

„The war is not over...”? Rethinking Latvian politics of the past in post-colonial discourse

Abstract

by prof. Dr. Deniss Hanovs, Riga Stradins University, Faculty for Communication, Riga, Latvia

hanovs@inbox.lv

World War II is still not over in the Baltic States. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, all three Baltic States continued their struggle for re-discovering their national history as newly restored nation states. All three republics have inherited various controversial issues from their Soviet past. Latvia is a special case among the three „Baltic sisters” with its large number of ethnic minorities (exceeding 40%), large number of non-citizens (Soviet internal migrants during the period from 1945 until the mid of 1980ies) and ethnically divided political landscape with no clear signs of ethnic reconciliation politics.

Since the perestroika period and afterwards, in the 1990ies Latvian political elites, predominantly ethnic Latvians, viewed the restoration of the interrupted political culture of the so-called “first” Republic as their top priority. Alongside with the restoration of the Satversme (Constitution) and various political institutions and practices, the politics of the past plays a predominant role in various areas, including integration politics, civil society and migration policy. Direct democracy is strongly affected by ethnic division of the Latvian society, which is being sustained and used by various political forces by constructing conflicting concepts of the past (this term means mainly the history of the 20th century, starting with the first occupation of Latvia by Soviet troops in June 1940). Political elites are crucial actors in the politics of the past and regularly produce what Pierre Nora described as collective memory, which, according to his concept of *lieu de memoire*, focuses on collective imagination and emotions. In Nora`s concept memory is opposed to history as academic discourse, which is aimed at logic and unemotional analysis of the facts.

This concept is still partly applicable when the attempt is made to analyze the politics of the past in current Latvian society, but should be strengthened by another influential explanatory frame – post-colonial discourse(s) which is (are) at present various and pluralistic. Various authors, such as Bhabha, Cooper, Brubaker *et altera* have entered “post-Edward Said phase” and went beyond colonial and post-colonial societies in North or Central Africa and other regions. Post-colonialism has since the mid of 1990ies returned and settled in the former metropolis, in Europe. The breakdown of the Soviet empire has given vital input into the empirical content of post-colonial analysis – the multiethnic empire broke down and societies of the former fifteen Soviet socialist republics entered a post-Soviet period with extremely different pre-conditions and local contexts.

The article argues that explanatory frame of the post Soviet period in the Baltic States and particularly in Latvia should shift from post cold war analysis of geo-political transformations of security policy, economy and constitutional politics towards the post-colonial turn, which is still hardly known among Latvian academicians, but is a product of critical analysis of post-structuralism known as cultural turn in Europe and the United States. Post-colonial paradigm with its growing interest towards colonial experiences of European societies and elites in Europe (internal colonization of subaltern groups in European societies) may offer additional explanatory tools for the issues of non-citizens, ethnic divisions within parties landscape, divided media space and also help to better understand the drawbacks of politics of integration in Latvia. The article is aimed at applying theoretical elements of the post-colonial paradigm such as liminality or inbetweenness (Bhabha), cultural translation and performative practices of ethnic minorities and majorities to current politics of the past in Latvia, particularly to the processes of formulating

conflicting versions of the Soviet occupation in 1940. The empirical range of the past versions is wide – from academically based concept of the occupation in June 1940 to complete denial of the occupation – this version was revitalized during the latest activities of minority NGOs and web media, as well as the recently established party “For Mother Tongue”: how has the alternative, “denial” versions been created and disseminated? What are the sources and performative practices which help legitimizing this version of occupation as a “myth”, used to “suppress ethnic minorities” [according to web resources from NGO www.rodina.lv] How is Latvian official version of the past being translated into political activism of ethnic minorities by the actors mentioned above and how is this process of translating official history being received within Latvian ethnic elites? These questions will be structured according to sub-chapters of the article.

The article argues that the fact of occupation is at the moment (since approx. Autumn 2011) being translated into conservative populist diaspora activism disseminated by cyber media and various performative practices organized and sustained by so-called diaspora or “Russian-speaking” minority politicians, NGOs and media. Prevailing “denial” version is characteristic of post-colonial societies, with rapid change of social status of various groups (from Soviet predominant ethnic-political group into minority group). Bhabha states in various places the role of political performance in cultural communication [Bhabha 1994]- this thesis can be described by various actions of minority activists on dates which not only commemorate events (wars, victories, death of charismatic persons, etc.) but are becoming *translation tools* for local minorities in finding their identities in Latvia – such as May 9, the official end of the so-called Great Fatherland War in 1945. Discursive denial of occupation is turning into a tool for upgrading the status of a minority in the predominant right-conservative discourse on the Soviet past. The “denial” version also includes refusal to participate in the new/old political frame of a re-established nation state – low rates of naturalization, low usage of Latvian language and readiness to support the referendum on the official status of Russian as a second state language in February 2012. These are examples of a refusal to participate [Bhabha 1994] and frustrations [Cooper 2012] vis-à-vis political modernisation of Latvia since 1991. In these elements the non-acceptance of Latvian dominant politics of the past is becoming a vital part of group identity and as such less able to change.