train myriad opportunities for exploitation of unprotected migrant workers.

THE POLITICS OF MIGRATION

The objective need for foreign labour, to replace those Latvians who have or will migrate westward to older member states, is increasing day-by-day and requires a critical reappraisal of previous ethnic fastidiousness. The World Bank has urged Baltic governments to manage labour migration more pro-actively and to consider 'phasing in - in tandem with capacity development for screening needed labour - a more liberal regime for importing labour from countries further east' (World Bank 2006). It has also advised that participation in a global economic environment now requires greater citizen inclusion and openness in order to satisfy skilled labour supply needs, and is a condition of their future economic progress (Mitra 2008). On another reading, Latvia, located on the periphery of the new Europe, having exported its most

valuable resource at cut price-rates – its labour force - is now invited to become the destination of new migrations.

At a political level there appears to be continuing disarray over government policy, or more accurately, the absence of policy, towards the question of inward migration. In response to employer demands for the easing of administrative barriers, Minister of Justice, Gaidis Berzins of the nationalist *Tēvzemei un Brīvībai* (For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Independence Movement FF/LNIM) party union from within the ruling coalition has argued that Latvia has to continue ‘protecting its labour market’. Therefore, the attraction of guest workers must remain expensive and time-consuming procedure (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2007d). The Minister considered ‘that influx of cheap labour force would have negative impact on several social and economical issues’ and that therefore Latvia ‘has to attract qualified guest workers from the EU countries who are ready to learn Latvian language and to respect Latvia culture and traditions’ (Integration and Minority Information Service of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2007d). The Minister of Health has admitted that continuing shortage of medical personnel, in particular of doctors, is likely to increase. However, replacements from other parts of the former Soviet bloc are ‘not to be encouraged’ (EMN Synthesis Report 2006: 13). On the other hand, as academic and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Artis Pabriks has argued, in the nearest future, Latvia will have to determine guest workers’ quotas for those spheres of economy that are experiencing the greatest shortages of labour, otherwise future economic development may be impaired (Pabriks 2007: 7-15). The resolution of these and other fundamental ambivalences, insofar as they are dictated by ethno-political considerations, appears unlikely.

THE ‘HARD LANDING’ SCENARIO

A worrisome factor has recently appeared on the horizon in the shape of economic instability in the intrinsically weak Latvian economy (Danske Banke 2008). Its previously developed manufacturing base, having been decimated in the dismantling of the command economy, is especially prone to crisis. Record growth rates of GDP in recent years attest less to the success of economic reconstruction than to a ‘bubble’ economy. This has been based on a consumption boom financed by easy-credit supplied by foreign banks, speculative property sales particularly in the capital city, and the lucrative ‘offshoring’ by the Latvian banking system of ill-gotten gains from domestic sources and from Russia. The ruling parties, having steadfastly ignored warnings from the international financial community of an economy was dangerously ‘overheated’, have reacted too little and too late to avoid an almost inevitable catastrophic outcome in terms of a ‘hard landing’ (IMF 2008). With GDP now in a sharp downturn and heading for negative growth rates, spiralling inflation and the prospect of rising unemployment, the outlook is grim. The collapse of mass living standards threatens to reproduce the depth of social dislocation of the early 1990s, but without the compensatory promise of ‘better things to come once painful transition has been completed’.

The adverse conjuncture of global and domestic economic crisis may simply further accelerate the exit of Latvia’s already disaffected workforce. As unemployment re-emerges, so too will downward wage pressures, likely resulting in a new round of labour emigration, unless the recession is European-wide, thus closing

the exit option, but also leaving a remaining population that is more alienated. There is evidence that economic downturn in Europe is already leading to a temporary slowdown in the volume of outward labour migration from the Baltic States and Poland (Home Office UK 2008). It is likely to be accompanied by the emergence of a simultaneous return migration based on 'negative selection'. This is typically biased towards the lower skilled more easily expendable categories of the labour force, for example, those migrant building workers that had previously benefited from the construction boom in Spain and Ireland, while the more skilled and qualified are retained abroad. As with the official migration 'concept', little attempt has been made so far to implement successful re-integration strategies for such workers, or to encourage an orderly as against spontaneous return migration. Indeed, among those who stayed, those who left and have now returned are often regarded as 'traitors' to Latvia and face new difficulties of again finding a place in their home society.

ABSENT COUNTERVAILING TENDENCIES

The capacity of Latvian society to deal with these difficulties is undermined by the weakness of identifiable 'countervailing tendencies'. Broader social disenchantment in contemporary post-communist Latvian society is pervasive, suggesting a social atomisation in which many have increasingly withdrawn their social support for the institutions of civil and political society to a narrower and more trusted circle of family and friends (Rose 2005; UNDP 2003). Four out of five Latvians (80.4%) do not participate in any form of public or private organisation (*Latvijas Statistika* 2008). In terms of trust in other people ('most people can be trusted'), Latvian respondents recorded 15% affirmative responses, approximately half the EU average (Eurobarometer 2004: 66). The 'low-trust' social environment of post-communism reflects a world in which individualistic solutions to life problems are sought. In this socially Darwinian free market society, profound attitudinal barriers inhibit the collective assertion of demands for voice (Tisenkopfs 2006).

A key social manifestation of the 'turning inward' is a growing rejection of all that is not 'Latvian'. Some four years after EU accession, there is increasing Latvian disenchantment with the European Union. The proportion of the Latvian population believing that EU membership is 'a good thing' is the lowest in the EU, (29% compared to an EU average of 52%) (Eurobarometer 2008: 6). Latvia also has both the highest proportion of respondents in the EU who believe they are 'at risk of falling into poverty' (45% compared to an EU average of 25%) (Eurobarometer 2007b: 8; Eurobarometer 2008: 3). The overall level of general satisfaction with life was one of the lowest in the Union.

The inability of a corrupt and kleptocratic political class to address issues of mass concern has meant that political parties and the parliament are deeply distrusted institutions. For its part, the Left that has still to achieve any credible political organisation. The Latvian trade union movement is struggling with the awkward business of re-inventing itself as a legitimate actor in a post-communist context. In leading a popular, but ultimately unsuccessful, mass movement petitioning for a constitutional change that would allow for democratic recall of parliament, the trade unions have attempted to articulate popular disgust with the ruling parties. However, on issues of migration and the recruitment of foreign labour, organised labour has been cornered into adopting a largely reactive approach, having experienced its own perceived illegitimate exclusion from the labour markets of the old EU in the so-called 'Laval case' (see Woolfson and Sommers 2006). Adopting a 'national' position, the trade unions have instead emphasised the need to develop the skills and

capacities of the existing indigenous labour force. The trade union confederation leadership has also taken the view that the national trade unions cannot represent immigrants, as they are not permanent residents of Latvia (Kešāne and Kaša 2008: 60). Their current stance, therefore, denies immigrants access to one of the few constructive channels for their integration and empowerment.

Historically, the importance of the transformative solidarities of trades union struggle and class formation, has been demonstrated by Foster and his colleagues (2002) in studies of inter-ethnic relations among Catholics and Protestants in the West of Scotland. In a more contemporary vein, Satnam Virdee (2000) also reminds of the successful struggles against racism in the British trade union movement. Thus, the exclusionary practices of ethno-politics and racialisation are highly contingent. In today's Latvia, however, such crucial identity-changing resources are without efficacy in dissolving the boundaries of migratory and ethnic exclusion. Labour, which has borne the major costs of neo-liberal market-building without reaping commensurate rewards in terms of social protections and living standards, now seems set to bear the costs of imminent market failure. Taken together with evidence of a 'low trust' politically alienated and deeply divided social environment, this mix of insecurities and disappointments among the so-called transition 'losers' (Wallace 2002: 622) points to a climate of intensified receptivity towards racist and xenophobic views.

CONCLUSION

There is an intimate but sometimes unacknowledged link between racism and nationalism, with the 'core nation' of 'titular' Latvians, drawing strategically on ethnic and even racialised conceptions of themselves as a way of maintaining or extending their economic and social dominance. Hence, new migrants are constructed as outsiders, 'others' whose culture, ethnicity or alleged race is deemed to be incompatible with what it means to be 'Latvian' – or at least with the imagined conceptualisation of 'the nation' (Miles 1993: 58-79). The case of Latvia suggests ethno-political considerations of perceived internal and external threat have produced, what even Latvian observers have described, as a 'Fortress Latvia' mentality (Akule 2007: 77). Given the uncertain inheritance of popular stereotypes and negative attitudes to 'others', even those in their midst for generations, there are few grounds for optimism. Key institutions of civil society are not able to provide a cohesive or unifying force within Latvian society that can overcome internal social disarray or provide a perspective of inclusive common identity. Discriminatory social relations are embedded in exclusionary practices with regard to citizenship and identity that *reproduce* themselves in a disabling manner.

The result is an absence in wider political discourses of rational public policy responses to real issues of labour resources occasioned by the fast-failing experiment in neo-liberal political economy. Latvia's problems of socio-economic development, in the context of developing economic maelstrom, are thereby radically decontextualised. Instead, they are perceived as interlocked with historically 'unresolved' questions of citizenship and ethnic identity, conveniently insulated from critical re-appraisal by the exculpatory invocation of 'legacy'. Latvia's defensive ethno-cultural notions of citizenship and nation now stand as obstacles to the development of the 'reflexive' identities (Delanty 1996) required to adapt to the challenges of the present, most of all, in the articulation of public policies promoting the social integration of migrants.

Isolation in the closed world of ethno-political discourse is not an inevitable fate for Latvia, even given the politically fraught historical experience of the Baltic

States. Brubaker (1992) points to the very different approach to questions of post-independence citizenship and nationality adopted in neighbouring Lithuania, which granted full citizenship to all its residents on the moment of independence. The UN Special Rapporteur Diène's report speaks tellingly of Latvia, as being 'at a turning point in its history' (UNHCR 2008: 20). His 'final analysis and assessment' warns that 'the gradual arrival in Latvia of new waves of migration, bringing for the first time non-European migrants to the country is posing new challenges for the country in the integration of racially, ethnically and religiously different minorities' (UNHCR 2008: 20). Diène has urged that 'broader efforts need to be made to prepare Latvian society for the arrival and integration of persons of different traditions, ensuring respect for their culture, religion and customs' (2008: 20). The ethno-politics of Latvia are intimately shaped by the fear of just such 'others'. The prospect is that a new regime of multilayered discrimination will be instituted against the migrants who will come, as much as against those who 'remain'.

Finally, a moment of reflection is also due. Increasing ethnic and racialised exclusion, and expressions of hostility concerning labour migrants are apparent at a European and not just Latvian level. Paradoxically, the European Union's desire to maximize conditions for labour mobility and to mobilise the 'human resources' of the periphery in the search for global competitiveness, has simply heightened these fears. As John Rex (1996) pointed out, in an analysis even more pertinent today, the supra-national European project cannot provide a viable alternative sense of common citizenship. The European Union, itself in neo-liberal retreat from a social agenda, has created the political space for new exclusionary ethno-nationalisms, whatever its ultimate intentions might have been. Externally, as the ramparts of 'Fortress Europe' are daily reinforced, Latvia's ongoing internal dilemma over nationality and identity in the face of new migratory movements is, but a distorted reflection of a broader European one.

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Endnotes

¹ The Integration and Minority Information Service Monitor is a daily Latvian press digest on minority and social integration issues published by the Latvian Centre for Human Rights established in 1993 with a view to promoting human rights and tolerance in Latvia.