

## Discerning Colours in Greyness

### Defying Essentialist Representation of Latvian Russian Speakers in Surveys and Public Narrative

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Lena Hercberga

# Discerning Colours in Greyness. Defying Essentialist Representation of Latvian Russian Speakers in Surveys and Public Narrative

**Abstract:** This paper is a call for a methodological expansion in studies of the Russian-speaking community in the former Soviet spaces and beyond. The article critically reflects on the dominant quantitative approaches to studying Russian-speaking identities in Latvia and emphasises the need to engage with more qualitative and refined methods – those that allow space for agency in respondents’ self-identification. A growing concern about the Russian-speaking minority in the Baltic states, increases the need for academic and public explorations of the sense of ‘self’ and belonging amongst the local Russophone community. Despite a growing number of studies that point to conceiving representatives of the Russophone community as complex and heterogeneous, the public polling system and the political elite discourse are failing to account for multiplicity and situatedness of self-identification, tending to reconstruct an ethnicised and homogenised identity of local Russian speakers as lagging in progressive European values, as benighted, as a ‘grey zone’ of indifference. The author uses this tension between the complex self-making of Russian speakers and their essentialist reconstruction through the polling system and media as an entry point to invite social scientists working in the field to approach the ‘grey zones’ in East European studies not as monochrome, but as rich in meaning and encompassing ambiguity, thus offering new insights into the Russian speaking diaspora, empirically and/or analytically.

**Keywords:** Russian speakers, Latvia, ethnoprotectionism, minority, methodology

## Introduction

In the scope of this article, I critically discuss how dominant quantitative approaches aiming at producing original knowledge about the Russian-speaking community in Latvia – namely surveys and opinion polls, as well as representation of their results in the media – tend to reconstruct a hegemonic binarism of a ‘progressive’ titular nation and local Russian speakers lagging in European values. I am drawing predominantly on Bourdieu’s critical assessment of: 1) the role of the polling industry in reinforcing a hegemonic vision of reality,<sup>1</sup> and 2) the political ramifications of ‘don’t know’ responses.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Cf. Bourdieu, Pierre: *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London 1984, 397–465; idem: *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge-Oxford 1990, 168–174; idem: *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge-Oxford 1991, 163–251; idem: *Sociology in Question*. London 1993, 149–157.

2 See also Myles, John A.: *Bourdieu, Language and the Media*. Basingstoke 2010, 111–123.

A large body of literature has demonstrated how opinion polls, surveys and censuses are not merely capturing social reality but (re-)creating it.<sup>3</sup> I will engage with the socio-political implications of “the politics of numbers”<sup>4</sup> and “the politics of categories”<sup>5</sup> in the ethno-protectionist context of Latvia,<sup>6</sup> wherein members of the Russian-speaking minority experience a sense of alienation<sup>7</sup> and de-normalisation,<sup>8</sup> while being highly securitised.<sup>9</sup> Aside from a confined critique of the performative nature of categories used in some Latvian opinion polls<sup>10</sup> or of the dominance of quantitative methods to understand the complex identities of local Russophones,<sup>11</sup> there has been little critical debate on: 1) the political factors impacting the selection of analytical tools and representation of results; or 2) the social and political effects of the latter on the self-perception of Latvians and on their inter-relations. Meanwhile, the already highly antagonistic inter-ethnic relations in the country<sup>12</sup> highlight the need for a critical discussion on the performative nature of opinion polls.

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3 Cf. Anderson, Benedict R.: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition. London-New York 2006, 163–185; Brubaker, Rogers; Loveman, Mara; Stamatov, Peter: *Ethnicity as Cognition*. In: *Theory and Society* 33/1 (2004), 31–64, here 34 f.; Hacking, Ian: *Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers*. In: Cisney, Vermon W.; Morar, Nicolae (Eds.): *Biopower: Foucault and Beyond*. Chicago 2015, 65–81, here 66–79; Loveman, Mara: *National Colors. Racial Classification and the State in Latin America*. Oxford 2014, 3–42; Kertzer, David I.; Arel, Dominique: *Censuses, Identity Formation, and the Struggle for Political Power*. In: Idem (Eds.): *Census and Identity. The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses*. Cambridge 2002, 1–42; Petersen, William: *Politics and the Measurement of Ethnicity*. In: Alonso, William; Starr, Paul (Eds.): *The Politics of Numbers*. New York 1987, 187–234.

4 Urla, Jacqueline: *Cultural Politics in an Age of Statistics: Numbers, Nations, and the Making of Basque Identity*. In: *American Ethnologist* 20/4 (1993), 818–843, here 819.

5 Brubaker, Rogers: *Ethnicity without Groups*. Harvard 2006, 13.

6 Cf. Björklund, Fredrika: *The East European “Ethnic Nation” – Myth or Reality?* In: *European Journal of Political Research* 45/1 (2006), 93–121; Melvin, Neil J.: *Post-Imperial Ethnocracy and the Russophone Minorities of Estonia and Latvia*. In: Stein, Jonathan P. (Ed.): *The Politics of National Minority Participation in Post-Communist Europe. State-Building, Democracy and Ethnic Mobilization*. New York 2000, 129–166.

7 Cf. Cara, Olga: *Acculturation Strategies and Ethno-National Identification – a Study of Adolescents in Russian-Language Schools in Riga*. PhD Thesis. University College London 2013, 221–230; Gruzina, Ieva: *Relationship between History and a Sense of Belonging – Russian Speaking Minority Integration in Latvia*. In: *CEU Political Science Journal* 6/3 (2011), 397–432.

8 Cf. Cheskin, Ammon: *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia. Discursive Identity Strategies*. Edinburgh 2016, 1–7.

9 Cf. Kuczyńska-Zonik, Aleksandra: *The Securitization of National Minorities in the Baltic States*. In: *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 10/2 (2017), 26–45.

10 Cf. Ekmanis, Indra: *Host Land or Homeland? Civic-Cultural Identity and Banal Integration in Latvia*. PhD Thesis. University of Washington 2017, 31 f.; Karklins, Rasma: *Integration in Latvia: A Success Story?* In: *Journal of Baltic Studies* 52/3 (2021), 455–470.

11 Cf. Hercberga, Lena: *How to Be Many. Understanding Difference and Disagreement among Young Russian Speakers in Latvia*. PhD Thesis. University of Bristol 2023, 23 f.; Karklins, Rasma: *Integration in Latvia* (cf. n. 10), 466.

12 Cf. Cheskin, Ammon: *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia* (cf. n. 8).

Throughout this article I argue that, firstly, the current polling system, in synergy with the local media, re-construct a putative homogenised identity of Latvian Russian-speakers as those lagging in progressive European values, as a ‘grey zone’ of indifference. Secondly, this re-creation of the local Russian-speaking diaspora as inferior, as benighted contributes to a paradox – wherein the Latvian state strives to get rid of everything (post-)Soviet/Russian in the process of returning to Europe<sup>13</sup> – yet reproduces it through the polling system and the representation of the results in the media. I suggest that the re-creation of the internal ‘other’ as inferior is used in the re-construction of the imagined community of ethnic Latvians as ‘superior’ and concerns the latter’s own “ontological insecurity”<sup>14</sup> of being “the European other [...] mired in socialist legacies”.<sup>15</sup> While attempting to address one group’s existential anxiety this paradoxical, yet purpose serving, construction of the homogenised and othered Russian speaker interferes with the processes of self-perception of the local minority as it comes in conflict with the complexity and contingency of their everyday negotiations of ‘self’. Moreover, reproduction of the binary hierarchy might intensify inter-ethnic relations in the country since categories based on ethnicity are more resilient to disconfirmation, or the alteration in perception brought about by further interaction.<sup>16</sup> Because of these social and political effects, it is vital to challenge the dominant “methodological simplicity”<sup>17</sup> in studies of Russian-speaking identities in the current highly politicised context in Latvia.

I start by briefly demonstrating how Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine has induced new waves of academic and public concerns about the sense of belonging amongst the Latvian Russian-speaking diaspora. I then summarise the critique in relation to the politics of categorisation and over-reliance on quantitative methods to understand the complexity that constitutes a human being.<sup>18</sup> I then apply this critique to the Latvian case, namely to the methods and the language used in inquiries into the Russian-speaking community. I go on to consider the so-called ‘grey zones’ – the ‘don’t know’ responses of the representatives of the Russian-speaking diaspora – scrutinising them through the Bourdieu’s work. It is not my ambition here to provide a

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13 Silova, Iveta: Returning to Europe: The Use of External References in Reconceptualizing Minority Education in Post-Soviet Latvia. In: Nóvoa, António; Lawn, Martin (Eds.): *Fabricating Europe. The Formation of an Education Space*. New York et al. 2002, 87–107.

14 Džatkovica, Evija: Discursive Region Building in Latvia: The Case for a Contemporary Identity Search. In: *Alternatives. Global, Local, Political*. Online First. 23.09.2023, DOI: 10.1177/03043754231197549, 1–17, here 4.

15 Dzenovska, Dace: *School of Europeanness. Tolerance and Other Lessons in Political Liberalism in Latvia*. Ithaca 2018, 11.

16 Cf. Levine, Hal: Reconstructing Ethnicity. In: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5/2 (1999), 165–180, here 169.

17 Dixon, John; Elcheroth, Guy; Kerr, Philippa; Drury, John; Bzour, Mai Al; Subašić, Emina; Durrheim, Kevin; Green, Eva: It’s not just “us” versus “them”: Moving beyond Binary Perspectives on Intergroup Processes. In: *European Review of Social Psychology* 31/1 (2020), 40–75, here 42.

18 Cf. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (cf. n. 3), 184.

comprehensive analysis of all surveys into the Russian-speaking diaspora in Latvia. I will engage with the results, and their representation in the Latvian media, of two major opinion polls on the Russia's aggression in Ukraine to illustrate the performative nature of the latter in the ethno-protectionist context of Latvia. The selection is rationalised on two grounds. Firstly, opinion polls on politically sensitive topics make their performative nature more noticeable.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, the results of the aforementioned surveys have had a high resonance in the local media and political discourse and thus provide rich data to work with. The article concludes with a call to consider alternative methods to study this complexity of identities, namely those of a more qualitative nature: those that would offer more insight into unconscious practices rather than conscious interpretations.

## **Alienation and securitisation of the Russophone minority in Latvia**

The post-Soviet transition period in Latvia is characterised by a “struggle between different groups to define and redefine what is socially ‘natural’ and ‘normal’”.<sup>20</sup> The self-perception of Latvians shifted from being ‘the norm’ (pre-Soviet path of development) to ‘minority’ (during the Soviet occupation) and back to restoring ‘normality’ at the end of the 20th century with the return of independence. Simultaneously, the status of Russian-speakers in Latvia has changed from a privileged position during the Soviet times, i. e., their ‘normality’, to the status of “subordinated minority”.<sup>21</sup> There is a partial conviction “that fifty years of Soviet power were deviation from normal path of the political, economic and cultural development of Latvia”.<sup>22</sup> As such, ‘normality’ is seen as something shared or owned by the dominant culture, i. e., ethnic Latvians, and all that belongs or is associated with the Soviet past, should be abandoned, replaced and forgotten.<sup>23</sup> This conception of ‘normality’ and ‘deviation’ along ethnic lines has greatly shaped the course of nation building as well as the local politics of integration.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Bourdieu, In Other Words (cf. n. 1), 168–174.

<sup>20</sup> Eglitis, Daina S.: *Imagining the Nation. History, Modernity, and Revolution in Latvia*. University Park/PA 2002, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Volkov, Vladislav: *Ethnic Self-Categorisation of the Russian-Speaking Population in Latvia*. In: Barnabas, Sylvanus G. (Ed.): *Indigenous and Minority Populations. Perspectives from Scholars and Writers across the World*. London 2023, 119–136, here 120.

<sup>22</sup> Rozenvalds, Juris: *Latvia after Twelve Years of Renewed Independence: the Search for Normality*. In: *Latvijas Universitātes Raksti* 663 (2004), 7–22, here 14.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the analysis of a similar narrative in the early post-socialist nationalism of Lithuania: Klumbyte, Neringa: *Ethnographic Note on Nation: Narratives and Symbols of the Early Post-Socialist Nationalism in Lithuania*. In: *Dialectical Anthropology* 27/3–4 (2003), 279–295.

Since regaining independence in 1991, Latvia is believed to have pursued an ethnic approach to state and nation building,<sup>24</sup> and democracy,<sup>25</sup> characterised by not equating nation to citizenry or demos but to a specific ethnicity. Thus, belonging to a nation cannot be acquired, but is predicated by birth and origin.<sup>26</sup> As such, the ethnic understanding of nation is exclusive and to a greater degree centred on the us/them distinction since the borders of these categories are not easy to permeate. The ethnic approach to nation building in post-Soviet Latvia, as well as the protectionist status of the titular language, have been justified by the historic trauma caused by the lingering effects of the Soviet occupation and thus the desire to protect and restore the dominant status of Latvian ethnicity and language.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Latvian nationalism, applying Brubaker's thinking, exemplifies "a remedial political action"<sup>28</sup> that is aimed at addressing 'pathological' (post-)Sovietness and Russianness on the path to recovery, i. e., restoration of the Latvian 'normality'.

Enduring de-normalisation of the Russian-speaking minority is linked to the sense of alienation and separation of Russian speakers,<sup>29</sup> i. e., it has had an effect on their self-perception, which exacerbates with time.<sup>30</sup> This peripheral positionality of the Latvian Russophones is re-emphasised and capitalised by an on-going Russian state influence.<sup>31</sup> The latter raises concerns amongst some scholars about the allegiances of the Russian-speaking diaspora<sup>32</sup> and prospects of national security threats.<sup>33</sup> Security con-

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24 For a more elaborate discussion on this matter cf. Björklund, *The East European "Ethnic Nation" – Myth or Reality?* (cf. n. 6).

25 Cf. Smith, Graham: *The Ethnic Democracy Thesis and the Citizenship Question in Estonia and Latvia*. In: *Nationalities Papers* 24/2 (1996), 199–216; Melvin, *Post-Imperial Ethnocracy* (cf. n. 6), 129–131; Pettai, Vello: *Emerging Ethnic Democracy in Estonia and Latvia*. In: Opalski, Magda (Ed.): *Managing Diversity in Plural Societies. Minorities, Migration and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Europe*. Nepean 1998, 15–32.

26 Cf. Björklund, *The East European "Ethnic Nation" – Myth or Reality?* (cf. n. 6), 96–100.

27 Cf. *Ibid.*, 113–114; Rozenvalds, Juris: *The Soviet Heritage and Integration Policy Development Since the Restoration of Independence*. In: Muižnieks, Nils (Ed.): *How Integrated Is Latvian Society? An Audit of Achievements, Failures, and Challenges*. Rīga 2010, 33–60, here 35 f.; Solska, Magdalena: *Citizenship, Collective Identity and the International Impact on Integration Policy in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*. In: *Europe-Asia Studies* 63/6 (2011), 1089–1108, here 1089 f.

28 Brubaker, Rogers: *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge 1996, 79.

29 Cf. Birka, Ieva: *Expressed Attachment to Russia and Social Integration: The Case of Young Russian Speakers in Latvia, 2004–2010*. In: *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47/2 (2016), 219–238; Cara, *Acculturation Strategies* (cf. n. 7), 224–229; Lulle, Aija; Jurkane-Hobein, Iveta: *Strangers within? Russian-Speakers' Migration from Latvia to London: A Study in Power Geometry and Intersectionality*. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43/4 (2017), 596–612, here 603; Smith, Graham: *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands. The Politics of National Identities*. Cambridge 1998, 110 f.

30 Cf. Volkov, *Ethnic Self-Categorisation* (cf. n. 21).

31 Cf. Birka, *Expressed Attachment* (cf. n. 29), 231–234.

32 Cf. *ibid.*; Kaprāns, Mārtiņš; Mierīņa, Inta: *Minority Reconsidered: Towards a Typology of Latvia's Russophone Identity*. In: *Europe-Asia Studies* 71/1 (2019), 24–47, here 24 f.

cerns have grown in importance after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine in 2022, leading to the securitisation of the Russian-speaking minority,<sup>34</sup> their media consumption,<sup>35</sup> and memory.<sup>36</sup>

Minority securitisation is accompanied by a range of issues, one of them being that it does not necessarily enhance state security but rather places some social groups – most notably minorities and immigrants – in more precarious and insecure conditions.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, as Browning argues,<sup>38</sup> on the example of another alleged threat to security and national identity – migrants – their securitisation “places them in the almost impossible position of constantly having to prove their belonging”,<sup>39</sup> i. e., puts them under rigorous scrutiny and subjects them to regular loyalty checks.<sup>40</sup> As such, the securitisation of the Russian-speaking community in Latvia lays out a ground for academic studies into understanding identities and a sense of belonging for the Russophone minority. In addition, an array of opinion polls, conducted by private research companies (e. g., Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (BISS), Socially Correlative Data Systems (*Sociāli korelatīvo datu sistēmas [SKDS]*), Latvian Facts (*Latvijas Fakti*) and commissioned by government agencies or non-for-profit organisations (e. g., *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*), draw significantly on in the academic and public knowledge production of the Russian-speaking diaspora in Latvia.

However, as I will flesh out in the following pages, the recent proliferation of studies into the Russian-speaking diaspora in Latvia tend to be over-reliant on quantitative data, while the language used in the surveys as well as in the representation of the results is performative, i. e., it reconstructs a hegemonic imagery of the Latvian nation and the Russian-speaking minority.

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33 Cf. Ozoliņa, Žaneta: Introduction. In: Eadem (Ed.): *Social Security. Inclusion-Exclusion Dilemma. A Portrait of the Russian-Speaking Community in Latvia*. Zinātne 2016, 7–12; Vanaga, Nora: *Is Russia Still a Threat to Latvia? An Analysis of Latvia's Security Strategy*. In: *Security Dimensions of Central and Eastern Europe* 11/5 (2013), 123–137.

34 Cf. Kuczyńska-Zonik, *The Securitization of National Minorities in the Baltic States* (cf. n. 9).

35 Cf. Vihalemm, Triin; Juzefovičs, Jānis: *How Baltic Russian-Speaking Audiences Outmaneuver Securitization, Essentialization, and Polarization in Times of Crisis?* In: *Journal of Baltic Studies* 53/4 (2021), 495–517.

36 Cf. Hanovs, Deniss: *Concrete Dust Versus Angel's Wings? Sacralization of the “Victory Monument” and Postcolonial Memory Politics in Latvia*. In: *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 43/9 (2022), 1–26.

37 Cf. Baar, Huub van; Ivasiuc, Ana; Kreide, Regina: *The European Roma and Their Securitization: Contexts, Junctures, Challenges*, in: Idem (Eds.): *The Securitization of the Roma in Europe. Human Rights Interventions*. Basingstoke 2019, 1–25.

38 Cf. Browning, Christopher S.: *Security and Migration: A Conceptual Exploration*. In: Bourbeau, Philippe (Ed.): *Handbook on Migration and Security*. Cheltenham-Northampton/MA 2017, 39–59.

39 *Ibid.*, 55.

40 For an empirical demonstration of this cf. Hercberga, *How to Be Many* (cf. n. 11).



## The authority of numbers and neutrality of categorisation challenged

The dominance of quantitative approaches in understanding identities of Russian speakers in Latvia is merely a local example of a global and protracted phenomenon. Indeed, there is a large body of literature, which offers a critical reading of “the avalanche of printed numbers”<sup>41</sup> in an attempt to understand the social world. Rooted in the Enlightenment, the idea of quantitative ways of knowing being pure and impartial has occupied a position of authority.<sup>42</sup> The way big data has been deified recently, and, indeed, how datafication has been normalised “as a new paradigm in science and society”,<sup>43</sup> does indicate that the authority of numbers is here to stay.

In terms of the scope of this article, there are a few problems associated with the hegemonic status of numbers as steadfast truth-tellers.<sup>44</sup> Firstly, quantitative data occupy a position outside and above of social context, they omit any contextual nature of the lived experiences of respondents and the situatedness of knowledge construction.<sup>45</sup> As regards the former, Abramson, on the analysis of politics of census categories in post-Soviet Uzbekistan for example, claims that the way people respond to census is contingent and might differ from their responses in other forums.<sup>46</sup> In a similar way, through ethnographic work with young Russian-speakers in Latvia, Hercberga demonstrated how performance of their own difference as well as their perception of ‘the other’ depends greatly on their assessment of the context and thus, again, contingent and situated.<sup>47</sup> Put differently, surveys are not able to engage with this contingency of self-identification. Additionally, the recognition of the impact that an analyst’s background and positionality might have on their analysis defies the argument for the unbiased and impartial nature of knowledge construction.<sup>48</sup> In other words, ethnic assumptions that reside in the imagination of an analyst might impact ethnic labelling

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41 Hacking, *Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers* (cf. n. 3), 66.

42 Cf. Urla, *Cultural Politics in an Age of Statistics* (cf. n. 4), 820.

43 Dijck, Jose Van: *Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology*. In: *Surveillance & Society* 12/2 (2014), 197–208, here 198.

44 Cf. Urla, *Cultural Politics in an Age of Statistics* (cf. n. 4), 819.

45 Cf. Edmond, Jennifer; Horsley, Nicola; Lehmann, Jörg; Priddy, Mike: *The Trouble with Big Data: How Datafication Displaces Cultural Practices*. London 2021, 12f.

46 Cf. Abramson, David: *Identity Counts: The Soviet Legacy and the Census in Uzbekistan*. In: Kertzer/Arel, *Census and Identity* (cf. n. 3), 176–201.

47 Cf. Hercberga, *How to Be Many* (cf. n. 11).

48 Cf. Haraway, Donna: *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. In: *Feminist Studies* 14/3 (1988), 575–599; Boyd, Danah; Crawford, Kate: *Critical Questions for Big Data*. In: *Information, Communication & Society* 15/5 (2012), 662–679, here 667f.



and categorisation employed in the scope of a national polling, as well as the interpretation of the results.<sup>49</sup>

The second complication associated with the hegemony of numbers is that counting is “hungry for categories”<sup>50</sup> and thus involves processes of classification and labelling, which does not occur in a vacuum but is influenced by the dominant ethnic politics.<sup>51</sup> As such, the state discourse delineates a putative in-group from a putative out-group,<sup>52</sup> which has a profound impact on self- and other-perception,<sup>53</sup> as well as on the production of difference.<sup>54</sup> Brubaker calls this process ‘groupism’, i. e.,

“the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis. [...] [A]s substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed.”<sup>55</sup>

The process of classification and labelling is linked to inter-group conflicts developed through depersonalising from “unique persons to exemplars of named groups”, accompanied by the homogenisation of groups and heightening differences.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the ‘objective’ predefined categories offered by the analyst limit options for arbitrary self-identification<sup>57</sup> and thus foreclose space for respondents’ agency in offering their own interpretations of situated experiences.

Finally, what emanates from the above is the critical argument of the performative nature of categorisation. Since the ethnic labels and categories tend to be “narrated into being”<sup>58</sup> they reinforce ethnic ‘groupism’ in the everyday life. Therefore, as Levine suggests, “ethnicity moves around in *everyone’s* head, not just the social scientist’s”,<sup>59</sup> making categories active part of larger feedback loops and thus more difficult to deconstruct.

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49 Cf. Banks, Markus: *Ethnicity. Anthropological Construction*. New York 1996, as cited in Levine, *Reconstructing Ethnicity* (cf. n. 16), 177.

50 Hacking, *Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers* (cf. n. 3), 66.

51 Cf. Urla, *Cultural Politics in an Age of Statistics* (cf. n. 4); Abramson, *Identity Counts* (cf. n. 46); Grommé, Francisca; Scheel, Stephan: *Doing Statistics, Enacting the Nation: The Performative Powers of Categories*. In: *Nations and Nationalism* 26/3 (2020), 576–593.

52 Cf. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (cf. n. 1), 220–228; Levine, *Reconstructing Ethnicity* (cf. n. 16), 169.

53 Cf. Kertzer/Arel, *Census and Identity* (cf. n. 3), 5–10, 177.

54 Cf. Grommé/Scheel, *Doing Statistics, Enacting the Nation* (cf. n. 51), 580–587; Levine, *Reconstructing Ethnicity* (cf. n. 16), 169.

55 Brubaker, Rogers: *Ethnicity without Groups*. In: *European Journal of Sociology* 43/2 (2002), 163–189, here 164.

56 Levine, *Reconstructing Ethnicity* (cf. n. 16), 169.

57 Cf. Kertzer/Arel, *Census and Identity* (cf. n. 3), 2.

58 Grommé/Scheel, *Doing Statistics, Enacting the Nation* (cf. n. 51), 580.

59 Levine, *Reconstructing Ethnicity* (cf. n. 16), 177.

## “What do Russians think?” Language of polls as divisive and exclusive

Language used in the opinion polls is not merely a tool capturing and describing social reality, it plays an important role in constructing it, i. e., it is political.<sup>60</sup> The complications of the reported interrelation between the language of the polls and its role in authorising a certain vision of the reality are many-fold.<sup>61</sup> What is worth mentioning in relation to the proliferation of studies into the Russian-speaking diaspora in Latvia is that they continue and reinforce the previously reported distinct oppositional delimitation between two imagined ‘groupisms’ of ethnic Latvians and non-Latvians in cultural, political, and social terms.<sup>62</sup>

For example, Ekmanis critically discusses the binary and exclusionary wording of some of the questions used in Birka’s study aiming at operationalising the “willingness to identify with national group”<sup>63</sup> amongst the Russian-speaking youth

“by asking informants to respond to statements such as ‘Latvians and Russians (Russian speakers) are two conflicting camps’ and ‘I have no problem with Latvians; Latvians are the same as everyone else’ (Birka 2016, p. 226). The first statement explicitly puts these narrowly defined groups in conflict with one another. The second statement similarly implies that the respondent is not analytically Latvian; that is, even if Russian speakers and Latvians are ‘the same’, the question explicitly differentiates the respondent from the national titular group.”<sup>64</sup>

To extend the above critique, the wording used in the aforementioned quotation illustrates how “answer is induced by the way the question is asked”.<sup>65</sup> As Grommé and Scheel demonstrated in their study, the way questions are asked and categories are worded often emanates from social biases and implicit assumptions about nationhood, ‘self’ and ‘the other’ circulating in society.<sup>66</sup> As discussed earlier, scholars are also part of these feedback loops. However, by making an assumption part of a questionnaire, scholars’ biases enter the process of constructing a public opinion by foregrounding questions and categories respondents would never think about, at least not in the sug-

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Bourdieu, *Distinction* (cf. n. 1), 459–465; idem, *Language and Symbolic Power* (cf. n. 1), 39–41.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Cheskin, Ammon: *The Discursive Construction of “Russian-Speakers”: The Russian-Language Media and Demarcated Political Identities in Latvia*. In: Golubeva, Maria; Gould, Robert (Eds.): *Shrinking Citizenship. Discursive Practices That Limit Democratic Participation in Latvian Politics*. Amsterdam 2010, 133–154, here 151–153; Wallace, Claire; Patsiurko, Natalka: *Citizenship, Europe and Ethnic Boundary Making among Russian Minorities in Latvia and Lithuania*. In: *Migration Letters* 11/2 (2014), 187–205, here 200.

<sup>63</sup> Birka, *Expressed Attachment* (cf. n. 29), 226.

<sup>64</sup> Ekmanis, *Host Land or Homeland?* (cf. n. 10), 76.

<sup>65</sup> Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (cf. n. 1), 149.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Grommé/Scheel, *Doing Statistics, Enacting the Nation* (cf. n. 51).

gested way,<sup>67</sup> i. e., artificially reinforcing inter-ethnic cleavage and conflict, and implanting a certain trajectory in the way that they are thought about (e. g., as conflictual, as oppositional).

To use another example, despite most post-2014 opinion polls collecting data from across the ethnic groups in Latvia, the language used in the dissemination of their results, however, sets the focus on the Russian-speaking diaspora, e. g.: *Peace and Security Under Pressure. An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking Minority in Latvia*,<sup>68</sup> *What Do Russians Think?*,<sup>69</sup> *The War Continues to Divide. How Has Latvian Russians' Assessment of Russia's War in Ukraine, of Putin and of the Possibility of Ethnic Conflicts Changed this Year?*<sup>70</sup> The chosen frame of reporting puts the Russian-speaking community in the spotlight, what do Russians think about the war, not more inclusively, Latvians or inhabitants of Latvia. This presents the bounded ethnicity of Russian speakers as the main unit of analysis, as the ones to be concerned about; while the titular nation is used as the control group: as the benchmark, – ‘the norm’ to compare against. This reporting approach echoes the one-way minority politics in Latvia, wherein the success of integration is deemed the responsibility of the Russian-speaking minority rather than a mutual rapprochement.<sup>71</sup> In other words, this divisionary and exclusivist language in the reporting of the survey results continues the ethnonational trajectory of the Latvian state that is organised along the line of ethnic difference.<sup>72</sup>

By putting the spotlight solely on the Russophone community through these exclusive forms of language, the media authorise the idea that support of Russia is predetermined by ethnicity. Additionally, despite the reported differences in self-perception between Russian-speaking diasporas and citizens of Russia,<sup>73</sup> the linguistic choice to confine diverse Latvian Russian-speakers with the homogenised category of ‘Russians’ (in the examples above and below) reduces the complexity of self-identification of the local Russophone community to one denominator and overtly assigns them an identity of ‘the other’. This “lumping together” of the ethnic minority with an external nation,

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67 Cf. Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (cf. n. 1), 149–157.

68 Krumm, Reinhard; Šukevičs, Kristis; Zariņš, Toms: *Peace and Security Under Pressure. An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking Minority in Latvia*. Rīga 2023. URL: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/baltikum/20445.pdf> (07.03.2024).

69 Ločmele, Nellija: *Ko Domā Krievi? [What Do Russians Think?]*. In: *Ir Žurnāls*. 13.07.2022. URL: <https://ir.lv/2022/07/13/ko-doma-krievi/> (07.03.2024).

70 Eadem: *Karš Turpina Šķelt [The War Continues To Divide]*. In: *Ir Žurnāls*, 13.07.2023, 14.

71 Cf. Rozenvalds, *The Soviet Heritage and Integration Policy Development Since the Restoration of Independence* (cf. n. 27), 55.

72 For similar practices in Estonia cf. Grommé/Scheel: *Doing Statistics, Enacting the Nation* (cf. n. 51).

73 Cf. Kolsto, Pål: *Territorialising Diasporas: The Case of Russians in the Former Soviet Republics*. In: *Millennium* 28/3 (1999), 607–631; Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia* (cf. n. 8).

with which the minority share an ethnic and cultural background, “bounds group identity by ethnicity, not civic nationality” and raises the likelihood of conflict.<sup>74</sup>

To reengage with Brubaker, the examples above demonstrate how Latvian Russian-speakers are discursively portrayed as distinctly dissimilar to ethnic Latvians, as a unified collective with shared values, beliefs and orientations, which are predetermined by their ethnicity – a sort of a “monochrome ethnic [...] bloc”.<sup>75</sup> This colourless bloc is often depicted in grey tones, signifying the abstention and indifference of local Russian speakers and, as I will argue, any lack of the state’s genuine interest in them.

## ‘Don’t know’ answers or ‘grey zones’ of ‘indifference’

Grey colour, usually connoting neutrality, is traditionally used in the display of survey results to mark those who have not yet made up their mind, those who are not able or find it difficult to answer a survey question. Bourdieu suggests the need to take the ‘don’t know’ answers seriously and calls them “the most important information supplied by opinion polls”.<sup>76</sup>

Grey colour has been very prominent amongst the answers given by Russian-speaking respondents in the two opinion polls assessing the views on Russia’s full-scale invasion in Ukraine amongst the inhabitants of Latvia, conducted a few months after the start of the war in 2022,<sup>77</sup> and a year after in 2023.<sup>78</sup> I will now continue to develop my critique of the dominant analytical methods in order to engage with the Russian-speaking community in Latvia by analysing the grey areas in these surveys as well as their representation in the local media due to the latter’s prominent role in shaping public opinion,<sup>79</sup> and constructing everyday borders.<sup>80</sup>

Bourdieu’s intellectual interest in the ‘don’t know’ answers lies in what they disguise – not merely about the respondents themselves – but about the political system, which relies on abstentionism amongst marginalised groups to function.

“Abstentionism is perhaps not so much a hiccup in the system as one of the conditions of its functioning as a misrecognized – and therefore recognized – restriction on political participation.”<sup>81</sup>

74 Kachuyevski, Angela; Olesker, Ronnie: Divided Societies and Identity Boundaries: A Conflict Analysis Framework. In: *International Journal of Conflict Management* 25/3 (2014), 304–321, here 306.

75 Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups (cf. n. 55), 164.

76 Bourdieu, *Distinction* (cf. n. 1), 399.

77 Cf. Ločmele, *Ko Domā Krievi?* (cf. n. 69).

78 Cf. Krumm/Šukevičs/Zariņš, *Peace and Security* (cf. n. 68).

79 Cf. Bourdieu, *Distinction* (cf. n. 1), 440–451.

80 Cf. Knudsen, Ida Harboe; Frederiksen, Martin Demant: Introduction: What Is a Grey Zone and Why Is Eastern Europe One? In: Idem (Eds.): *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe. Relations, Borders and Invisibilities*. London 2015, 1–22.

81 Bourdieu, *Distinction* (cf. n. 1), 398.

This observation switches the analytical focus from ‘the abstention’ as a problem to the ‘political system’ as a problem. Bourdieu equates “the propensity to speak politically” to “the sense to having the right to speak”.<sup>82</sup> When citizens share a sense that their voices would not influence the state of affairs in the country, they opt to abstain from answering by choosing the ‘don’t know’ option. This means that Bourdieu does not equate the ‘don’t know’ answers with ignorance or indifference, but with impotence.<sup>83</sup> However, this impotence is not so much indicative of the respondents’ agency as of the structures in place: the political system that restricts political participation of marginalised social groups, namely the working class when it comes to the intellectual focus of Bourdieu.

Bourdieu correlated the abstention from answering questions on politics with levels of cultural and economic deprivation.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, although ethnicity as such was not his focus, it is the socially and politically marginalised status of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia (as discussed earlier) that makes the application of his thinking valid in the scope of this article.

The numbers of “don’t know” and “none of the options” answers amongst the responses given by the Russian-speaking respondents are striking in the results of the aforementioned surveys. For example, to one of the key questions of the survey, “Which of the fighting sides do you support?”, in 2022 49 percent of respondents who speak Russian at home chose the “none of the sides” answer option, while 10 percent answered: “hard to say”.<sup>85</sup> The proportions of the 2023 ‘grey zones’ were very similar: 51 percent and 8 percent respectively.<sup>86</sup>

It would be wrong to say that this heightened level of abstention amongst Russian-speaking respondents to give a definitive answer goes unrecognised. Unequivocally, because of the high securitisation of the minority identities and the highly political nature of the question, this reported neutrality or inability to take one of the sides is indeed seen as a problem and denounced by the public discourse, as much as it is not often taken at face value. This abstention to define one’s position in a time of the war is condemned in the public narrative due to its consonance with the ‘everything is not so clear-cut’ narrative (*ne vsjo tak odnoznachno*) that has become a leitmotif of Kremlin propaganda to justify the 2022 invasion.<sup>87</sup> This neither/nor position is con-

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 411.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Cf. *ibid.*; *idem*, In Other Words (cf. n. 1), 168–174; see also Myles, Bourdieu, Language and the Media (cf. n. 2), 117–123.

<sup>85</sup> Ločmele, Ko Domā Krievi? (cf. n. 69).

<sup>86</sup> Krumm/Šukevičs/Zariņš, Peace and Security (cf. n. 68), 10.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Litvinenko, Anna: Propaganda on Demand: Russia’s Media Environment during the War in Ukraine. In: Global Media Journal 12/2 (2022), 1–14; Foht, Elizaveta: “Gde vŷ byli vosem’ let” i “ne vse tak odnoznachno”. Antropolog Arkhipova o tom, kak i pochemu rossiyane opravdŷvayut voĭnu v Ukraine [“Where Have You Been for Eight Years” and “Not Everything Is So Simple.” Anthropologist Arkhipova on How and Why Russians Justify the War in Ukraine]. In: BBC News Russia. 27.04.2022. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-61235671> (07.03.2024).

sidered as ‘impossible’ by the public media and by the political elite, as can be seen in this comment by Egils Levits, then President of Latvia:

“I think that Russians living in Latvia should take a clear position. And most of them have done so. Because in this situation, a neutral attitude is impossible. If a person is neutral, it means that he has not understood the essence of the matter.”<sup>88</sup>

To be fair, this neutrality is also condemned by the Russian-speaking elite in the country. A couple of months into the war, 114 prominent and less so representatives of the Russian-speaking diaspora signed an open letter condemning the war and inviting its readers to address the ‘neutrality’ in their intimate circles:

“If you have closed ones, friends or acquaintances in Russia or here in Latvia who still support the war in Ukraine or do not believe that unimaginable evil is happening there, talk to them. Make sure that people in your circle cannot turn a blind eye and ‘remain neutral’, remain ‘out of politics’, or otherwise silently support the war crimes being committed by the Russian military.”<sup>89</sup>

Apart from providing an additional illustration of the public recognition and condemnation of neutrality in relation to the war in Ukraine, the above quote equally demonstrates fragmentations within the Russophone community in Latvia,<sup>90</sup> and simultaneously starts to reveal its internal complexity and heterogeneity. Although this is still expressed in a binary and simplified mode: one group of ‘good’ Russian speakers addresses another group of ‘bad’ Russian speakers.

The anecdotal social category of ‘the good Russian’ (or ‘proper’ or ‘correct’ Russian) appeared before the start of the Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, yet became more prominent in the ensuing years. This category includes those Russophones who have not only become fluent in Latvian, but who have acquired a certain set of cultural beliefs and values that have been considered as ‘correct’ or ‘right’ in contemporary Latvian society, e. g., acknowledging the fact of the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940 or being critical about the Russian interventions in politics of the former Soviet republics, but also simple everyday practices like the choice of cultural events or entertainment places.<sup>91</sup> Russia’s aggression added another point to the list of evaluation criteria: one’s stance towards the war and the Russian state.

<sup>88</sup> Levits intervijā Krievijas TV izsakās par krieviem Latvijā [Levits Speaks about Russians in Latvia in an Interview on Russian TV]. 24.07.2022. In: Tautasruna.lv. URL: <https://tautasruna.nra.lv/citi/387080-levits-intervija-krievijas-tv-izsakas-par-krieviem-latvija/> (07.03.2024).

<sup>89</sup> Voīna i mī: otkrytoe pis'mo russkoyazychnykh Latvii [The War and Us: Open Letter to Latvian Russian Speakers]. In: Delfi.lv. 08.04.2022. URL: <https://rus.delfi.lv/57860/latvia/54226442/voyna-i-my-otkrytoe-pismo-russkoyazychnyh-latvii> (07.03.2024).

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Kaprāns/Mieraņa, *Minority Reconsidered* (cf. n. 32).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Petrenko, Dmitrijs: Man jākļūst par pareizo krievu [I Must Become a Proper Russian]. In: Providus Domnica. 20.04.2011. URL: <https://providus.lv/raksti/man-jaklust-par-pareizo-krievu/>; Procevska, Olga: Labā Krieva Uzvedības Kodekss [Code of Conduct of a Good Russian]. In: Satori. 27.03.2013. URL: <https://satori.lv/article/laba-krieva-uzvedibas-kodekss> (07.03.2024).

The categorisation into ‘bad’ and ‘good’ Russian speakers continues the state’s discourse of omitting the contingency and complexity of everyday processes of self-making amongst Russian speakers in Latvia. In this hierarchy, ‘good’ Russian speakers occupy a position of knowledge, of expertise and enlightenment that allegedly grants them the right to claim to know ‘the other’ that is the ‘bad’ Russian speaker, as can be seen from the following quotation by a Russian-speaking journalist: “But by and large, all these neutral positions have a common place. They somehow find an excuse for Russia and the ongoing war”.<sup>92</sup> The state of expertise and superiority that can be traced in the quotes above does not challenge but reinforces the social binarism, and could be interpreted as a ‘self’ reification through opposition to difference.

While respecting and sympathising with the expressed public disapprovals of, and worries associated with, the pronounced ‘grey zone’ in the surveys in question, this article is not a moral exercise in condemning the political stances of a part of the Russian-speaking community in Latvia. Drawing on Frederiksen and Knudsen’s valorisation of greyness in East European ethnographies,<sup>93</sup> I am more interested in understanding what these ‘grey zones’ disguise. In what follows, I will attempt to demonstrate that the heightened abstentionism amongst the Russian-speaking community might reveal more than merely an alleged universal support of Russia’s foreign policy.

## Re-production of the category ‘Russian speakers’ as lagging

As I have demonstrated in the previous section, contrary to Bourdieu’s conception of ‘don’t know’ answers as an exclusionary mechanism to further disregard opinions of already marginalised classes,<sup>94</sup> the ‘neither/nor’ answers of the Russian-speaking respondents are clearly acknowledged and condemned. However, similar to Bourdieu’s thinking, this generalisation of the group’s identity serves the purpose, viz. sustaining the narrative of the image of ‘Latvianess’ as that of returning to Europe after a prolonged deviation caused by the Soviet occupation. For that to happen, as I demonstrate in this section, the reported ‘neutrality’ amongst Russian-speakers is extended to the whole Russophone community and explained by its ethnicity. In the example below, then Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Defence of Latvia, Artis Pabriks, makes reference to the reported indeterminacy among the local Russian speakers by enacting a hierarchical binarism on the basis of ethnicity:

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<sup>92</sup> Lipin, Artjom: “Vse ne tak odnoznachno” – chto na samom dele znachit neĭtral’naya pozitsiya [“Everything Is Not So Clear-Cut” – That Actually Means a Neutral Position]. In: TVNET.lv. 31.03.2022. URL: <https://rus.tvnet.lv/7487799/vse-ne-tak-odnoznachno-chto-na-samom-dele-znachit-neytralnaya-poziciya> (07.03.2024).

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Knudsen/Frederiksen, Introduction (cf. n. 80).

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Bourdieu, *Distinction* (cf. n. 1), 411–419.



“The Russian ruthless aggression in Ukraine gives a great opportunity of choice for Latvian Russians to be with Latvia and the free world. I extend you my hand. The other choice is to be supporters of the Russian crime and never be understood in the free Latvia.”<sup>95</sup>

Apart from homogenising the Russian-speaking diaspora under the ‘undecided’ label, this text is equally an example of equating ‘Latvian’ values with a progressive mindset, as those of ‘the free world’, while presenting all Latvian Russians as lagging: being lost somewhere in the grey zone of indeterminacy or supporting Russia’s crime. A comparable message can be discerned in the rhetoric by another former Latvian president, Valdis Zatlers:

“Latvian Russians are still afraid to reveal their opinion, but it is necessary to help these people overcome their insecurity, because Latvians are currently showing self-confidence, but Latvian Russians cannot do this yet.”<sup>96</sup>

This narrative continues the subjectivation of the whole Russian-speaking diaspora as deviant, that is lacking confidence and a sense of security to use the example above, and those who need help, such as from ethnic Latvians who are presented homogeneously in the narrative of both politicians and in the Latvian media (below) as those who can provide this support:

“[T]his target group [Russian speakers] has lost reference points of value orientation, and by receiving a friendly invitation, encouragement and support from the Latvian-speaking European value-carrying part of the society, we can get a significant population group loyal to the state.”<sup>97</sup>

Such binary and hierarchical representation of the titular nation and local Russian-speaking diasporas can be traced through studies in other contexts, where migrants from the post-Soviet context are portrayed as lacking a progressive mindset making them unfit for modern-day European societies:<sup>98</sup> as apolitical, unappreciative of freedom, and yearning authoritarianism.<sup>99</sup>

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95 Pabriks, Artis. In: Twitter. 04.04.2022. URL: <https://twitter.com/Pabriks/status/1511000241448833030> (07.03.2024).

96 Zatlers: krieviem jāsaprot, ka karš Ukrainā atrāvis latviešu vēsturiskās rētas [Zatlers: Russians Must Understand That the War in Ukraine Removed the Historical Scars of Latvians]. In: VS.lv. 04.05.2022. URL: <https://vs.lv/raksts/sabiedriba/2022/05/04/zatlers-krieviem-jasaprot-ka-kars-ukraina-atravis-latviesu-vesturiskas-retas> (07.03.2024).

97 Starp “vatņikiem” un “mūsejiem”. Kā Krievijas iebrukums Ukrainā izmainījis Latvijas sabiedrību [Between “Vatņiks” And “Ours”. How the Russian Invasion of Ukraine Has Changed Latvian Society]. In: Jauns.lv. 28.03.2023. URL: <https://jauns.lv/raksts/zinas/551709-starp-vatņikiem-un-musejiem-ka-krievijas-iebrukums-ukraina-izmainijis-latvijas-sabiedribu> (07.03.2024).

98 Cf. Senders, Stefan: Aussiedler Repatriation: Rhetoric, Reproduction, and Demography in the Context of the Welfare State. In: Zeitschrift für Ethnologie 131/1 (2006), 71–89.

99 Cf. the article by Daniel Gebel in this issue and Klingenberg, Darja: Auffällig unauffällig. Russischsprachige Migrantinnen in Deutschland. In: Osteuropa 69/9–11 (2019), 255–276.

What makes the above cases of use, in terms of the numerous ‘don’t know’ answers amongst Latvian Russian-speakers standing out, is that their readings by some Latvian media outlets and members of the political elite suggest that it is not merely socialisation in the former Soviet context that makes the Russophonous diaspora prone to political and moral backwardness – simply because the ethnic Latvians share a prolonged Soviet history too – it is the ethnic belonging that is presented as the cause of lagging in a ‘progressive’ mindset, represented by the ethnic Latvians. The conception of society’s morality along ethnic lines resonates with the state building project in Latvia since the regaining independence in 1991: the aspiration to return to Europe<sup>100</sup> constructed in contrast with all that is (post-)Soviet/Russian embodying “deviation from normal path of political, economic and cultural development of Latvia”.<sup>101</sup>

The imaginary, discursively constructed nature of the two opposites, is further accentuated by the fact that a relatively high percentage of those ethnic Latvians who have opted for the ‘grey-toned’ answers is almost omitted from the public narrative. In the 2022 survey 14 percent of ethnic Latvian respondents replied “neither of the sides”, while 3 percent chose the “hard to say” option.<sup>102</sup> In 2023 the distribution of the answers was 19 percent and 1 percent, respectively.<sup>103</sup> Apart from contributing to further antagonise social relations, this tendency to shadow off the above results amongst ethnic Latvians supports the construction of the Latvian European (i. e., progressive) identity in opposition to its threats,<sup>104</sup> i. e., the post-Soviet legacy – the Russian-speaking minority.

## Discussion: Discerning colours behind the ‘greyness’

Despite the public acknowledgement and problematisation of the large ‘grey areas’ of alleged apathy amongst the Russian-speaking respondents, these areas remain unexplored, they are homogenised, concerned about yet left to themselves. Because, as I have demonstrated, some media outlets and representatives of the political elite use this ‘grey zone’ to reconstruct the imagined ‘groupism’<sup>105</sup> of the Russian-speaking minority, and thus also of the Latvian majority, it serves their purpose to preserve these zones as colourless, as unmapped, as monochrome.

Are these ‘grey zones’ so colourless and shapeless, though? Frederiksen and Knudsen invite us to reimagine greyness in the context of Eastern Europe as “the combina-

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**100** Cf. Djatkovica, *Discursive Region Building in Latvia* (cf. n. 14); Silova, *Returning to Europe* (cf. n. 13); Dzenovska, *School of Europeanness* (cf. n. 15).

**101** Rozenvalds, *Latvia After Twelve Years of Renewed Independence* (cf. n. 22), 14.

**102** Cf. Ločmele, *Ko Domā Krievi?* (cf. n. 69).

**103** Cf. Krumm/Šukevičs/Zariņš, *Peace and Security* (cf. n. 68), 10.

**104** Feldman, Gregory: *Development in Theory: Essential Crises: A Performative Approach to Migrants, Minorities, and the European Nation-State*. In: *Anthropological Quarterly* 78/1 (2005), 213–246, here 238.

**105** Cf. Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (cf. n. 5), 164.

tion of all colours in one place”;<sup>106</sup> as encompassing and signifying ambiguity, with its exploration requiring “the kind of multi-coloured analysis”.<sup>107</sup> Drawing from this thinking, I suggest that an advancement of the understanding of the Russian-speaking community, as much as the success of the social integration lies in starting to discern colours in the reported greyness, i. e., recognising and working with a complexity of meanings behind the everyday experiences of Russian speakers, including behind the heightened abstention from answering political questions.

For a start, I would seek to recognise the partiality and situatedness of knowledge, including that stemming from quantitative data. Paraphrasing Bourdieu,<sup>108</sup> there is a scientist behind the polling industry – categorisation, data gathering and analysis – who acts both as “an object of enquiry and the means of analysing”.<sup>109</sup> This partiality and situatedness of knowledge could be seen as a strength, though, as it strives to build connections with other positions, with other incomplete knowledges in order “to see together without claiming to be another”.<sup>110</sup> Such relations across positionalities require space for self-reflexivity within the enquiry, so to unpack not only the studied complexity but also that of the researcher. Ethnography is believed to help to unpack or at least to foreground the complexity behind mundane experiences,<sup>111</sup> as well as to work with everyday practices,<sup>112</sup> with the implicit and *in situ*.<sup>113</sup>

Despite the domination of quantitative approaches, there have been a number of ethnographies looking into everyday experiences of Latvian Russian-speakers. These qualitative, at times (self-)reflexive, enquiries have challenged the essentialist and homogenised depiction of the Russophone community described earlier. For example, Lulle and Jurkane-Hobein’s study on the self-perception of London-based, young Russian-speaking immigrants from Latvia demonstrate the performative and contextual nature of their identities within the diversity of London.<sup>114</sup> Cara,<sup>115</sup> Cheskin,<sup>116</sup> Ekmanis,<sup>117</sup> Hercberga,<sup>118</sup> and Laizāne et al.<sup>119</sup> all report the complexity and multiplicity of

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106 Knudsen/Frederiksen, Introduction (cf. n. 80), 3.

107 Budandt, Nils: Coda: Reflections on Grey Theory and Grey Zones. In: Knudsen/Frederiksen, *Ethnographies of Grey Zones* (cf. n. 80), 187–198, here 195.

108 Cf. Bourdieu, *In Other Words* (cf. n. 1), 168–174.

109 Probyn, Elspeth: *Sexing the Self. Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*. London 1993, 91.

110 Haraway, Donna: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*. London 1991, 193.

111 Cf. Anderson-Levitt, Kathryn M.: *Ethnography*. In: Green, Judith L.; Camilli, Gregory; Elmore, Patricia B. (Eds.): *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education*. Washington 2006, 279–296, here 279.

112 Cf. Livingstone, Sonia; Sefton-Green, Julian: *The Class. Living and Learning in the Digital Age*. York 2016, 45.

113 Cf. Adams, Laura L.: *Techniques for Measuring Identity in Ethnographic Research*. In: Abdelal, Rawi; Herrera, Yoshiko M.; Johnston, Alastair Iain; McDermott, Rose (Eds.): *Measuring Identity. A Guide for Social Scientists*, Cambridge 2009, 316–341, here 317.

114 Cf. Lulle/Jurkane-Hobein, *Strangers within?* (cf. n. 29).

115 Cf. Cara, *Acculturation Strategies* (cf. n. 7).

116 Cf. Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia* (cf. n. 8).

117 Cf. Ekmanis, *Host Land or Homeland?* (cf. n. 10).

118 Cf. Hercberga, *How to Be Many* (cf. n. 11).

resources enacted in the process of the construction of 'self' among contemporary Latvian Russophones, thus confronting the homogenised image of the latter as victims of the Kremlin's propaganda or being stuck in Soviet nostalgia.

Hercberga, in particular, demonstrates that the grand narratives of political apathy, fear, and indeterminism that are assigned to the Russian-speaking residents in Latvia should not be taken at face value.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, with a more elaborate set of analytical tools and a great interest in the community, they can tell more than appears on the surface. Her research demonstrates how young Russian speakers could be seen as critical thinkers – knowledgeable of the political affairs in the country, following the policies that impact their lives, being able to internalise them as well as to defend their positions, and engaging with the latest developments in global and local political affairs. This positions research participants as having agency in the process of self-making rather than being passive recipients of one or another discourse.

However, Hercberga's research participants are conscious that they are partially limited in expressing their opinions that differ from those of the state authority. Indeed, the research demonstrates how young Russian speakers operate on various levels and how their self-identification is situated and contextual. Her research participants are cautious about standing out and proclaiming their discontent with state politics when the state's gaze is present (in fact or as a possibility). On the 'surface' they conform to a rather fixated identity of 'a good Russian speaker' to avoid ramifications towards themselves, their future, their peers, their teachers, the school, and potentially the wider Russian-speaking community. By performing as 'the good Russian-speaking subject' on the surface, the research participants are thus delineating for themselves a less restricted private space.

In this 'backyard' away from state hegemony, young people have more agency to navigate their complex identities: to accommodate multiple, diverse, and even conflicting sources for self-identification. The described behaviour of the research participants had clear purposes – to survive or to protect themselves and others in their community in a highly politicised national context. Their survival is not a loud proclamation of their existence or a constant vocalisation of their discontent with state politics. Their survival becomes a silent reminder of the exclusionary nature of the political regime in Latvia. Their survival strategy is not selfish either – young people's decisions to act in one or another way was driven by the care of a wider collective, for example, their school and teachers. This way their performed political apathy could be viewed an act of empathy and care for others.<sup>121</sup>

As such, Hercberga's ethnographic research could explain the reported 'indifference' of a large part of the Russian-speaking population of Latvia by presenting

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119 Cf. Laizāne, Māra; Putniņa, Aivita; Mileiko, Ilze: *Mazākumtautību Skolu Skolēnu Identitāte Un Piederība Latvijai* [Identity and Belonging of Minority School Pupils in Latvia]. Rīga 2015.

120 Cf. Hercberga, *How to Be Many* (cf. n. 11).

121 See also Norgaard, Kari Marie: *Living in Denial. Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. Cambridge-London 2011 for a similar conclusion in a different context.

their abstentionism as a conscious self-censorship and protectionist practice. Moreover, the prominent ‘don’t know’ answers could be seen as the respondents’ way to align to the class ethos – “a system of implicit values which people have internalised from childhood and from which they generate answers to very different types of questions”,<sup>122</sup> wherein broader discursive forms of exclusion and marginalisation from the political arena play a significant role.<sup>123</sup> Since Bourdieu equates “the propensity to speak politically” to “the sense to having the right to speak”,<sup>124</sup> the conscious choice to abstain from speaking openly amongst Russian speakers could be linked to their acceptance of “status-linked incompetence”<sup>125</sup> developed through long-lasting ethnocentrism as well as through othering practices and narratives. This conscious choice to adhere to the social norms and the group ethos as the subaltern that cannot speak openly,<sup>126</sup> i. e., requires to adjust one’s opinion according to the dominating discourse, speaks to the illusion that everyone is equal in politics.<sup>127</sup>

The few highlights from previous studies start to demonstrate the capacity of more qualitative, notably ethnographic enquiries, to offer more colours to the understanding of the aforementioned greyness of the Russophone diaspora, to suggest meanings behind numbers, and to add perspective to the two-dimensional depiction of the Latvian society.

I am not suggesting that any forms of qualitative research or any ethnography would necessarily produce a more accurate description of the social world or generate ‘better’ data. Indeed, this text is not a call to abandon quantitative methods in the studies of Russian-speaking identities, nor in studies of any identities for that matter. In the construction of my own argument, as the reader might have noticed, I do myself engage with statistics. Instead, I argue that more qualitative, reflexive and critical research can contribute to adding another jigsaw puzzle to our understanding of the complexities that constitute everyday practices and experiences of the Russophone diaspora.

For Bourdieu the solution to address the performative nature of opinion polls lays in the discontinuity between ethos and logos.<sup>128</sup> The survey translates “experience into discourse”,<sup>129</sup> i. e., fixates and reifies “unformulated ethos into a constituted, constituting logos”.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, discussions on political topics should engage with “class unconscious rather than a class consciousness”.<sup>131</sup> Since respondents from marginalised groups recognise and consciously answer political questions according to social

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122 Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (cf. n. 1), 152.

123 Cf. Bourdieu, *Distinction* (cf. n. 1), 460–462.

124 *Ibid.*, 411.

125 *Ibid.*, 417.

126 Cf. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In: Cain, Peter H.; Harrison, Mark (Eds.): *Imperialism*. London 2023, 171–219.

127 Cf. Bourdieu, *Distinction* (cf. n. 1), 417.

128 *Ibid.*, 461.

129 *Ibid.*, 460.

130 *Ibid.*

131 *Ibid.*, 419.

norms, it is potentially the turn to unconscious that might shed some interesting light into the complexity of everyday diasporic experiences, as well as foreground the agency of the representatives of the Russian-speaking community in the process of self-making, thus allowing them to walk away from the rigid and predefined categories of surveys, allowing for the situatedness and contingency of self-expression.

The article's contribution to the present volume lies in its reminder that knowledge creation is impacted by how we – as scholars and analysts – conceive the concept of 'knowledge',<sup>132</sup> as well as other notions we study. How can we advance understanding about diasporic communities in a broader sense, and about the everyday complexities of the post-Soviet experiences specifically, if we do not open up to epistemological and methodological complexity that would allow us to foreground and work with this complexity?

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132 Cf. Strathern, Marilyn: *Opening Up Relations*. In: Cadena de la, Marisol; Blaser, Mario (Eds.): *A World of Many Worlds*. Durham-London 2018, 23–52.