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Lived Citizenship and Belonging among Non-Citizens in Latvia:
A Bottom-Up Investigation

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Stefan Pacher BA

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Univ.-Prof. Dr. Petra Dannecker M.A.

Deutsche Kurzzusammenfassung

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht, wie Menschen mit dem Status „Non-Citizen“ und russischer Muttersprache in Lettland Staatsbürger*innenschaft und Zugehörigkeit wahrnehmen und erleben. Theoretisch stützt sich die Arbeit auf Ansätze, welche Staatsbürger*innenschaft als gelebten und emotionalen Prozess begreifen, der auf Solidarität, Gerechtigkeit, Anerkennung und Selbstbestimmung beruht, und erkennt zugleich die Bedeutung normativer Ansätze an, um ein ganzheitliches Bild substanzieller Staatsbürger*innenschaft zu zeichnen. Empirisch basiert die Fallstudie auf qualitativen Interviews, die verdeutlichen, dass Lettland für die Befragten auf emotionaler und gelebter Ebene Heimat ist. Die Ergebnisse bestärken, dass russischsprachige Nicht-Staatsbürger*innen eine spezifische und Lettland-zentrierte Identität aufweisen, die auf keine politische Loyalität zu Russland schließen lässt. Der Status „Non-Citizen“ wird als auferlegte und diskriminierende Identität erfahren, die Anerkennung erschwert und politische Teilhabe ausschließt. Sprache erscheint doppelt: als Ressource kultureller und familiärer Bindung, zugleich aber als Hauptfeld staatlicher und sozialer Ausgrenzung. Besonders deutlich zeigt sich die politische Entfremdung, die nicht nur individuelles Zugehörigkeitsgefühl schwächt, sondern auch die demokratische Legitimität Lettlands insgesamt schwächt. Dieses multidimensionale Spannungsverhältnis führt zu einer unvollständigen Staatsbürger*innenschaft: sozial integriert und emotional verankert, aber rechtlich und politisch marginalisiert. Basierend auf den Ergebnissen der qualitativen Feldstudie diskutiert diese Masterarbeit Möglichkeiten und Stärken inklusiver Theorien der Staatsbürger*innenschaft im lettischen Kontext.

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Introduction

Topic overview

Citizenship in Latvia continues to be a critical topic in academic and political debates. One of the main reasons for this continued interest are Latvia's so called non-citizens, which continue to constitute "more than 9%" of Latvia's society (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia 2025).

In 1991, Latvia regained its state sovereignty following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The restoration of Latvia's independence ended more than 50 years of Soviet occupation. Among the 15 post-Soviet successor states, Latvia was most affected by the aggressive Soviet Russification policy, which consisted of the strategic mass settlement of people from different parts of the Soviet Union and the introduction of the Russian language in every sphere of public life. The main goal of this policy was to consolidate loyalty towards the Soviet empire and to extinguish potential claims of sovereignty. As a result of this, in 1989, only half of Latvia's population was proficient in speaking Latvian, while Russian language dominated all spheres of public life (cf. Dreifelds 1996: 143f). In the three largest cities of Latvia, Riga, Liepaja and Daugavpils, "Latvian speakers had become a minority" (Germane 2010: 118). When Latvia regained independence in 1991, the preservation of Latvian language and culture became one of the most urgent problems for policy makers (cf. Maksimovtsova 2019: 158). It was widely believed that, for the state-in-the-making, it was inevitable to protect and promote the "cultural, economic, demographic and political vitality" of the Latvian "core nation" that was under the threat of extinction (Brubaker 1996: 432f).

Soon after regaining independence, Latvian officials declared the Soviet occupation as illegal on the principle of state continuity. In the eyes of international law, Latvia was never formerly part of the Soviet Empire, and therefore Latvia did not cease to exist *de jure* as a state between 1940 and 1991, the period of Soviet occupation (cf. Ziemele 2005: 31). With this political decision, roughly 700.000 Soviet settlers, overwhelmingly Russian speakers, suddenly became stateless in a country where they had lived for decades or where they were born and raised (cf. IHRC 2008).

Under international pressure, Latvian officials created the unique non-citizenship status for this large national minority to circumvent the issue of mass statelessness in Latvia and to adhere to international human rights standards (cf. Law on the Status of those former USSR Citizens 1995). This special legal status was meant to be of a temporary nature to ensure a controlled integration

of Soviet settlers, and to address the far-reaching changes in demographic composition, language use and culture that were introduced during Soviet occupation. However, in 2024, more than 169.000 people in Latvia still held the status of non-citizens (cf. LCHR 2024; Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia 2025) and the existence of a large Russian-speaking minority without equal Latvian citizenship has remained and unresolved question for Latvia's decision makers, while continuing to raise profound questions of nationality and belonging for those directly affected (Cheskin 2013; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2013).

Recent geopolitical tensions, especially the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and more recently the Russian military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, sparked a new fear of Russian aggression across several Eastern European countries, including Latvia. Against this backdrop, the political debate about the future of Latvia's Russian-speaking non-citizens has taken up new momentum (cf. Higgins 2023; Brown 2017; Croft 2016; Grigas 2016). Although several actions were taken to accelerate the processes of naturalization and to promote inclusive strategies regarding citizenship, naturalization rates remain low and the non-citizenship framework, introduced more than 30 years ago, remains unresolved (cf. Kuczynska-Zonik 2017: 8f).

This thesis investigates citizenship in the case of Latvia from a horizontal perspective, emphasizing that it is "culturally relevant, empirically grounded, and context-specific" (Isin/Nielsen 2009: 2). It suggests that inclusive notions of citizenship are inherently progressive and capable of continuous reconstruction to "unfold their egalitarian and anti-hierarchic logic" (Hoffman 2004: 138f.). Investigating citizenship not only in normative terms, but through social and cultural perspectives challenges these exclusive tendencies of citizenship in favour of a more inclusive form of lived citizenship and beyond the prevailing top-down perspective that remains dominant in the political discussion in Latvia and the study of citizenship (cf. Isin/Nielsen 2008: 3ff).

Conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with Latvian Russian-speaking non-citizens allows to investigate citizenship under the conceptual approach that citizenship is a dynamic process that is constantly reshaped by the citizens themselves, and it can highlight dynamics of citizenship from below, uncovering an alternative approach to the study of citizenship from an actor-oriented perspective. Doing so potentially allows to unfold horizontal characteristics of lived citizenship and promote a more holistic understanding of the complex notions, feelings and powers that shape citizens.

Rationale for this study and research questions

The rationale for this research is twofold:

First, although there is a growing body of academic literature that focuses on inclusionary aspects of citizenship from “the standpoint of the excluded”, there seems to be a considerable imbalance between empirical and theoretical work on the topic (Lister 2007: 50). Latvia, among other post-Soviet successor states, has been especially interesting for scholars researching citizenship from diverse disciplines because of the country’s historical background, linguistic diversity and the unique status of non-citizenship. The empirical methodology of this study advances Isin’s (2009: 368) argument that citizenship is “historically grounded and geographically responsive”. Therefore, it lies within the logic of citizenship theory to keep advancing empirical research at different points in time to continuously rework and unfold its inclusive potential. Further, notions of inclusive or exclusive tendencies of citizenship can become even more apparent in a time of heightened geopolitical tensions, when social tensions rise (cf. Croft 2016: 194; Brubaker 1998).

Second, contemporary scientific work on citizenship continues to advance inclusionary aspects in favour of marginalized groups. It challenges the traditional association of citizenship and the role of the nation-state, trying to fill the empirical void in the studies of citizenship. Contrary to that, the political reality in Europe and beyond draws a different picture in which nation-states remain the guardians of citizenship to control inclusion and exclusion. There is a wide gap between academic advancements in emancipatory citizenship theory and the political and normative use of citizenship as a tool of exclusion (cf. Lister 2007: 55f). This is the case in Latvia, but a trend can be observed in Europe and beyond.

Therefore, this study aims to add to the “empirical void” (Lister 2007: 58) of citizenship theory from a bottom-up perspective. Hence, this study aims to answer the following research question:

How do non-Citizens in Latvia experience citizenship and belonging?

Further, based on the findings of this study, I will suggest possible approaches for pro-active policy making in Latvia to address the gap between inclusionary citizenship theory and the arguably exclusionary lived reality for Latvia’s non-citizens.

Ethnicity in the Latvian Context

It is important to outline how this study approaches the complex and sometimes problematic category of ethnicity, especially in the context of Latvia.

In political and academic discourses on Latvian citizenship, history and demographic development, ethnicity is frequently presented as a central category, often equated with the first language or cultural practices an individual speaks or practices. However, imposing ethnicity based on such characteristics tends to obscure the complex and fluid nature of identity. Ethnicity is frequently treated as a biological or self-evident trait, especially in times of political tension or mobilization (cf. Britannica 2024; Brubaker 1998). The term “ethnic Russians” is widely used in both scholarship and media (cf. MRG 2018; Mierina 2024; New York Times 2023), yet it misleadingly suggests a homogenous group with shared ancestry or identity.

This assumption does not hold true in the Latvian context. Between 1940 and 1991, hundreds of thousands of individuals from various parts of the Soviet Union migrated to Latvia. The only commonality among most is their use of Russian as a first language (Andzans 2024). Several polls and studies underscore that Latvia’s Russian-speaking population is not a monolithic group (On Latvia 2025).

Against this backdrop, constructivist approaches to the definition of ethnicity offer a much more nuanced understanding. Such constructivist perspectives argue that ethnic identity is not simply inherited but shaped by social, political, and economic phenomena. The formation of identity is dynamic and relational, formed through the interactions that individuals have with their environment (cf. Chandra 2001: 7). This approach to ethnicity also challenges the idea that ethnic tension is inevitable, a notion often embedded in narratives about Latvia’s so-called ethnic Russians.

Ammon Cheskin (2013) offers a compelling analysis of identity formation among Russian-speaking minorities. He concludes that identity in Latvia is shaped by both Latvian and Russian narratives, resulting in heterogeneity and complexity. He identifies how sharp divides in language-based media, a strong and “ethnicized” political landscape and institutionalized historical memory - what he terms a “memory war” (ibid.: 288) - influence and distort identity formation.

In line with this view, this study avoids imposed ethnic labels and instead adopts Cheskin's term "Latvian Russian-speakers" (or simply "Russian-speakers" where the Latvian context is clear). This terminology respects the fluidity of identity formation in Latvia, and it also provides the necessary space for individuals to articulate their own sense of belonging and identity.

Highlighting how ethnicity is approached in this study is especially important given that this study explores lived experiences of citizenship and belonging. Rather than assuming static categories, it focuses on the perspectives of individuals who negotiate identity in a politically and socially contested space. In doing so, it refrains from reproducing narratives and instead approaches identity, belonging and ethnicity as a relational and fluid dimension of citizenship.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into 6 chapters, as follow:

Chapter 1 is separated into two parts. Part 1 outlines theoretical concepts of citizenship which highlight the historical inclusive/exclusive tendencies as well as the ethno-cultural and top-down focus of the dominant theories regarding citizenship. Highlighting these enables a better understanding of the current status quo of citizenship policy in Latvia. Further, it outlines the logic of citizenship as normative and legal concepts. Part 2 outlines alternative theories of inclusive citizenship, focusing on horizontal and actor-oriented perspectives. It discusses some of the contemporary developments in the study of citizenship that challenge existing top-down approaches and highlights the possibilities and limits of normative approaches to the study of citizenship. In combination, these theories help to re-investigate Latvia's non-citizenship framework from a new perspective, putting into focus the ways in which non-citizens experience citizenship based on their normative status and everyday experiences. This can aid a better understanding of the current social tensions and questions of citizenship and belonging of Latvia's Russian-speaking non-citizens.

Chapter 2 outlines the relevant historical context of Latvia to provide a holistic understanding of Latvia's contemporary citizenship regime. Latvian citizenship has been shaped through numerous internal and external factors. Understanding Latvia's past, from the countries' first national aspirations to the renewal of independence in 1991, is crucial to explain the development of non-citizenship from a historical, political and legal perspective. Further, outlining the complex

historical past helps understanding the limits of the current citizenship framework and the potentials of a more inclusive approach in the future.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach used to conduct the case study presented in this thesis, which includes in-depth interviews to collect primary data from Russian-speaking non-citizens. For the interview data, the application MAXQDA was used to code, interpret, organize and structure the information obtained. It further outlines the usage of flexible qualitative coding to ensure an accurate representation of the interview participants, enabling a transparent analysis of the data gathered.

Chapter 4: In this chapter, the results of the case study will be presented and discussed along the theoretical and historical background as outlined in the previous chapters. Using these insights, I will discuss the research question, outline the possibilities of inclusive citizenship and highlight limitations.

Chapter 5 will conclude the study, discuss limitations and outline possibilities for future research.

Chapter 6: Bibliography

1 The Theory of (Inclusive) Citizenship

1.1 Chapter Introduction

Theorizing citizenship has been a part of academic and political discussion for the longest time. The earliest definitions of citizenship date back over 2000 years, and some of these definitions have become widely accepted as the foundation of contemporary citizenship theories in Europe and the West (cf. Pocock 1992: 34).

Today, a wide range of theoretical and conceptual approaches exists, many of which investigate the historical development and contemporary understanding of what it means to be a citizen and who qualifies as one. Citizenship continues to entail a tension between inclusion and exclusion, a dynamic that has been increasingly challenged by international migration and the linguistic, religious, or cultural diversity that come with it (cf. Bellamy 2008: 2, 13f; Turner 2016: 681; Isin/Nielsen 2008: 16). Most contemporary discussions of citizenship incorporate four key dimensions: legal status, rights and benefits, participation, and identity (Bloemraad 2000: 10ff). However, these dimensions are the result of a long historical evolution, and history shows that the meaning of citizenship remains contested (cf. Lister 2007; Bloemraad et al. 2008).

In Latvia, (non-)citizenship is shaped by a variety of internal and external factors. Numerous studies (Muiznieks 2006; Cheskin/Kachuyevski 2018; Maksimovtsova 2019) show that the complex legacy of Soviet occupation, the renewal of Latvian independence, EU accession, and other geopolitical developments have profoundly shaped Latvia's citizenship regime. These dynamics continue to challenge social cohesion and a broader sense of belonging to a unified Latvia. The post-Soviet successor state exemplifies the contemporary challenges of citizenship, belonging, and national identity and demonstrates that the concept of citizenship should remain in flux, because citizens themselves and their sense of identity and belonging remain in flux. Latvia's historically inherited demographic composition and linguistic diversity make it especially suitable to challenge prevailing conceptions of citizenship as predominantly a legal status and for reimagining it as a concept that is evolving in different ways under varying circumstances (Lister 2007).

Part one of this chapter reviews the historical origins of citizenship in Greece and Rome, focusing on both its exclusionary and inclusionary tendencies. A short introduction to T.H. Marshall's

Citizenship and Social Class (1950) outlines the historical development of citizenship as a multidimensional system of rights and duties. Part 1 further explores key theories of citizenship and the nation-state, which are relevant to understanding Latvia's current citizenship regime and policies. A critical review of the selected literature identifies potential shortcomings in these approaches regarding the development of stronger social cohesion and a sense of belonging in Latvia among non-citizens.

Part two introduces concepts of citizenship that focus on actor-oriented perspectives, emphasizing the standpoint of Latvia's non-citizens. These approaches focus on the practices and acts of individuals in their everyday lives. As that, they can offer alternative understandings of citizenship as a lived and contested condition. Outlining these theories sets the path for exploratory ways to expand and challenge the current conception of citizenship in Latvia from a bottom-up perspective.

1.2 Part One

1.2.1 Historical origins of inclusion and exclusion – Greece and Rome

The concept of citizenship has been a tool for political and legal inclusion and exclusion for the longest time. Its earliest manifestations can be traced back to ancient Greece and the Roman republica. Aristotle's political manifests, especially in *The Politics* (cf. Aristotle 1999), provide one of the first fundamental definitions of the citizen. In this classical definition, the citizen is defined as someone who both "rules and is ruled" (ibid.). For Aristotle, citizenship represents the highest political identity, disconnected from the burdens of economic life, and enabled full political participation as a form of self-realization. Humans are purposive and rational by nature, and this potential is realized not simply in utility, but in the pursuit of political virtue.

Pocock emphasizes the political dimension of this Aristotelian view:

"What makes the citizen the highest order of being is his capacity to rule, and it follows that rule over one's equal is possible only where one's equal rules over one. Therefore the citizen rules and is ruled; citizens join each other in making decisions where each decider respects the authority of the others, and all join in obeying decisions they have made" (Pocock 1992: 35f).

Aristotle's separation between the private and public realms is significant: to be a citizen, one had to be removed from the private burdens of domestic and economic concerns. Only those who were

free of such obligations could participate in public life. This conception of citizenship was also deeply exclusionary, as participation was reserved for a male-only elite (cf. Bloemraad 2008: 155; Pocock 1992; Bellamy 2008: 38). According to Aristotle, a citizen had to be a male of known lineage, a patriarch, a warrior, and the master of others' labor (cf. Pocock 1992: 36). He further notes that, while modern societies now challenge these inequalities, they have not fully overcome them. As Pocock suggests, it remains an open question whether race, class, and gender can ever be eliminated as barriers to full citizenship (cf. Pocock 1992: 36). However, what is clear from Aristotle's vision is the idea that political agency is a fundamental and defining human good. He speaks of an ideal that continues to shape modern democratic theory. Pocock (1992: 38f) describes the political voice of a human being as the highest form of the realization of citizenship.

Although the conditions of modern citizenship have changed dramatically since then, the tensions of inclusion and exclusion in political participation that Aristotle identified remain a relevant factor in defining citizenship today - also in the Latvian case.

The second classical source of citizenship is found in Roman jurisprudence. Particularly the work of the jurist Gaius had a profound impact on later theories of citizenship (cf. Bloemraad 2008: 155; Pocock 1992). The concept of citizenship as outlined by Gaius is primarily legal rather than political. The Roman citizens, as Gaius argues, were defined by their legal status, embedded in a framework of persons, property, and actions. In Roman law, human interaction is theorized as a system of ownership and obligations, requiring formal legal mechanisms. The citizen therefore became both a possessor and proprietor, and their standing in society was defined in their legal relationship to things and other people.

Pocock (1992: 40) outlines that "A 'citizen' came to mean someone free to act by law, free to ask and expect the law's protection, a citizen of such and such legal community, of such and such legal standing in that community". In contrast to the Greek citizenship model, Roman citizenship centered on the protection of private interests through legal recognition. Interaction between individuals and through things, as opposed to political participation in Greece, defined the essence of the citizen.

In comparison, these two classical models reflect fundamentally different ontologies of citizenship:

- For Aristotle, it is political voice that defines the citizen.

- For Gaius, it is legal status, granting rights and protections, that defines citizenship.

(Pocock 1992: 46ff)

Despite their contrast, these paradigms have both been inherited by contemporary theories and frameworks of citizenship. Citizenship today still embodies a legal dimension - through which individuals possess rights and engage with the world - and a political dimension, which is expressed in equal participation and freedom.

Pocock (1992: 47) argues that citizens as legal actors interact with both objects and other persons through a set of rights and obligations. He also notes that citizenship implies equality and freedom as political equals, for those who possess the status of a citizen. These ancient definitions both expose the inherent exclusionary potential of citizenship, a reality that continues to shape political communities and societies until today. Modern democratic societies are still confronted with these fundamental tensions, and understanding their historical origins provides an important perspective for the analysis of citizenship regimes today. The Greek and Roman models of citizenship highlight each what citizenship includes and what it excludes, reinforcing why historical perspectives remain essential in any critical study of contemporary citizenship, such as in the Latvian case. These early definitions of citizenship were also re-interpreted and expanded in later theories, most notably in T.H. Marshall's account of civil, political and social rights, which will be discussed in the following section.

1.2.2 Citizen, society and state

Approaching the second half of the 20th century, British sociologist T.H. Marshall (1950) developed a concept of citizenship that became a foundational narrative in the study of modern citizenship theory in Western Europe and beyond (cf. Bellamy 2008: 45f). Marshall's theory reflects the classical distinctions outlined earlier by Aristotle and Gaius. Marshall further expands the political and legal dimensions towards a more comprehensive social model of citizenship. Drawing from the historical experiences of the British working class, Marshall outlined the evolution of citizenship along three dimensions: from civil rights in the 18th century, to political rights in the 19th, and finally to social rights in the 20th century. The civil element, according to Marshall, includes individual liberties such as freedom of thought, speech, religion, the right to own property, and equality before the law. These rights reflect the Roman tradition of the *homo legalis*, emphasizing legal subjectivity and protection under the law. The political element refers

to the right to participate in the exercise of political power, primarily through voting. This reflects Aristotle's notion of the political citizen. Finally, the social element refers to economic welfare, security, and the right to live as a "civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society" (Marshall 1950: 11). Marshall's multidimensional framework encompasses both, status and substance: formal rights and the social conditions that make these rights livable.

Marshall's theoretical approach to citizenship highlights a significant shift from earlier conceptions that were either legal or political. By introducing the social dimension, Marshall reframes citizenship as something that is lived and that unfolds through institutions, rights, and a sense of collective belonging. Rather than a static category, citizenship is a process that is not equally experienced and expanded through contestation. Importantly, Marshall interprets the development of citizenship as a fluid, conflictual process, driven by class struggles and the expansion of rights by subordinate groups over time (cf. Bellamy 2009: 49). Citizenship, in Marshall's theoretical approach, is not a static achievement, but a constantly evolving condition of negotiation and contestation.

This process-oriented understanding is especially useful for analyzing cases of partial or hierarchical citizenship. In the Latvian context, it draws attention to the political and social struggles of Russian-speaking non-citizens who are included in some these dimensions of citizenship but excluded from others. While Latvian non-citizens enjoy a wide range of civil and social rights, their exclusion from political participation illustrates the unfinished aspects of citizenship. Marshall's account is helpful here in outlining how the absence of one dimension - particularly political rights - can undermine the other dimensions of citizenship. Moreover, Bellamy (2008: 42) emphasizes that "the source of the rule of law will always lie within the rule of persons"; law is interpreted and shaped through political participation. Therefore, political participation is not a luxury but a cornerstone of democracy. Latvia's non-citizenship framework shows that withholding political agency can hollow out civic and social inclusion, consistent with Marshall's model.

Marshall's emphasis on social inclusion also reflects the broader debate about belonging and identity. Bloemraad (2000: 10f) argues that citizenship also implies "membership in a socio-political community", a notion that goes beyond legal status. This community is not defined solely by the state but also by collective norms, values, and shared experiences of individual and group

belonging. The individual is both a legal subject of the state and a member of a national community, and these dual roles often come into tension. In practice, the concept of the nation-state fuses these two domains, but the distinction remains analytically important and will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The formation of nation-states was deeply tied to the need to foster social unity and cohesion. Brubaker (1996: 43) refers to this as the “sociological stateness” of the establishing “states-in-the-making”. As feudal systems gave way to centralized states, elites had to bargain in order to secure compliance from the population (cf. Tilly 1992: 188). This consolidation of power established the nation-state as the primary guardian of citizenship, with the sovereign of the state to determine its boundaries and citizenry (cf. Brubaker 1996: 43f). As Brasington (2011: 204) notes, “the sovereign possesses the sole authority to decide which individuals and groups constitute citizens and to establish citizenship requirements.” The consequence of institutional guardianship is taken up in the next section.

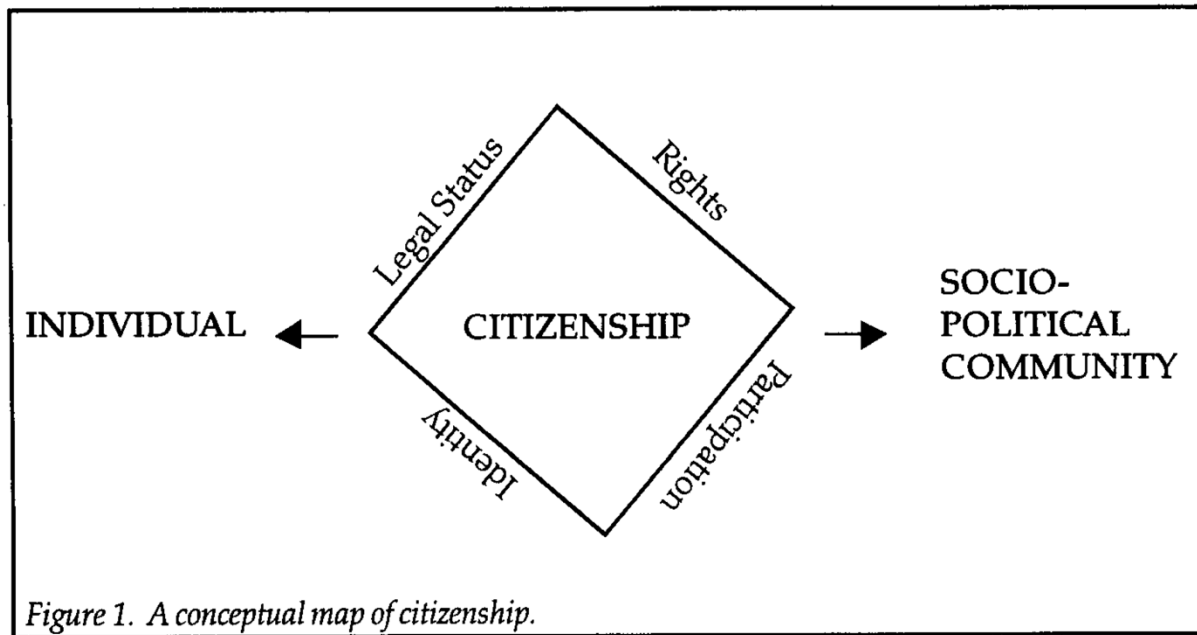
For this study, the key takeaway from Marshall’s theory of citizenship is that it is a multi-layered and contested process that is constantly defined and redefined through social struggle. Latvia’s non-citizenship framework exemplifies that the lack of political rights affects the civic and social dimensions of citizenship. Following Marshall (1995) and Bloemraad (2008), this study approaches citizenship as both a legal-political relationship with the state and as a practice of belonging to a community. In this sense, it adopts an actor-oriented perspective that foregrounds identity, belonging and participation as preconditions for holistic citizenship across all dimensions.

1.2.3 Citizenship in the nation-state

Numerous contemporary theories of citizenship attempt to move beyond the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis. While cosmopolitan and post-national approaches to citizenship theory challenge the role of the nation-state as a guardian of exclusive citizenship regimes, most frameworks today are still set within nationally bounded institutions. Both in theory and reality, the nation-state remains the dominant authority over citizenship, particularly in Europe. Most top-down descriptions of citizenship still emphasize the formal relationship between the citizen and the state. But in culturally and linguistically heterogeneous societies, such a framework is no longer sufficient to address the complexities of identity, inclusion, and belonging, especially in

contested cases like Latvia. This section therefore discusses the role of the nation-state as gatekeeper, complementing and extending Marshall's perspective further.

Bloemraad's (2000:10) conceptual map of citizenship acknowledges the dual nature of citizenship by highlighting both the individual's relationship to the state and to the wider national community. In Bloemraad's approach, the nation-state can be understood as a two-sided structure, simultaneously representing the authority of the state and the collective identity of the nation. This duality allows for an analytical distinction: citizenship can be investigated as a legal and political relationship with the state, and as a social phenomenon embedded in a national community. In Latvia, this approach highlights how legal exclusion and contested nationhood reinforce each other, making non-citizenship a site where institutional recognition and identity intersect.



(Source: Bloemraad 2000: 10)

Although there is growing literature advocating for a decoupling of citizenship from the nation-state, this remains more an aspiration than a reality. In most of the world, the nation-state continues to control the conditions of membership through naturalization rules, language laws, and the limitation of political rights. In many ways, it still serves as the institutional gatekeeper of who belongs (or who has the right to belong) and who does not. This is clearly visible in Latvia's post-Soviet trajectory, where the re-establishment of independence led to a redefinition of national

membership, effectively excluding large segments of the Russian-speaking population from citizenship.

Many scholars stress the continuing importance of the nation-state as an anchor for social cohesion and identity. Brubaker (1996: foreword) points out a "return to the nation-state, most spectacularly with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and former Czechoslovakia into a score of nationally defined successor states". Similarly, Schlesinger (1991) elaborates that weakening the link between citizenship and national identity could erode national solidarity. Cohen (2012: 319) argues that the sovereignty of nation-states enables the preservation of a special relationship between citizens and their government, ideally grounded in principles of constitutionalism and democracy. These arguments reinforce why national frameworks persists even as mobility and global migrations expand.

However, this protective framing of the nation-state can obscure exclusionary tendencies. The assumption that citizenship must align with a certain nationality tends to marginalize minority populations whose cultural or linguistic background differs from that of the "core nation" (Brubaker 1996: 432). In Latvia, national identity has been profoundly shaped through language legislation and citizenship policy, which resulted in a framework that sharply distinguishes between different groups in terms of belonging. This approach constructs Russian-speaking non-Citizens as perpetual outsiders, despite decades of residence and their contributions to society. In sum, legal status and symbolic recognition are mutually reinforcing each other.

The persistence of *ius sanguinis* (right of blood) in the citizenship frameworks of many Eastern European states, including Latvia, reflects this linguistic and cultural concept of the nation. Unlike *ius soli* (birth right), which grants citizenship based on birthplace, *ius sanguinis* privileges ancestral ties and kinship, often promoting the exclusion of those who lack such ties, even when they are deeply embedded locally. This legal logic has reinforced Latvia's restrictive approach to citizenship and is contributing to the enduring gap between formal membership and lived belonging.

It is interesting to note at this point that the European Union (EU) presents a partial exception to this trend by offering a secondary layer of citizenship, which provides legal and social rights across member states. EU citizenship allows for cross-border mobility and protection, especially in terms of social rights. However, key political rights, such as voting in European and national elections,

remain under the exclusive control of member states. In this way, the EU has not displaced national authority over political inclusion. In Latvia, non-citizens remain excluded from these rights on the national and the EU level despite long-term residence and, in many cases, local rootedness.

These differences raise important normative and empirical questions: If individuals fulfill most civic and social obligations, should they not also be entitled to full political participation? Bellamy (2008: Chapter 1) warns that the marginalization of political rights threatens democratic legitimacy. From a democratic perspective, citizenship without political agency remains incomplete; equal participation is a cornerstone of democracy.

In conclusion, the nation-state endures as the safeguard of citizenship, shaping membership as both legal status and as tool of national identity. In the Latvian case, this understanding of the nation-state as gatekeeper helps explain the persisting legal marginalization of Russian-speaking non-citizens and the tensions embedded in this otherwise democratic framework.

1.2.4 Nationhood and citizenship - ethnic versus civic approaches

Another aspect of citizenship and belonging is the formation of nationhood. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, officials of the newly re-established Latvian nation-state faced the complex task of nation-building amid a highly heterogeneous and multilingual population. It can be argued that decades of Soviet rule have eroded nationhood on the territory of Latvia. According to Historian and Philosopher Janis Taurens (2025), in 1991, many “ethnic non-Latvian residents” supported the national independence processes, however a considerable portion voiced a negative attitude towards an independent Latvian state. He (ibid.) notes that insufficient research has strengthened the myth that Latvia’s national awakening was a predominantly “ethnic Latvian movement”. Ultimately, these frictions highlight the poor state of national unity and nationhood in Latvia in 1991.

In addition to addressing urgent issues such as economic stability, democratic governance, international recognition, and national security, arguably the most difficult challenge was how to re-build and re-consolidate a sovereign Latvian nation. Strong ethnopolitical movements emerged, seeking to institutionalize Latvian nationalism. These efforts laid the groundwork for what scholars characterize as an “ethnic democracy” (Urazbaev/Yamalova 2020: 54f). A detailed introduction to Latvia’s history and nation-building process is outlined in the next chapter.

Brubaker distinguishes between two fundamental forms of nationalism: civic and ethnic. The first defines national membership based on shared political identity, inclusivity and legal citizenship, while the latter defines it based on common ancestry, culture, and ethnicity (cf. Brubaker 2004). Notably, among the 15 post-Soviet successor states, only Latvia and Lithuania adopted a distinctly ethnic model of nationhood, promoting restrictive citizenship laws, and an emphasis on the ethnocultural primacy of the core nation. Brubaker describes the ethnic model as illiberal, ascriptive, particularist and exclusive towards minorities (cf. Brubaker 2004: 133f).

Following the collapse of the Soviet empire in the late 1980s, the newly independent Baltic states faced a unique dilemma: how to construct nation-states with aspirations of national unity while being highly multicultural through the forces of Russification policy, and multilingual in composition (cf. Bloemraad 2008: 158). This gave rise to scholarly interest in how states attempted to reclaim nationhood under conditions of what Brubaker (1996: 23) calls “institutionalized multinationality”. In this context, the question of who belongs to the nation - and who is therefore entitled to citizenship - became a political flashpoint. The model of ethnic citizenship in Latvia emerged in response to this tension. It emphasizes cultural or genealogical ties as preconditions for inclusion into the citizenry, rather than participation, integration or local rootedness. This approach aligns in part with the legal principle of *ius sanguinis*, which grants citizenship based on descent and kinship. Both concepts are inherently exclusionary, as they rest on criteria that cannot be acquired by outsiders, regardless of their social and cultural integration. For instance, one cannot acquire a new mother tongue or change one’s parental origins, no matter how long one resides in the country.

However, there are key differences between *ethnic* belonging and *ius sanguinis*. While citizenship by descent can, in theory, be extended through generations - e.g., children of naturalized immigrants may pass on citizenship as a blood right - ethnicity often remains tied to perceptions of cultural authenticity and is not easily inherited. It rejects the standpoint that ethnicity is a fluid and relational process. In this way, ethnic conceptions of citizenship tend to be more rigid and more deeply embedded in identity discourses. As a result, they often draw symbolic boundaries between insiders and outsiders, reinforcing hierarchical and exclusionary understandings of the nation. Latvia’s citizenship regime reflects this logic partially in how it treats Russian-speaking non-Citizens despite their country of birth or self-perception as part of Latvian society.

Brubaker (1996: 43ff) identifies this as one of the central issues of modern citizenship:

“Among the still unsettled, and unsettling, questions are the following: Who ‘belongs,’ by formal citizenship, or in other sense or status, to the state?”

His analysis underscores the dual character of nationhood and citizenship, suggesting that formal legal status is not always equivalent to social or national belonging. This tension is particularly visible in Latvia, where many Russian-speaking residents, despite being born and raised in the country, continue to be treated as (political) outsiders. The institutionalization of “ethnic nationhood”, as described in Brubaker’s (ibid.) forms of nationalism, has reinforced a distinction between legal status and social membership.

Björklund (2006: 93f) similarly highlights that...

“The nation is the political expression of an ethnic community. The citizenry is not automatically equivalent to the nation: nation and demos may not coincide.”

In contrast, civic nationalism proposes a more inclusive framework, whereby membership is defined through political participation and shared democratic values. As Björklund (2006: 94) explains, “the civic nation implies that national identity is something that can be acquired; it is basically a question of choice.” This opens the possibility for immigrants and minorities to be recognized as full members of the national community - at least in principle. However, this civic ideal often fails in practice. Björklund warns that civic nationalism can become a disguised tool of assimilation, pressuring minorities to adopt dominant cultural norms under the guise of inclusion (ibid.: 99). The supposed choice to belong may be heavily constrained by structural inequalities or identity politics. In the Latvian context, for example, naturalization requires not only legal compliance but also cultural adaptation – most notably an alignment with the official historical narrative.

This raises the central dilemma of civic vs. ethnic nationalism: Must a nation be ethnically homogeneous to be (politically and socially) unified? Empirical evidence suggests that this is not necessarily the case (cf. Kende et al 2018). There are successful examples of multicultural or multiethnic democracies where ethnicity is not the primary marker of national belonging. Halicka (2023: para. 4) argues that “although at that time [1990’s; Author’s note] in Western Europe the idea of multiculturalism had many supporters and was seen as the best way of social coexistence,

it initially found little interest in the Baltic States”. However, each national model carries its own historical and demographic patterns, and comparisons must be made with caution. As Björklund’s (2006) research on Eastern European nations suggests, no two models of nationhood are identical.

Latvia and Lithuania, for example, share similar experiences of Soviet “colonial federalism” (Smith et al. 1998: 9), yet differ significantly in their interpretation of national unity. Björklund (2006) notes that the Latvian case represents a modified ethnic model, with strong emphasis on linguistic unity, while other markers of cohesion – such as religion - are comparatively weak.

As Bloemraad (2008: 158) argues, the dichotomy between ethnic and civic nationalism is rarely clear-cut. Most real-world cases lie within a grey zone, where political practices are shaped by both logics simultaneously. For instance, language requirements can be interpreted as a tool of civic integration or as an instrument of assimilation. The interpretation depends largely on the intent and effects of these policies.

Latvia’s post-1991 language reforms exemplify this duality. On one hand, language fluency can be seen as a prerequisite for democratic participation, enabling individuals to engage in public discourse. Indeed, Latvian language skills are often propagated as a necessity for social and economic inclusion by Latvian officials, and this argument is reasonable. On the other hand, mandating language and culture as a gateway to citizenship can be viewed as a means of preserving ethnonational hegemony, especially when aimed at historically marginalized groups. The empirical part of this study also highlights that many non-Citizens have strong language skills in both Russian and Latvian language, which indicates that the obstacles of naturalization lie elsewhere.

Brubaker (2004: 139f) emphasizes this point: language laws may be justified both as civic tools for participation and as tools for exclusion. The interpretive ambiguity makes it difficult to categorize such policies as purely civic or ethnic. In his comparative study “Staats-Bürger”, Brubaker (1992) contrasts France and Germany to illustrate how historical legacies shape citizenship regimes. Germany’s nation-centered past and its reliance on *ius sanguinis* reflect a strong ethnic conception of citizenship. In contrast, France’s state-centered republicanism supports a civic model, emphasizing political participation and assimilation into shared values.

These models raise further questions about access to naturalization and citizenship. Can individuals ever fully substitute birthright citizenship through naturalization? And what legal,

cultural, or symbolic barriers persist even when formal citizenship is acquired? In theory, naturalization offers a pathway to full inclusion. But in practice, substantive access is regulated through a variety of criteria, such as cultural ties, the feeling of belonging to a society and the connection to places and spaces. Within the EU, there is a general trend toward standardized naturalization requirements, but substantial variation remains between member states (cf. Bloemraad 2009: 156). Importantly, the EU does not prescribe uniform rules, leaving states significant discretion in defining access to citizenship.

The Latvian case exemplifies the ongoing tension between ethnic and civic models of citizenship as outlined by Brubaker (2004). While civic inclusion is frequently promoted at the rhetorical level, policy practices often remain grounded in ethnocultural assumptions. This has direct implications for Russian-speaking non-Citizens in Latvia, whose exclusion reflects not only formal legal structures but also underlying conceptions of who is - and is not – a legitimate member of the Latvian nation.

1.2.5 Four dimensions of contemporary citizenship

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, most contemporary Western conceptions of citizenship encompass four core dimensions: legal status, rights and benefits, identity, and participation (cf. Bloemraad 2008). These dimensions may complement or contradict one another, but they help deconstruct the complex relationships between individuals, the state and society. In the context of Latvia's Russian-speaking non-citizens, these dimensions offer a useful analytical lens to understand how partial inclusion can hinder deeper experiences of exclusion.

The legal status dimension refers to the formal relationship between the individual and the state. It defines who is officially recognized as a member of the political community and therefore entitled to legal protection. This threshold determines access to other dimensions of citizenship. In European countries, this relationship is controlled by the state, which sets the conditions for entry, naturalization, and potential loss of citizenship (cf. Turner 2016: 681). In theory, every person holds one citizenship and resides in the country that grants it. In practice, many long-term residents - such as Latvia's non-citizens - live in a grey zone: not excluded from most rights of a citizen but not fully included either.

This condition raises several critical questions: Who bears the responsibility for integration when naturalization efforts fail - the state or the individual? Why do some residents choose not to

naturalize? And how do state-defined thresholds for legal inclusion shape these decisions? States typically justify naturalization criteria by appealing to national interest, while individuals evaluate the costs and benefits of acquiring citizenship. In Latvia, these questions have a major significance, given the large population of non-citizens who have resided in the country for decades but remain marginalized in some dimensions.

The European academic discourse tends to focus on states as the primary agents of citizenship, with many comparative studies examining national legal frameworks and international standards. Organizations like the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have put pressure on Latvia to align its citizenship practices with human rights norms, especially regarding non-discrimination and the reduction of statelessness (cf. OSCE 1998). These external influences have shaped Latvian policy to some extent, yet the slow pace of naturalization suggests that legal reforms alone do not resolve deeper underlying issues of identity, trust, and symbolic belonging.

Another branch of legal scholarship explores why individuals choose to naturalize or not. Studies in this field often point to material benefits such as mobility, welfare access, or labor rights as primary motivations for naturalization (cf. Gathmann/Monscheuer 2020; Migration Observatory 2013). For instance, the Migration Observatory (2013: Figure 5) shows that migrants from wealthier countries are less likely to naturalize, suggesting that the perceived value of citizenship is often tied to economic opportunity. Conversely, migrants from lower-income backgrounds may pursue naturalization as a strategic investment. Latvia's patterns of naturalization reflect this logic: a temporary spike in naturalization of non-Citizens occurred between 2004 and 2006, coinciding with Latvia's accession to the EU. As Kuczynska-Zonik (2017: 6) observes, "Dynamics in naturalization between 2004 and 2006 resulted from the EU accession. Non-citizens were afraid of their status [in the European Union, Author's note]."

However, legal frameworks and material incentives alone do not fully explain naturalization behavior. Other studies highlight the importance of social integration and identity. Bloemraad (2000: 16) argues that "the more integrated one is, the more likely one is to naturalize." This perspective aligns with the view that citizenship is not merely a legal contract, but a social relationship involving trust, belonging, and recognition. In this sense, naturalization becomes the culmination of a successful integration process, not just its starting point.

Yet, many existing models of legal citizenship analysis suffer from a narrow focus: they tend to center either on the state or the immigrant, often neglecting society's role in shaping inclusion. Moreover, they may fail to capture how legal rules intersect with social attitudes, public discourse, and historical memory, factors that are highly salient in the Latvian case. The state may formally allow naturalization, but societal signals of exclusion (through language laws, education policy, or historical narratives) can discourage non-citizens from seeking full membership.

The second dimension, *rights and duties*, builds on the Roman legal tradition of *homo legalis* but extends beyond legal status. The emergence of supranational legal frameworks and human rights standards means that many rights today apply regardless of formal citizenship. For example, non-citizens in Latvia pay taxes, use public services, and follow the same laws as citizens. In return, they receive many of the same social rights. However, this reciprocity is not absolute. Some duties, such as jury service or mandatory military service, apply only to citizens, and key rights, especially political rights remain inaccessible to non-citizens.

This leads to what Turner (2016) describes as “denizenship”: a condition in which individuals have almost equal obligations, but weaker rights, especially in the political sphere. Non-citizens in Latvia embody this ambiguous legal condition, existing in a space where they are expected to fulfill civic duties but are denied full representation. The gravity of this status is even more pressing in Latvia, because non-Citizens are not represented in Latvia nor anywhere else. Fulbrook and Cesarani (1996: 214f) argue that such a situation collides with the democratic notion of “no taxation without representation.” Their call to decouple citizenship from ethnicity and nationality is especially relevant in post-Soviet contexts where legal status continues to reflect historical grievances.

The third dimension, *identity*, captures the emotional and symbolic aspects of belonging. Bloemraad (2000: 20) emphasizes that debates over legal membership often mirror deeper disputes about national identity and who is recognized as a member of the imagined community. In Latvia, the identity question is particularly visible. The dual legacy of Soviet occupation and post-independence nationalism means that citizenship is not only a legal status but a badge of belonging to the “core nation.” (Brubaker 1996: 432) This complicates the position of Russian-speaking non-Citizens, many of whom were born in (Soviet-)Latvia but remain symbolically excluded from the national narrative.

The identity dimension highlights an important point: an individual may have legal rights but still be perceived - or perceive themselves - as not fully belonging to a state and a nation. This tension is central to the Latvian case. Language policies, education, and historical narratives reinforce a specific vision of Latvian identity, one that is often difficult for Russian-speakers to fully access or share. As a result, naturalization does not necessarily guarantee a feeling of inclusion, and exclusion may persist even after formal membership is granted.

Finally, the *participation dimension* refers to the ability to take part in democratic processes and political life. Participation is often reduced to the right to vote, but it also includes social engagement, protest, volunteering, and everyday civic actions. Bloemraad (2000: 25) argues that participation involves economic activity, social involvement and political engagement, which are shaped by both personal initiative and structural conditions.

For non-citizens, especially in Europe, formal political participation is restricted, but informal and non-institutional forms of participation still occur. Demonstrations, community initiatives, and public dialogue offer alternative avenues for political expression. However, these forms of participation are often invisible in policy discussions and excluded from mainstream definitions of citizenship. In Latvia, the political agency of non-citizens is not entirely absent but it is weak, remains unrecognized and undervalued.

This four-dimensional approach to citizenship theory, as outlined by Bloemraad (2008) reveals that citizenship is not a monolithic status, but a layered and contested social process. Legal recognition, rights, identity, and participation do not always align and in many cases, they diverge sharply. The Latvian case exemplifies this misalignment: non-citizens may fulfill many social duties and feel locally rooted, but they remain politically and symbolically excluded. While the four dimensions help identify what is missing in the experience of non-citizenship, they do not fully explain how individuals navigate, contest, or reinterpret these exclusions in everyday life. This calls for a shift in perspective: from top-down frameworks toward bottom-up theories that explore citizenship as feeling of belonging and as lived practice, based on an actor-oriented perspective..

Part 2 of this chapter therefore introduces alternative approaches to citizenship, focusing on agency, identity, and resistance from the perspective of the excluded. These theories offer alternative ways to explore how citizenship is performed, claimed, felt and negotiated outside the

boundaries of legal status, and are essential for understanding the Latvian case beyond institutional categories. While the classical and normative conceptions are equally important to address citizenship as a substantive and inclusive phenomenon, these alternative theories provide an expanded understanding and new tools to investigate and uncover what substantive citizenship must entail.

1.3 Part Two

The frameworks that shape real-world citizenship policies nowadays represent the four dimensions of citizenship (legal status, rights, participation, identity) to a greater or lesser extent. In principle, citizenship is neither a purely legal concept (legal status, rights), nor is it a purely social phenomenon (identity, participation), but a combination of the two categories. As Isin and Wood (1999) point out, it is important to recognize both these aspects of citizenship and recognize that, without one, individuals may not be able to gain the other.

New approaches to the study of citizenship increasingly argue that norms, practices, meanings and identities have become more important to express citizenship, rather than legal rules and formal rights (cf. Lister 2007: 51). Along with this shift in focus, the tools to investigate have moved more into the center of attention, because accounts of social belonging and identity are much more difficult to uncover. These theoretical approaches have opened new and inspiring ways to investigate citizenship as a more holistic relationship between individuals, societies and states that includes identity, social positioning, practices and belonging, rather than just the relationship between an individual and the state.

Part 2 of this chapter therefore highlights approaches to the study of citizenship that emphasize a bottom-up perspective to evaluate notions of citizenship from the perspective of the excluded. Various theoretical approaches have investigated citizenship from the standpoint of marginalized groups and outsiders to develop differentiated theories of citizenship, focusing mainly on citizenship's inclusive tendencies (cf. Lister 2007: 50). Lister concludes that, despite the very different contexts within which excluded groups stipulate notions of citizenship, there are four core values that transcend different historical, cultural and other boundaries that people associate with the idea of citizenship. While it remains difficult to universalize these values, they seem significant enough in the organization of collective life and the way people connect with each other to suggest

that these values embody what inclusive citizenship might imply (Kabeer 2005: 1; cited in Lister 2007: 50).

Lister concludes that the four core values of inclusive citizenship from a bottom-up perspective are:

- Justice: when is it fair to be treated the same? When is it fair to be treated differently?
- Recognition: all people are intrinsically the same, with respect to individual differences.
- Self-determination: the ability to exercise participation and the right to be different.
- Solidarity: the ability to act in unity with others and with them in their claims for justice and recognition. (Cf. Lister 2007: 51)

1.3.1 Breaking the habit(us): Acts of citizenship

The expansion of what it means to be a citizen has brought new challenges for scholars, politicians, and critics alike. In particular, the proliferation of citizenship theories beyond the normative and legal dimensions has raised more questions than it has answered. If citizenship is more than just a set of duties and rights, how can such notions of identity, belonging and emotional citizenship be investigated or uncovered?

Isin and Nielsen (2008) and come to a similar conclusion:

"What exactly is citizenship? Is it legal membership in a state? If so, many new citizens don't have a legal membership to which their citizenship refers. Environments, markets, lifestyles (...) are not things for which you can hold legal membership." (Isin/Nielsen 2008: 1)

The dominant discourse among political theorists highlights that civic, political, and social rights have largely materialized as passive entitlements in contemporary citizenship. Meanwhile, the democratic dimension of citizenship, comprising social responsibility and the willingness to actively participate, has often been neglected. (Cf. Oosterhuis 2009)

Isin and Nielsen (2008) propose a new and alternative perspective on the study of citizenship. Until now, they argue, studies have mainly focused on the politico-normative dimension (ibid.: 11). It emphasizes mainly the legal status and the rights and obligations defined by the nation-state. While formal acceptance in the host community undoubtedly plays an important role in forming a holistic

understanding of citizenship, it does little to foster a feeling of substantive belonging, an aspect shaped by lived experience and social recognition and solidarity (cf. Lister 2007: 50ff).

Although the dominant focus has not yet shifted away from status and rights, critical thinkers have increasingly questioned the unilateral approach to citizenship. As a result, sociologists have started placing greater emphasis on the citizen's role within social, political, cultural, and symbolic contexts. (Cf. Bloemraad 2008: 154ff) What can be taken from these approaches is that citizenship is not inherited but learned, and that this learning process requires the establishment of enduring practices. It can be argued that actions that reinforce an individual's horizontal relationship toward the citizenry, rather than toward state authority, reflect a more substantial layer of recognition and acceptance (cf. CoE 2024). While there are many examples of such citizenship practices, they all share the same characteristic in that they can potentially take place outside of formal citizenship.

Yet, the question remains unanswered: is formal status a precondition for such practices, or vice versa? Possibly, there is no definitive answer. One could argue that a minimum of symbolic practice, such as citing the national anthem, is a necessary prerequisite to gain formal citizenship in many European countries. At the same time, it seems plausible that social, cultural, or symbolic practices are less likely to emerge without formal recognition, as formal exclusion may foster alienation. This argument is particularly compelling when political practices are considered. For example, electoral participation is typically not possible without legal citizenship.

This dilemma has been widely discussed and is also reflected in the four-dimensional approach to citizenship, as outlined in this chapter above. It may be one of the most pressing questions for real-world change in citizenship policy: should politicians place greater value on social, cultural, political, and symbolic practices of citizenship? Fundamentally, these practices are shaped by individuals to a much greater extent than by the state. Therefore, the preconditions for citizenship could be transformed by those whose who claim the right to have rights (Isin/Nielsen 2008: Introduction).

Isin and Nielsen's concept of "Acts of Citizenship" (2008) pushes the discussion one step further. They argue that the proliferating meanings of citizenship require an analytical framework that cannot be reduced to either status or practice, even while recognizing the importance of both. Their conceptual progression departs from the mainstream but does not dismiss the achievements of contemporary citizenship theory. Introducing acts of citizenship as a new analytical lens is,

according to the authors, a powerful tool for investigating not only citizenship from the bottom up, but also the acts and deeds that produce such claimants of citizenship.

But what are acts of citizenship? According to the authors, while practices such as paying taxes or language learning "appear passive and one-sided in mass democracies, acts of citizenship break with repetition of the same and so anticipate rejoinders from imaginary but not fictional adversaries" (ibid.: 2). These acts, they argue further, create the possibility of citizenship by generating moments in which claimants assert rights and responsibilities. This does not mean that such claims immediately produce citizens. Through such acts of citizenship, subjects may also constitute themselves as strangers, aliens, or outcasts. This broadens the scope of investigation beyond traditional notions of good citizenship and opens the discussion to include more complex, contested identities.

"The concept of acts of citizenship [...] leads to a rather sharp break with current citizenship studies in that it stretches the field well beyond the dominant liberal trajectory that dwells on a linear, formal and legal language of status, rights, obligations, justice and order" (Isin/Nielsen 2008: 11).

By uncovering acts of citizenship, it becomes possible to distinguish activist citizens from active citizens. Isin and Nielsen (2008: 38ff) note that activist citizens engage in "writing scripts and creating scenes", while active citizens merely follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already set. Furthermore, an act of citizenship "recognizes that acts produce actors that become answerable to justice against injustice" (ibid.: 39). Must acts be responsible to qualify as acts of citizenship? Or can activist citizens question the legitimacy and responsibility of the established order? Isin and Nielsen argue that activist citizens are not a priori recognized in law. It is through their acts that they enact themselves and influence the legal frameworks that eventually recognize them. Therefore, the right to have rights can be claimed outside of legality and formal responsibility.

Without a doubt, Isin and Nielsen's theory should be interpreted with caution. Although the authors highlight several real-world examples of possible acts of citizenship, some arguments may theoretically conflict with the rule of law in modern nation-states. Creating law and responsibility is part of a legitimate democratic process, and it is likely that unlawful acts by activist citizens will be rejected as legitimate means of claiming citizenship rights. However, broadening the theoretical

lens of citizenship to include such acts remains a valid and important tool for exploration. Most importantly, the authors emphasize that “[w]hen acts of citizenship produce strangers, aliens and outcasts, they emerge not as beings already defined but as active and reactive ways of being with others” (ibid.: 7f).

In the context of this case study, acts of citizenship provide an interesting approach to better understand how Latvian non-citizens negotiate their place within society. The claim to be recognized as different, but as a distinct and legitimate part of Latvian society, could itself be understood as an act of citizenship. Using language, cultural practices, everyday interactions, and expressions of belonging, they perform citizenship in ways that challenge the legal and symbolic boundaries outlined by the state. In this sense, acts of citizenship can uncover how non-citizens claim the right to be citizens, not primarily by demanding legal inclusion, but by challenging the meaning of citizenship as a predominantly normative classification. The proliferating ways of citizenship theory highlight that, to form a holistic understanding, investigations must remain open-minded and consider citizenship as a multidimensional construct.

1.3.2 Horizontal citizenship

Many of the traditional conceptual models of citizenship focus primarily on the vertical relationship between individuals and states. They analyze belonging through legal recognition, formal status, and the rights and obligations that arise through this normative membership. In the context of Latvian non-citizenship, this top-down analysis seems insufficient. The emphasis on normative membership tends to obscure the width of feelings, acts and everyday deeds that encompass substantive citizenship. Since independence in 1991, a significant part of the population has lived outside of full legal citizenship, but these individuals nevertheless remain socially and emotionally embedded in Latvia. Many of the non-Citizens were born in Soviet Latvia and have, in many cases, lived their entire lives in the country. The application of horizontal concepts of citizenship becomes especially valuable to investigate such cases. Rather than defining citizenship through legal status alone, horizontal approaches predominantly emphasize belonging, identity, and solidarity through everyday interactions. Citizenship therefore emerges not only through formal inclusion but also through local rootedness, social relationships, civic engagement, and recognition by others. It is a lived and relational practice, often happening outside state institutions.

Ruth Lister's (2007) work on inclusive citizenship highlights how bottom-up can uncover the ways in which people experience and perform citizenship even when they are excluded from certain spheres of citizenship. In Latvia, many non-citizens participate fully in society: they send their children to school, work and volunteer or take part in other aspects of every life. They speak Latvian to varying degrees, form bonds across linguistic and cultural lines, and form an integral part of Latvia's society through these interactions. These practices reflect belonging, even in the absence of full citizenship rights. However, despite these everyday signs of citizenship practice, a top-down model of citizenship remains exclusionary. Legal recognition continues to be tied to language tests and a narrow understanding of national identity. This approach assumes that belonging must conform to state-defined categories. But for many non-citizens, citizenship is not something to be granted or imposed from the state, it is already being lived. What is often missing is not loyalty or civic participation, but substantial recognition and a sense of solidarity. This lack of recognition on symbolic, cultural, and social levels is where many of the tensions arise. While non-citizens contribute to the functionality of Latvian society, their lived experiences are often invalidated by an institutional framework that continues to treat them as outsiders. In this regard, citizenship becomes a contested space, shaped as much by exclusion as by integration. The shortcomings of top-down models lie in their inability to account for these lived dimensions of citizenship.

Horizontal theories of citizenship move the focus away from formal markers like passports or voting rights and instead look at what people actually do in their daily lives: how they express belonging or alienation, and how they negotiate their place in Latvian society. This opens up new ways of thinking about citizenship by showing that recognition matters as much as legal inclusion. From this perspective, citizenship is about being acknowledged with solidarity and treated as an equal member of civic and social life. The empirical chapters of this thesis build on this view. Through the voices of Latvian non-citizens, they examine how people articulate belonging, identity, and agency, not through legal status, but through lived experience. Recognizing these horizontal dimensions is not only analytically important; it is also politically urgent. Without the necessary recognition and acceptance for the ways non-citizens already participate in and shape Latvian society, efforts to build a more just and inclusive democracy will remain incomplete.

2 Historical Context of Latvia's non-Citizenship

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of Latvia's historical and political developments to highlight and explain the origins of non-citizenship and the challenges related to identity and belonging in Latvia that continue to shape the country's society and political landscape. It aims to contextualize the emergence of Latvia's large non-citizen population within the broader processes of state formation, Soviet occupation, and nation building. Latvia's historical trajectory significantly differs from that of other post-Soviet states in several aspects. The country did not emerge as a new state in 1991 but declared the restoration of independence, based on the principle of legal "state continuity" (Pleps 2022: 30) with the 1918-1940 interwar Latvian Republic (cf. Smith et al. 1998: 71). This distinction created important implications for citizenship, nation building, and for Soviet-era settlers after 1991.

The sections of this chapter explore how Latvian citizenship was shaped by various historical developments before, during and after the Soviet occupation that lasted from 1940 until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. During the interwar period (1918-1940), Latvian national identity was shaped around a civic and territorial understanding of nationhood. In contrast, the re-establishment of independence in 1991 was marked by a shift toward an ethnic Latvian conception of citizenship, based on the idea of returning to the pre-Soviet legal status and demographic composition (cf. Smith et al. 1998). Understanding this transformation is crucial for analyzing how legal status was redefined in a way that excluded large parts of the population. This chapter therefore explores how the citizenship regime in Latvia became an instrument for nation-building by establishing "cultural boundaries" (Stepan/Linz/Yadav 2010: 50), and how formal inclusion became determined based on linguistic, historical, and cultural ties to Latvia. These developments laid the foundation for the emergence of Latvia's non-citizenship category.

The chapter outlines important cornerstones of the establishments of citizenship in post-Soviet Latvia. By presenting a historically grounded explanation of Latvia's citizenship framework, this chapter contributes to a broader understanding of how formal exclusion is linked to a contested history, demographic change, and competing visions of statehood (cf. Plakans 2011). Further, it

also helps explain why non-citizenship remains a persistent and unresolved issue in Latvian society, even after more than three decades of independence.

The chapter is structured chronologically. Section 2.2 outlines the emergence of the Latvian nation-state and citizenship regime in the interwar period. Section 2.3 describes the impact of Soviet annexation, demographic transformation, and the effects of Soviet russification policy. Section 2.4 describes Latvia's political transition after 1991 and how legal continuity shaped its (non-)citizenship framework. Section 2.5 discusses how the category of non-citizen was codified and embedded in the political discourse. Finally, Section 2.6 reflects on how historical legacies continue to shape belonging, exclusion, and identity in contemporary Latvia.

This historical overview also complements the theoretical insights introduced in the previous, particularly regarding the tension between civic and ethnic nationhood, the multidimensional nature of citizenship, and the limits of top-down theories of citizenship. It sets the stage for the case study, in which non-citizens' own accounts of belonging, identity, and participation are investigated.

2.2 Foundations of Latvian Statehood and National Identity (1918–1940)

With the proclamation of an independent state on November 18, 1918, Latvia's territory was, for the first time, demarcated by physical borders around a heterogeneous population. But even after the proclamation of the state, Latvian nationhood and society were amorphous. The territory was populated by a multicultural composition of settlers, and various linguistic minorities played a notable role from the very first moments of Latvian statehood. (Cf. Gusachenko/Kleinberga, 2021: 57)

The competing concepts of a civic and an ethnic nation model were nothing new in Latvia, even before 1918. Two early thinkers, Ernests Blanks and Mikelis Valters, profoundly shaped the idea of creating an independent Latvian state that would facilitate and protect the growth of a unique Latvian culture. Although both shared similar reasons and justifications for the need for a sovereign state to protect Latvians, their political and philosophical approaches were very different.

Ernests Blanks, a scholar of history and philosophy born in 1894, was the first to outline the concept of an independent Latvia in 1917 (cf. Germane 2012: 443). Although in the early stages

of Latvian independence Blanks expressed hope for a multicultural Latvian nation, it became clear that this hope had faded only a few years later. In 1926, in his monograph “Nacija un Valsts” (Nation and State: *Blanks 1926: 18ff*), he argued that Latvia could not exist as a multicultural and multiethnic nation due to its geographically vulnerable position. In his view, the constant threat of Germany and Russia would make survival impossible unless the cultural autonomy of national minorities was strictly regulated. To prevent the permanent loss of the Latvian culture and language through foreign influence, he argued that minorities should not be granted proportionate rights and privileges (cf. Germane 2012: 454; Blanks 1926: 22).

Equally patriotic, but fundamentally different in his approach to Latvian nationalism, was Mikelis Valters. Valters viewed Latvian culture, language, and sense of nationality as being in their early stages of development. Therefore, he believed it would be impossible for Latvians to withstand the centuries-old and very dominant cultures of others, including the Russian culture. However, in contrast to Ernests Blanks’ view, Valters saw cooperation and solidarity with minorities in Latvia as the only viable option to survive and preserve a small but unique Latvian identity. He envisioned this within the broader Baltic region, as the Latvian state did not yet exist when he published his book *Musu Tautības Jautājums* (Question of Our Nationality) in 1914. (Cf. Germane 2012: 449ff)

Valters supported the idea of cultural autonomy as a way to ensure cooperation and to protect Latvian minorities elsewhere. This is a compelling argument, considering that around 100,000 Latvians were not residing within the territory of future Latvia (cf. Germane 2012: 450). Another interesting idea that Valters’ presents in his monograph about Latvian nationality (cf. Valters 1914: 120; Germane 2012: 450) was the belief that the repeated attempts to destroy the Latvian core nation from outside would at some point become the greatest incentive for consolidating Latvia as a nation.

Both thinkers highlight the complicated circumstances of Latvia’s earliest nation-building aspirations. Ultimately, despite the popularity of nationalist sentiments in Latvian politics during the early years of the first republic, Latvia opted for a civic nation model after the proclamation of independence in 1918. Irrespective of language, cultural ties, self-identity or religion, citizenship in the first Latvian Republic was granted to everyone residing within the physical borders of Latvia at the time of independence (cf. Germane 2012: 439).

A more uniform Latvian national identity already started to form in small circles before and during World War I but remained a work in progress for decades, even after the proclamation of the Latvian state (cf. Plakans 2010: 16). In this early stage of nation-building, now within an actual state with defined borders, Latvia was already torn between two visions: Latvians as a heterogeneous society, diverse in language and cultural heritage, and the stricter concept of the Latvian nation as a group defined by ethnicity and nationality.

Between 1860 and 1918, during the "Latvian national awakening" (Zemaitis 2024a), a small group of advocates began to promote the Latvian language as a key marker of national identity. It was during this time that Latvia's iconic figure of the National Awakening, Andrejs Pumpurs, wrote the famous epic called *Lacplesis* (Bearslayer). The Bearslayer tells the story of a Latvian hero who fights off invading Vikings and Germans and ultimately sacrifices himself to protect the Latvian language and culture. Even today, Pumpurs' Bearslayer remains a symbol of Latvian national pride and is celebrated across Latvia each year one week before Independence Day, on November 11 (cf. Zemaitis 2024a; Pumpurs 2013).

By the end of World War I, the concept of *tauta* (Latvian peoples) had become firmly embedded in the minds of many Latvian speakers. Even before Latvia gained independence, Latvians had started to identify as a more cohesive group, united by a common language and a shared sense of culture and history (cf. Plakans 2010: 17f). Unlike many European states that had formed over centuries, Latvia was established through an act of will in-between Europe's collapsing empires. Because of this, the formation of a collective identity within Latvia required a long time to develop into a more homogenous group, aligned with the imagined society residing within the borders of the new state (cf. *ibid*: 18f). In the first census of 1920, religious, linguistic, and cultural minorities made up 28% of the population. They consisted of Russians, Jews, Belarusians, and Germans (cf. Gusachenko/Kleinberga 2021: 58f).

Latvian nation-building during this early period remained a slow process. In 1922, Latvia elected its first parliament and adopted a fragmented and incomplete constitution. Another important milestone in state formation was the establishment of a national army, which helped expel the last remnants of the Bolshevik army from Latvia's eastern territories. This eventually led to the Peace Treaty with Soviet Russia in August 1920 (cf. Gusachenko/Kleinberga 2021: 55). Plakans (2010:

19) describes the successes of the Latvian army during this time as the “defense of the imagined community”, since the connections between state, society, and nation were still very weak.

In 1934, the process of Latvian national identity formation accelerated following a military *coup d'état* that resulted in the establishment of the “authoritarian Ulmanis regime” (Jekabsons 2024). Before this decisive shift toward an explicitly nationalistic course, multicultural visions of a future Latvian nation-state played a more central role in public discourse (cf. Germane 2010: 118). Karlis Ulmanis had served in the Latvian parliament since its founding in 1918. In 1934, while holding the office of prime minister, he dissolved the parliament and banned all political parties. Many of Ulmanis’ supporters backed his authoritarian leadership, which wanted to turn the imagined community of a unified and homogenous Latvian nation into reality. Until then, Latvia has never had any sort of a leader cult. However, by 1938, the 20th anniversary of Latvian independence, this had changed. Latvian society had undergone a transformation, presenting an almost unanimous portrait of the Latvian core nation under the guidance of the authoritarian leader. Ulmanis believed that the Latvian state belonged to the Latvian nation, and that his main purpose was to preserve and protect Latvian identity, language and culture. His fear of the permanent loss of “Latvian-ness” (Germane 2012: 440) was not completely irrational, as history proved later. In 1935, approximately 75% of the population identified as Latvian by language and national self-identification. This figure declined significantly in the decades that followed, reaching just 52% in 1989 (ibid.).

Ulmanis’ definition of the Latvian nation was strictly cultural and linguistic. Nonetheless, his political vision included the coexistence of both Latvians and non-Latvians (Plakans 2010: 22ff). Latvia’s early political system was based on the idea that a distinct Latvian national identity could survive and coexist with linguistic and cultural diversity. This is reflected in small details in the Latvian constitution of this time. The first version of the constitution placed political power in the hands of “the people of Latvia,” rather than “the Latvian people” (Germane 2012: 456), highlighting the important distinction between the two phrases in the Latvian language.

The leader cult surrounding Karlis Ulmanis left strong marks on Latvia’s society. Today, some Latvians draw parallels between the mythical Bearslayer, who sacrificed himself for the survival of Latvians, and Karlis Ulmanis, who saw himself as the leader of the Latvian future. But opinions about Ulmanis remain mixed among Latvia’s society. While a full assessment of the Ulmanis

regime lies beyond the scope of this thesis, it is clear that his vision that was rooted in language and cultural identity had a strong impact on Latvian national identity between 1934 and 1940.

The so-called interwar period, during which Latvia began to form as a state and a nation, was relatively short. In 1939, not long after the establishment of the “first republic” of Latvia (Germane 2012: 439) in-between the collapse of European empires, Latvia’s path changed dramatically with the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

2.3 From Annexation to Resistance: Latvia Under Soviet Rule

Latvia’s experience under Soviet occupation massively altered the perception national identity. As a result of the non-aggression pact between Stalin and Hitler, Latvia was forced to allow the Soviet Union’s Red Army to establish military and naval bases on Latvian territory. Less than a year later, in June 1940, Latvia was invaded and annexed by the Soviet forces. Within days, a new government was installed, and Soviet rule was introduced in Latvia, following a sham referendum on joining the Soviet Union. Ultimately, the newly installed government unanimously agreed to incorporate Latvia into the USSR as the Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic (cf. Smogorzewski et al. 2024).

Although Latvia’s struggle for independence and national identity started long before the Soviet invasion, the decades of occupation certainly had the most severe impact on Latvian identity and demography. The legacy of Soviet rule remains a topic in Latvian politics today and has left a deep scar in the country’s society. During World War II, Latvia was devastated by military conflict (cf. Germane 2013 :112f). As a result of Operation Barbarossa (cf. Bundeswehr 2022), Nazi Germany partially occupied Latvia, and Latvians were conscripted as auxiliary forces on both sides of the Eastern Front. The population also suffered greatly under the Holocaust. In 1935, around 94,000 Jews lived in Latvia. By the end of the war, almost 90,000 had been killed, deported, or had fled. These events significantly reduced the already small group of Latvian speakers in the region, many of whom were scattered across Europe or murdered during the war (cf. Holocaust Encyclopedia 2024).

After the formal surrender of the German Reich on May 7, 1945, Latvian nationalist movements declared the restoration of Latvian independence, but with little success. Within a few days, Soviet troops reoccupied Riga and violently silenced national uprisings and demonstrations. Anti-Soviet movements continued in the underground for several years and led to the deportation of

approximately 100.000 Latvian residents, most of whom were patriots and strong promoters of the unification of Latvia as an independent state (cf. UCA 2024).

From the moment of Soviet annexation in 1940, Latvian citizenship was effectively erased. The concept of Soviet citizenship was originally laid out in the 1924 Constitution of the Soviet Socialist Republics. Section 2, Article 2, Paragraph 7 of the 1924 constitution stated that “Citizens of the Union republics shall have a single union citizenship” (Constitution 1924). In 1936, this constitution was drastically amended under Yosif Stalin, resulting in the so-called Stalin Constitution (cf. Constitution 1936). Although the provision for a single union citizenship remained, it is noteworthy that the 1936 version already referred to Latvia as the Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic, even though it was still an independent state at the time.

Also, two other significant legal acts regarding Soviet citizenship were adopted prior to the annexation. The “Soviet Citizenship Act No. 198 of 19 August 1938” (Taracouzio 1939: 159) declared that each citizen of a Union republic was also a citizen of the USSR. Another clause extended Soviet citizenship to those were citizens of the Russian Empire as of 7 November 1917 and had not since lost that status (cf. Ibid. 160). At the time of Latvia’s annexation, the Soviets passed the “Decree of 7 September 1940, concerning the acquisition of the USSR citizenship by nationals of the [...] Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic” (Decree 1940). This decree established that Latvian citizens were now considered USSR citizens. It is also worth noting that Russian lawmakers had no clear or detailed policy regarding non-Russians. This likely illustrates an underlying intent to assimilate all Soviet republics through cultural domination (cf. O’Connor 2003: 127).

Although “Russification policy” in the Baltics had a long history, these events marked a major turning point (Misiunas/Taagepera 1989: 71). Beyond the erasure of Latvia’s physical borders, several decades of state-building and nationalist aspirations were legally and politically extinguished. The 1940 citizenship decree remains one of the most significant legacies of Soviet occupation and continues to shape Latvian contemporary developments. Most certainly, the aggressive intention to dominate and assimilate Latvian culture and language laid the groundwork for the political path after Latvia’s second independence.

Soviet Russification policies consisted of two main components. One was the strategic settlement of Russian speakers in Latvia. There are several reasons to believe that Latvia held high strategic

importance for the Soviet Union. First, the capital city of Riga provided direct access to the Baltic Sea and served as strategic location for military naval and logistical infrastructure. In addition to that, the Baltic region, including Latvia, was historically seen as a buffer zone between East and West. Control over the Baltics and Eastern Europe offered protection for Saint Petersburg and Moscow from possible Western aggression, especially from Germany.

Because of this strategic importance, strengthening Russian influence in Latvia became a high priority in the Soviet Russification campaign from the 1950s onward. It could also be argued that the Soviet leadership saw Latvia as a historical part of Greater Russia. In comparison to other Soviet-occupied countries, Latvia arguably suffered the most under Russification policy. “Latvians constituted 77% of the total population during Latvia’s independence period in 1935, but only 62% in 1959, 54% in 1979 and 52% in 1989” (Dreifelds 1996: 143f). By the end of the Soviet occupation, only 37 percent of Riga’s inhabitants were Latvians (cf. Zemaitis 2024b). In addition to large-scale settlement of people from all over the Soviet empire, linguistic Russification was the second important pillar of Soviet policy. Russian was established as the official language throughout all the Soviet republics, including all forms of public communication and education. Latvian speakers were expected to learn Russian, while Russian-speaking settlers were not expected to learn local languages. Moreover, Russian culture such as theatre, opera, and literature was highly developed and aggressively used to promote the Russian language beyond official settings. When voluntary assimilation proved insufficient, the Soviet regime turned to censorship, arrests, and other coercive measures to enforce conformity (cf. O’Connor 2003: 132). No other state went as far as the Soviet Union in sponsoring, codifying, institutionalizing (and in some cases inventing) nationhood and nationality. (Brubaker 2006: 53).

Although the Soviet project of “ethnic engineering” (cf. Germane 2010: 117f) had a profound and long-lasting impact, it must be concluded that the decade-long Russification campaign ultimately failed. By the mid-1980s, the Soviet empire began to weaken, and Latvian national resistance started to re-emerge. The Helsinki-86 Group, founded in 1986, was the first openly anti-communist civil rights organization in Latvia. Initially, the group focused on democratization, civil rights, and greater autonomy within the Soviet Union rather than full independence (cf. Gusachenko/Kleinberga 2021: 67). From 1987 onward, Latvians, Estonians, and Lithuanians began organizing nonviolent protests and formed civil society groups such as the Latvian National Independence Movement (ibid.: 67). These efforts are often referred to as the “Singing

Revolution” (Smidchens 2016), a remarkable case of peaceful resistance. As Smidchens writes, “the Singing Revolution was so named because Balts identified songs as the unifying symbol and nonviolent weapon of choice in the struggle for national self-determination.” One of the most striking moments of this movement, and arguably one of the most powerful acts of national resistance in modern European history, took place in 1989, on the 50th anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. On August 23 of that year, approximately two million people from the three Baltic countries joined hands to form a human chain stretching from Tallinn to Vilnius. This extraordinary demonstration made it clear that Latvia’s second national awakening could no longer be stopped (cf. The Baltic Way 2021).

The Soviet occupation not only disrupted Latvia’s legal and political sovereignty but fundamentally changed its demographic composition. Through national and cultural assimilation, population re-settlements, and linguistic Russification, the foundations of the Latvian nation-state were systematically dismantled. These processes left behind a deeply fragmented society, one in which national identity, citizenship, and belonging became contested and politically charged. As Latvia moved towards the renewal of independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the political leaders of Latvia were forced to resolve the obstacles inherited through this legacy. The next section highlights how Latvia’s return to independence in 1991 was framed not as a new beginning, but as a legal and symbolic restoration of the interwar republic, and how this decision profoundly shaped the creation of the non-citizen category.

2.4 National Awakening and Independence after 1991

Soviet Russification policy had a lasting impact on Latvia’s demographic composition, and the consequences of occupation remain clearly visible in 2025. After regaining independence in 1991, Latvia once again faced the challenge of nation-building, this time under very different circumstances than in 1918. The country experienced fifty years of systematic Soviet Russification, which left Latvian society fragmented and polarized. In 1989, only 52% of the entire population identified themselves as Latvians (cf. Dreifelds 1996: 114). This demographic shift was most pronounced in Latvia’s major cities. In Riga, Liepāja, and Daugavpils Latvians had become a minority (cf. Germane 2017: 118). Latvian speakers and former inhabitants of the first republic of Latvia, marginalized in their own homeland, viewed themselves as under threat, facing further marginalization at best and cultural extinction at worst (ibid.). The fear of this perceived threat is

also reflected in the legislation adopted in the decades following independence. Although the idea of a civic and multicultural nation had once been advocated by many Latvians - and was formally adopted as a nation model in 1918 (cf. Germane 2017) - by 1989, calls to protect the Latvian core nation at all costs grew significantly louder. Many believed that Latvian nationalism must be inherently ethnocultural in order to preserve language, heritage, and national survival. In contrast, the civic nation model was now widely seen as foreign, externally imposed, and incompatible with Latvia's historical struggle for sovereignty (cf. Germane 2010: 117ff).

Although views diverged on how Latvia's renewed independence should be framed, it was clear to many Latvians that history has proved the need for linguistic and cultural protectionism. In 1990, 85% of Latvians and 26% of other minority groups in Latvia supported the idea of independence (cf. Gusachenko/Kleinberga 2021: 67).

On the 4th of May 1990, Latvia officially declared the occupation of the Soviets as illegal and stipulated that the country was never part of the Soviet empire *de jure*. These claims were based on the legal principle of state continuity, which stipulates that foreign aggression can not suspend or dissolve the constitution or democratic government of Latvia (cf. Ziemele 2005: 31). This argument invoked the doctrine of *ex iniuria ius non oritur*, reaffirming that no legal rights can arise from the unlawful act of Soviet occupation. This understanding of state continuity stipulates that even if a country is occupied and undergoes territorial changes, it continues to exist legally. This claim was widely supported by Western states, who continued to see Latvia as independent state throughout the Cold War.

On September 1991, 79 states officially recognized Latvia's independence, including the Russian Federation under President Boris Yeltsin (cf. Gusachenko/Kleinberga 2021: 69). On this legal and symbolic basis, Latvia restored citizenship only to individuals who had been citizens before 1940 and their descendants (cf. Ronen 2009: 212). With this decision in place, more than 700.000 people, or roughly 27% of the entire population, were left in a legal limbo without any citizenship, because the Soviet Union did no longer exist (cf. IHRC 2008). Latvia rejected a so-called zero option, like Latvia adopted in 1918, where all permanent residents at the time of independence were granted citizenship regardless of language, culture, or religion. In contrast to this, the post-1991 leadership of Latvia believed that strengthening and demarcating the Latvian core nation was essential for long-term survival of the Latvian nation.

Gusachenko and Kleinberga (2021: 71) note that:

“In the 1990s, the most important difference with the period of 1917-1922 was the high proportion of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia. Compared to the situation in 1918, at the time when the Republic of Latvia was declared, the number of Russians had increased by more than seven times. Such an increase in the Russian-speaking part of the population, alongside the overall Russification policy, left the Latvians the perception that their existence was endangered, which led to favoring the exclusive approach regarding the citizenship.”

It could be argued that Latvia's restrictive citizenship policy resembled elements of retribution. Many Soviet settlers were perceived as illegal occupiers at worst and unwanted immigrants at best. Adopting a restrictive citizenship framework made it more difficult and potentially less desirable for Soviet settlers to remain in Latvia after 1991. However, after the end of World War II, the emerging global international human rights regime made it practically impossible to simply expel a minority group constituting such a large share of the population. Under these circumstances, more moderate voices in Latvia steered the debate towards a legal solution that balanced international obligations with the goal of promoting a Latvian nation-state (cf. Ronen 2009: 212ff; Kuczynska-Zonik 2017: 1). It also became clear in the political debates that sovereignty alone could not protect Latvia from future external threats. Therefore, Latvia needed a strong and international network of allies. These decisions made closer ties with the West a political and strategic necessity. Therefore, fulfilling the vision of a sovereign democratic state required adhering to Western standards of minority protection, social inclusion, and civic participation.

Germane (2010: 119) notes that Latvia's new citizenship policy had:

“limited automatic citizenship to the citizens of the interwar republic and their direct descendants. Those who arrived later and their descendants were to undergo a naturalization procedure, which included a Latvian language and history examination. De jure such a decision was based upon the historical continuity of the interwar republic. De facto, the main rationale advanced for the restriction was the allegedly questionable loyalty toward the newly independent Latvian state of those who migrated to Latvia during the years of Soviet occupation.”

However, the massive stateless minority in Latvia raised international criticism. The United Nations, OSCE, and later the European Union all pressured Latvia to find a solution for the growing issue of mass statelessness in the country. Latvia ratified the 1954 UN Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons (on 5 November 1999) and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (on 14 April 1992), both of which required immediate action regarding this issue (cf. Kuczynska-Zonik 2017: 2f). As a response to the growing international pressure, Latvia developed the unique legal category of non-citizenship: “[R]ussian-speakers, mostly ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians who find themselves in these countries as a result of Soviet migration policy received non-citizen status.” (Kuczynska-Zonik 2017: 3)

With the application of the *ius sanguinis* principle, only the individuals who were considered part of the Latvian “core nation” (Brubaker 1996: 432) were granted Latvian citizenship. Everyone who did not qualify as such had to undergo naturalization. In the beginning, the Latvian government limited the number of naturalizations allowed each year to avoid large amounts of applications at once. However, this cautious approach proved short-lived, and the effective number of naturalizations turned out to be much lower than expected. While the status of non-citizen was originally considered to be a temporary status, in practice the number of applications and successful naturalizations was much lower than expected (cf. Maksimovtsova 2019: 159; Kuczynska-Zonik 2017: 5f). Between 1995 and 1998, only 15.853 people applied for Latvian citizenship. Among those, just 11.431 were approved (cf. Kruma 2015). Application numbers increased again in the late 1990s as Latvia advanced toward EU accession, peaking between 2004 and 2006.

The challenge of resolving citizenship in post-Soviet societies remains complex. One explanation lies in the fear of assimilation among national minorities. Wright (2000: 3) highlights:

“As the political elites in the new states have (re)established independent political institutions, attempted to create a post Soviet civil society and (re)affirmed a sense of nationhood among their populations, the Russians have found themselves marginalized, in no small part because political life, civil society and identity have been bound intimately with a renaissance of languages which they do not speak.”

Latvian policy makers maintained that language and education reforms were meant to promote integration and language competence. However, others have interpreted these policies as a hidden intent of assimilation (cf. Hogan-Brun 2006: 330f).

Looking at current developments, it becomes clear that Latvia's non-citizenship policy has lost much of its momentum (cf. Kuczynska-Zonik 2017: 8f). As of 2024, more than 169.000 individuals are non-citizens (OSP 2024). Although numerous amendments to the citizenship law were adopted over the years, there is no comprehensive strategy to overcome the obstacle of the legal status of non-citizenship. The creation of non-citizen status in post-Soviet Latvia underscores the unresolved tensions between historical continuity and nationhood in Latvia. These tensions continue to shape how individuals experience belonging, recognition, and exclusion in the contemporary Latvian society.

2.5 Legal framework of Latvia's (non-)Citizenship

Latvia's legal framework concerning (non-)citizenship and statelessness is grounded in several key legal documents. In 1991, Latvia reinstalled the Constitution of 1922 (cf. Constitution 1922). While the 1922 Constitution outlines fundamental rights and duties of citizens, it does not define who qualifies as a citizen. Article 2 of the Constitution only refers to the "people of Latvia" (*Latvijas tauta*) as the source of sovereign power.

In Latvian language, there is a clear linguistic distinction between "the people of Latvia" (*Latvijas tauta*) and "the Latvian people" (*Latviešu tauta*). The latter is often translated as "the Latvian nation" (cf. Smith et al. 2010: 8). This distinction reflects Latvia's early civic nation model, applied between 1918 and 1940, which encompassed diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious groups within the territory of Latvia. In Russian language, there is a similar distinction between Latvian people (*Latishi*), which emphasizes kinship and cultural ties, and the people of Latvia (*Latviytsy*), a term that is frequently used as a (self-)description of Latvia's Russian-speaking non-Citizens.

While reinstalling the 1922 Constitution signaled Latvia's liberation from unlawful occupation, the question of citizenship remained unresolved. Only in 1994, the Latvian parliament passed a new citizenship law to clearly define the legal status of the new residents. According to this law, Latvian citizenship was granted only to "a person who was a Latvian citizen on 17 June 1940, as well as a descendant of such person" (Citizenship Law 1994: Art. 2 (1)). This step was aimed to

secure the legal continuity of Latvian citizenship and support the development of a unified society based on a shared feeling of nationality. In addition, the law defined a stateless person as an individual who is not considered a citizen of any other country, excluding those covered by the “Law on the Status of those Former USSR Citizens” (cf. Law on the Status of those Former USSR Citizens 1995), who held neither Latvian nor any other citizenship.

To comply with the 1954 UN Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, Latvia passed a supplementary law, confirming the legal rights and guarantees of non-citizens. This was necessary to distinguish them from stateless individuals under international law. In its final version, the law defined non-citizens as former USSR citizens and their children residing in Latvia who meet the following criteria:

- As of July 1, 1992, they were registered in Latvia - regardless of the status noted in their records - or their last registered residence was in Latvia, or a court had established that they had permanently lived in Latvia for at least ten years prior to that date;
- They were not Latvian citizens;
- They were not citizens of another state.

Non-citizens enjoyed the protection of the basic human rights as outlined in the 1922 Constitution, as well as the right to preserve their native language and culture under cultural-national autonomy. However, this right applied only if such practices did not conflict with other Latvian laws. By adopting these legal changes, Latvia created a unique legal status that legally prevented former Soviet residents from being classified as stateless. Non-citizens were granted rights such as permanent residence, the ability to travel abroad, and diplomatic protection. Importantly, voting rights and access to public service, military, or government positions remained reserved for Latvian citizens. The Law on the Status of those Former USSR Citizens was subjected to minor changes before reaching a final version in 1998 and remains in effect today, with no major changes to its core provisions. While Latvian officials encouraged naturalization, they rejected the idea that granting automatic citizenship to all long-term residents would foster social cohesion. Many of Latvia’s decision makers feared that a large Russian-speaking minority could pose a threat to national identity and sovereignty of the state. From their perspective, the risk of linguistic and cultural extinction outweighed the potential social tension of a polarized and divided society.

One key issue continued to attract international criticism: the legal status of children born to non-citizen parents. Until 2013, such children automatically inherited non-citizen status unless one parent naturalized and applied for citizenship for the child, too. The 2013 amendments allowed non-citizens to keep their status while applying for Latvian citizenship for their children if at least one parent held permanent residency. Citizenship at birth became possible, but remained a voluntary decision left to non-citizen parents.

“Since the 2013 amendments to the Citizenship Law [...] Latvian citizenship was registered for newborn children whose both parents are non-citizens or stateless persons immediately upon registration of the fact of birth, if at least one of the parents so wished.” (PMLP 2021)

While this development was seen a significant progress in reducing childhood statelessness, it still did not satisfy international expectations. Interestingly, the term “statelessness” was used more liberally by international observers when discussing children, even though non-citizen status was technically distinct from it:

“Non-citizens, who are not defined as stateless according to the national legal definitions, and whose rights and obligations significantly exceed the minimum rights set by 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, are still considered as stateless by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.” (ENS 2015: 1)

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, both ratified by Latvia, continued to put pressure on Latvian politicians to ensure full citizenship rights are granted for children.

In response, Latvia passed a key reform in 2019/20:

“The most recent amendments towards obtaining the Latvian citizenship were introduced in 2019 when the Latvian Parliament accepted the law ‘On the Termination of the Granting of the Status of a Non-citizen to Children’. According to this law, as of 1 January 2020 children with parents who are both non-citizens are automatically granted Latvian citizenship at birth, unless parents agree for assigning their child the citizenship of another country.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Latvia 2024)

Under this law, citizenship for newborns was no longer optional, but automatic, unless parents explicitly requested citizenship from another country. This change was widely welcomed by the United Nations and marked a decisive step in eliminating childhood statelessness in Latvia (cf. UNHCR 2019). The UN Human Rights Council confirmed that:

“On 17 October 2019, the Parliament adopted the Law on the Discontinuation of Non-Citizen Status for Children. Consequently, as of 1 January 2020, all newborn children in Latvia are automatically granted Latvian citizenship, unless the child’s parents opt for the citizenship of another country for their child or unless the child is a citizen of another country. This completely ends the assignment of the status of non-citizen to newborn children.” (UNHRC 2021: 18)

Despite these achievements, the core issue of non-citizenship remains unresolved. The status was originally intended as a temporary legal balance act, but social integration and naturalization have not occurred at the pace expected. Many non-citizens remain reluctant to naturalize. When asking why, the naturalization process itself seems an obvious factor. However, in comparison with other EU countries, Latvia’s requirements are not unusually strict. The naturalization test contains basic Latvian language skills tests, knowledge of Latvian history and culture, and a test on the Constitution and national anthem, similar to the naturalization requirements in most European countries. Still, Brasington (2011: 215) noted over a decade ago:

“Scholars and lawyers alike have criticized Latvian citizenship policy for perpetuating the problem of statelessness within Latvia’s borders by enforcing very rigorous language standards for naturalization.”

Whether meeting these requirements proves a genuine commitment to loyalty or just a procedural hurdle remains open to debate. Nevertheless, Latvia’s current naturalization standards are not excessive. Explanations for low naturalization rates vary and are often politically charged. Latvian political scientist Maris Andžans argues that “Non-citizenship is a matter of national security, and also a matter of national pride. Because it’s so easy to receive citizenship.” (Andžāns, cited in Politico 2024)

Regardless of decades of international pressure from the UN, OSCE, and the EU, a legal and political consensus on non-citizenship remains elusive:

“There are three ways of conceptualizing the legal status of the respective non-citizen populations. The [...] Latvian position that they have a special status has been accepted by some States and, by necessary implication, by the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights. Some UN human rights institutions characterize these peoples as stateless. The third reading, suggested by certain legal writers, is that respective non-citizen populations are nationals with limited political rights.” (EP 2018)

2.6 Implications on the European Union level

In the European Union, approximately half a million people live under conditions of statelessness. More than half of these individuals reside in the Baltic countries, where the issue is especially concentrated.

“UNHCR estimates, based on available data, that more than 292,000 stateless people were living in the Nordic and Baltic countries (end-2022 figures, including non-citizens in Latvia, and persons with undetermined citizenship in Estonia).” (UNHRC 2024)

This also raises legal questions about the rights of Latvia’s non-citizens within the broader framework of the European Union. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), for example, theoretically grants the right to vote and stand in municipal and European elections to “every citizen of the Union residing in a Member State of which he is not a national” (TFEU, Article 22(2)). However, it remains unclear if non-Citizens in Latvia are considered EU citizens or not. Latvian legislation refers to them as *permanent residents*, deliberately avoiding classifying them as nationals of Latvia. This choice creates a legal grey zone and further complicates the status of Latvian non-citizens in the EU context. A 2015 study by the European Parliament addressed this unclear definition and critically concludes that “the mere fact that Latvia deliberately labelled the persons involved as ‘permanent residents’ and not as ‘nationals’ is in our opinion not enough to exclude them from European citizenship.” (EP 2015: 41) Despite this criticism, EU institutions have largely agreed to the national guardianship of citizenship. With this, the competence to determine eligibility for EU electoral rights remains with the member states. It is therefore legal, but politically controversial for Latvia to exclude non-citizens from the right to vote on the EU level. It is not unlawful for an EU member state not to extend this possibility, and in the case of Latvia, it was not considered discriminatory to exclude non-citizens from the EU electorate, because states are not legally obliged to automatically grant this extension. (Cf. EP 2018: 8f)

The wider debate regarding integration and EU elections predates Latvia's EU accession. In 2003, Ineta Ziemele, a former judge at Latvia's Constitutional Court and later a judge at the Court of Justice of the EU, argued in favor of including non-citizens in the European electorate. She argues that there are strong reasons for granting EU electoral rights to non-citizens, including the potential to foster social cohesion and affirm their feeling of belonging to the European community.

The puzzle of whether non-citizens are nationals under the domestic law has serious consequences. It determines whether non-citizens are granted EU citizenship rights and, by extension, full participation in political life on the EU level. It seems likely that this kind of exclusion reinforces their marginalized status and perpetuates a civic divide within Latvia. In a way, the EU's legal situation not only reflects the problematic nature of Latvian non-citizenship but also risks legitimizing exclusion at the European level. (Cf. Jochecova 2024)

2.7 Non-citizenship and national security

Other than in many countries of the European Union, where debates about citizenship have intensified in response to international migration, especially after the so-called European migration crisis in 2015/16, Latvia's (non-)citizenship discourse has developed under different conditions. In Latvia, most non-citizens have been long-term residents, many of them have already been inhabitants of the country when it regained independence in 1991. Because of this, Latvia's challenges regarding citizenship and questions of national identity have not been driven by immigration, but by historical legacies and questions of national belonging. The so-called Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of Crimea by Russian military and proxy forces in 2014 re-sparked fears of Russian aggression across the Baltic region, especially in Latvia. Although Soviet-era Russification policies are now treated as historical remnants, the geopolitical tensions triggered in 2014 as a result of the Crimea annexation between Russia and the West continue to echo in Latvia's public discourses. Tensions like these have also sparked new debates of national security and malign foreign influence in Latvia, where a large proportion of both non-citizens and Latvian citizens speak Russian as their first language. The perception of Russian speakers as a potential security threat re-gained momentum after Crimea's annexation. While Latvia relies heavily on NATO for military security, domestic policy has increasingly focused on mitigating internal vulnerabilities, including freedom of media and social cohesion. In this context, Latvia's non-citizens, most of which are Russian-speakers and still perceived as

potential pro-Russian sediment, have become entangled in the state's continued efforts to fortify national security.

Following Russia's military full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Latvia further intensified these efforts by sanctioning the removal of Soviet-era monuments in Riga and other cities (cf. Mieriņa 2024; Foreign Policy 2023). These decisions, while framed as acts of historical reckoning and symbolic sovereignty, disproportionately impacted non-citizens. For many, these events were experienced as signs of further marginalization and exclusion, especially when cultural symbols associated with their identity are targeted. Croft (2016: 195) notes:

“Using current events to invigorate the approach to non-citizens would not mean that previous efforts had failed but would rather reflect that integration is an ongoing process requiring proactive policies and often demanding robust resources as well as brave political leadership.”

The recent developments underscore how non-citizens and Russian speakers in Latvia continue to be viewed, increasingly explicitly, as a threat since the beginning of Russia's war of aggression. However, it seems likely that this will prove counterproductive. The ideological concept of the *russkiy mir* (Russian world) promoted by the Kremlin reinforces the conviction that Russian speakers outside Russia are part of a transnational Russian family. It often serves as justification for foreign Russian intervention, as seen in both Crimea in 2014 and recently in eastern Ukraine (cf. CSIS 2016). By further alienating non-citizens, politically and socially, Latvian politicians risk reinforcing the very narrative that the *russkiy mir* ideology depends on. Instead of fostering loyalty, distrust and hostility within Latvia's own civil society could promote further alienation and social polarization. With this in mind, it must be asked critically whether maintaining a large and politically marginalized group within the country poses a greater risk for internal fragmentation, or a heightened potential for external interference in the long run.

The underlying question that Latvian politicians must come to terms with is whether ending non-citizenship would reduce vulnerability, or whether it could, paradoxically, strengthen the democratic resilience that the non-citizenship policy was originally intended to protect. In this sense, and much in the sense of Croft (2016), using current events to rethink the approach to non-citizenship would not mean that previous policies have failed altogether, but rather reflect that integration is a permanent process in the mirror of political and societal change.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that was used in this thesis to explore the lived experiences of non-citizens in Latvia. It describes how qualitative methods were applied to collect and analyze interview data in order to answer the research question: “How do non-Citizens in Latvia experience citizenship and belonging?”

While non-citizenship in Latvia has been a subject of political and academic debate for a long time, the lived experiences and bottom-up perspective of non-citizens themselves have rarely been explored through qualitative research. Much of the existing literature focuses on legal status, naturalization trends, or policy implications, while qualitative approaches to the perspective of non-citizens on citizenship and belonging remain limited (Oliver/Heater, 1994: 26; Turner, 1994: 159). The main aim of this chapter, and of the research more broadly, is to fill this gap by implementing an actor-oriented approach, positioning on the understandings and experiences of those living under the legal status of non-citizen.

The methodology that was applied in this study reflects the broader theoretical approach to citizenship as a social and relational construct. Instead of treating citizenship as a static legal category, this research approaches it as a fluid and contested social phenomenon, which is shaped by history, society, as well as actors and their agency. As such, qualitative research methods offer the most appropriate tools for capturing these dimensions of citizenship and belonging.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case study design based on in-depth interviews with Latvian non-citizens. A case study approach is especially well suited to explore social phenomena within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are interconnected (cf. Yin 2014: 3ff). In the Latvian case, this ambiguity is particularly evident: non-citizenship is at the same time a legal category, a political issue, a form of imposed identity, and a social experience.

The chapters above have outlined the historical trajectory and theoretical foundations of (Latvian) citizenship, including the development of non-citizenship as a legal and symbolic construct.

Building on this context, the research design of this thesis is grounded in the assumption that citizenship unfolds differently in different environments, under varying historical and social conditions and by different actors. This perspective provides the justification for focusing on how non-citizenship is lived and experienced from below.

Hoffman (2004: 138ff) highlights that the concept of citizenship must continuously be reworked to realize its full egalitarian and anti-hierarchical potential. Citizenship is constantly produced and re-produced through social interaction and remains in a constant state of revision. This view is echoed by Della Porta and Keating (2008: 109f), who describe citizenship as a process that is constructed, contested, and open to change.

In this context, the use of qualitative research methods is particularly appropriate. This thesis aims to investigate the personal dimensions of non-citizenship by exploring how Latvian Russian-speakers, who currently hold or have held the non-citizen status, understood their place and define their belonging within Latvian society. Qualitative interviews provide the opportunity to engage with participants, allowing the researcher to understand the participant's narratives on their own terms and in their own words.

Key notions such as social cohesion, belonging, exclusion, or political alienation are deeply personal and emotional. They cannot be adequately captured through numbers or surveys only. Instead, a methodological approach is needed that foregrounds the meaning that individuals assign to things, places and feelings. Through direct interactions in interviews, participants are given space to articulate what citizenship means to them beyond the legal status imposed from above.

Although non-citizenship in Latvia has been widely studied through legal, political, and historical lenses, few studies have prioritized the voices of non-citizens themselves (cf. Lister 2007). This gap presents an opportunity to shift the methodological attention to the bottom-up experiences of people most directly affected by non-citizenship. This thesis aims to partially fill the existing "empirical void" (Lister 2007: 58) in citizenship studies by applying a bottom-up approach,

Using in-depth interviews to gather primary data and an open coding process to analyze it allows for a research design that is both flexible and sensitive to the complexity of the lived realities of non-citizens. As Lincoln and Guba (1985: 210) suggest, this approach enables research to unfold, cascade, roll, and emerge in ways that are responsive to the data itself. This openness is essential

when investigating a subject like non-citizenship, which is simultaneously legal, emotional, social and political in character.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Social research must always consider several ethical considerations to ensure that no physical, psychological, financial or reputational harm is caused because of the research (cf. Bellalem et al. 2023). The need for a strong ethical code of conduct stems from the historical fact that social research was not always sufficiently regulated and designed to ensure no harm is done to the participants or the researchers.

For this research, the following steps were taken to ensure no harm was done:

3.3.1 Informed Consent

All participants must fully understand the purpose of this research and how the data will be used. All participants gave informed consent after being clearly informed about the purpose, aim, and voluntary nature of the study. They were notified of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. To protect participants' confidentiality and privacy, all data were anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting. Interviews were recorded only with explicit consent, and all data were stored securely on encrypted devices. Since all interviews were conducted online via video call, the informed consent was first discussed with each participant prior to recording. Once they verbally agreed to participate, the informed consent was read aloud again at the beginning of the audio recording to ensure their verbal consent was documented. (Cf. Bellalem et al. 2023: 443f)

3.3.2 Privacy and Confidentiality

All data was handled in accordance with the principles of secure data management. Digital files, including recordings and transcripts, were stored on password-protected and encrypted devices. Personal contact information was stored separately from interview materials to avoid direct links between data and participant identities. Data will be retained for the duration required by institutional policy and will be securely deleted thereafter. (Cf. Bellalem et al. 2023: 444f)

3.3.3 Minimizing Harm

Given the sensitive nature of topics such as citizenship, exclusion, and personal identity, extra care was taken to minimize the risk of emotional discomfort during interviews. Participants were

encouraged to speak only about topics they felt comfortable with and could skip any question without justification. At the conclusion of each interview, they were offered the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, clarify anything, or end the conversation immediately if desired. No signs of distress were observed during the interviews, and all participants completed the full interview voluntarily.

3.3.4 Language Support and Co-Interviewing

Because all participants indicated their native language to be Russian, and the interviews were conducted in Russian, a second person - an academic colleague who is also a proficient Russian speaker - was present during 4 interviews. Although I speak Russian and was able to conduct the conversations independently in many cases, the presence of a Russian-speaking co-interviewer provided additional clarity, particularly for complex or emotionally sensitive topics. This helped to ensure good communication, reduce potential misunderstandings, and create a more comfortable interview environment. The presence of a co-interviewer was disclosed during the first step recruitment, and participants were given the opportunity to decline the presence of a co-interviewer. In some interviews, the co-interviewer aided the overall flow of the conversation and helped to eliminate potential language barriers. All participants were offered the possibility to conduct the interview in Russian or English language, and no respondent chose English as interview language. (Cf. Bellale et al. 2023: 445f)

3.3.5 Voluntariness and Respect for Autonomy

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were not offered compensation in any form (cf. Bellale et al. 2023: 444). Given the legal and social vulnerability associated with the non-citizen status, every effort was made to avoid any perception of pressure or expectation. Participants were reassured throughout the process that they could withdraw or decline to answer questions at any point, without affecting their inclusion or standing in the study.

3.4 Participant overview

3.4.1 Non-Citizen population

This section presents demographic data on the non-citizen population. The figures outlined here aim to provide background for understanding the scope of the non-citizenship situation in Latvia.

Latvia has a population of 1.87 million. As of 2024, 169,276 individuals in Latvia hold a non-citizen passport, which means that non-citizens comprise approximately 9 percent of the total population. According to the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2025), 66 percent of non-citizens are ethnic Russians, with Belarusians and Ukrainians forming the next largest ethnic groups. Together, these two groups constitute 24 percent of the non-citizen population. 48 percent of non-citizens were born in Latvia, while 52 percent were born elsewhere.

The Central Statistical Bureau determines ethnicity of an individual as follows:

“The ethnicity of the population is compiled and published according to the Classification of ethnicities. Information on a person's ethnicity is available in the Register of Natural Persons, where the entry is made in accordance with the information in a personal identification document, a document certifying the registration of civil status acts or a court judgment. If information on the person's ethnicity is not available in any of the above documents, the person's ethnicity shall be entered according to the person's choice according to the ethnicity of the direct relatives in the ascending line. When recording the birth of a child, the ethnicity of the child can be entered according to the ethnicity of the child's relatives in a direct ascending line within two generations, i.e. the ethnicity of the father, mother or grandparents may be entered as a child's ethnicity. The ethnicity of the child may be omitted if the parents are of different ethnicities and cannot agree on the ethnicity of the child. In this case, the child's ethnicity will be recorded as ‘unselected’” (Central Statistical Bureau 2025)

The gender distribution among non-citizens is relatively balanced, with a slightly higher number of female non-citizens (52%) compared to males (48%). Age-wise, the most significant concentration appears in the age group between 55 and 74 years, which reflects historical developments and targeted policies. These targeted largely past and ongoing efforts to promote naturalization, especially among younger generations. Reforms in language education and automatic citizenship for newborns have primarily targeted children and students in primary and secondary education. The distribution of non-citizenship reflects these demographic trends: the share of non-citizens between ages 10 and 29 is notably lower, and fewer than 300 non-citizens are younger than 9 years old.

Non-citizens are concentrated mainly in Latvia's urban centers. In the six largest cities of Latvia - Riga, Daugavpils, Liepaja, Jelgava, Jūrmala, and Ventspils - non-citizens comprise between 10

and 14 percent of the local population. These urban concentrations reflect historical patterns of migration and Soviet-era industrialization. Rural areas show a less dense concentration of non-citizens. These demographic characteristics outline the broader context of this study and highlight the diversity and complexity within the non-citizen population and the connection to Soviet-era developments. (Cf. Geostat LV 2025)

These demographic insights inform the broader context of this study and highlight the diversity and complexity within the non-citizen population of Latvia. They also serve as a reference point for the interpretation of qualitative findings and guided the selection of interview participants and the limitations of this qualitative study approach.

All metrics were taken from a report of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights (cf. Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2024) and independently verified through the online platform of the Central Statistical Bureau and the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs of Latvia.

3.4.2 Sampling

For the sampling of interview participants for the qualitative part of this study, I followed a snowball sampling strategy. I contacted 17 personal contacts who are Latvian residents and native Russian speakers, whose citizenship status was unknown to me at that time. These contacts stem from an exchange year I completed in a Russian-speaking minority program at a high school in Riga during the academic year 2010–2011.

I introduced the core interests of the study and explained my plan to conduct interviews to collect primary data. I also asked whether they could recommend family members, friends, or acquaintances who might be interested to participate. To accommodate preferences and reduce barriers to participation, I emphasized that interviews could be conducted in either Russian or English and via any platform of their choice.

At this initial stage, no strict exclusion criteria were applied. Rather, individuals were encouraged to determine whether they felt suited to participate based on their resonance with the topic. The targeted sample size of 5–8 interviews was determined as realistic given the scope of a master's thesis and the chosen method of in-depth interviews and flexible coding. Through this approach, 12 individuals expressed interest, and after follow-up discussions, five ultimately agreed to participate. All five participants were strangers to me and were not part of my network of friends

and acquaintances. Individuals who chose not to participate were thanked for their consideration, and no further contact was pursued. This highlights the sensitivity of the topic and the difficulty of engaging potential participants, even through trusted networks.

Although an emphasis was placed on representing both genders equally, only one female participant could be recruited for this study. This could be due to the predominantly male network of friends and contacts I have in Latvia, but it could also have other reasons.

From February 28 to March 5, 2025, I conducted a study trip to Riga to deepen my understanding of the current political and social situation. During this visit, I engaged in informal conversations with residents in public spaces, including museums, cafés and on the street. Despite a generally high level of interest in the topic, no participants were recruited through this more direct approach. These experiences underscore the deeply problematic nature of non-citizenship and suggest a broad hesitancy rooted in fear of judgment or discrimination.

I also contacted two Riga-based human rights lawyers and one former politician and human rights advocate. While all expressed strong support for the research and shared useful background insights, these channels did not lead to any interview recruitment.

Participant overview:

Pseudonym	Age	Birthplace	Status	Interview Date	Gender
Aleksandr	67	Soviet Riga	Naturalized in 2012	22 March 2025	male
Dmitriij	42	Soviet Riga	Non-Citizen	26 March 2025	male
Nikita	30	Riga, LV	Non-Citizen	13 April 2025	male
Anastasia	30	Marupe, LV	Non-Citizen	14 April 2025	female
Konstantin	28	Riga, LV	Non-Citizen	11 April 2025	male

3.5 Data collection

Conducting in-depth interviews is a complex method of gathering data from participants. Charmaz (1991) highlights that effective interviewing must allow the researcher to explore the topic without turning the conversation into an interrogation. Framing and delivering questions in this way requires thorough preparation and a carefully crafted set of guiding questions. Furthermore, the interview guide should remain open and flexible to accommodate the flow of the conversation. It is important to keep in mind that the level of comfort of participants takes priority over obtaining the most comprehensive and detailed data.

During the interview, the goal is to interpret responses from the participant's perspective and to validate the significance of their experiences (cf. Charmaz 2006: 29ff). One or more open-ended and unspecific initial questions can help to establish the overall direction of the interview and reveal information that can guide the conversation further. A constructivist approach emphasizes the participant's own definitions of key terms, experiences, and assumptions.

With this in mind, I created a list of possible interview questions organized by topic or theme (e.g., citizenship, education, language use, discrimination, civil society, and the notion of home). The interview guide did not follow a fixed chronology, and several questions remained untouched in each conversation. After every interview, I revised and restructured the guide to adapt questions or include new ones based on the information gathered from previous participants.

Interviewing individuals about a sensitive and emotional topic can be challenging. Although the participants were very open with their stories and explanations, one individual repeatedly apologized for their non-citizens status, indicating that they feel shame or discomfort about this legal status. In this situation, it was helpful to indicate that this study's main goal is to highlight the narratives and experiences with citizenship from the non-citizen's point of view. In doing so, the participant adopted the role of the expert, and it felt less like an interview and more like a conversation. It also helped to briefly talk about the place that the participants are attending the interview from. This helped starting the conversation without directly jumping into the sensitive topic of non-citizenship.

All interviews began with space for an open introduction to determine the overall direction of the interview. The first question was phrased: "Tell something about yourself and where you come from." The length of responses to this question ranged from two to thirteen minutes. Follow-up

questions were then based on these initial responses and adapted to the general path outlined by the interviewee. The connections (family, work, future, politics,...) that participants made to the topic of non-citizenship also highlighted important markers of follow-up questions. Another challenge was to direct the conversation from a normative and legal perspective to more emotional and personal aspects of non-citizenship. One participant often seemed to try and explain the situation from the perspective of the state of Latvia, which was at times obstructing his/her own opinion. Here again, it helped to reiterate that the aim is to investigate definitions of citizenship or belonging outside of the legal and normative frameworks, and to steer the questions towards feelings, perceptions or other aspects that reflect more personal opinions than factual statements.

Interview durations ranged from 30 to 78 minutes. Four out of five interviews were conducted via WhatsApp video call, while one was conducted via audio call only, at the participant's request. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and stored in accordance with the procedures outlined in the ethical considerations section.

3.6 Coding and data analysis

To systemically identify, categorize and interpret themes across the different interviews, a flexible coding technique (cf. Deterding/Waters 2021) was used. Deterding and Waters note that this coding strategy is suited “to emphasize that researchers should learn from their respondents” while also acknowledging existing theories and literature (cf. Deterding/Water 2021: 714). Flexible coding allows for a combination of induction and literature- and theory-based coding that is not completely inductive. As Deterding and Water (2021: 721ff) also highlight, this strategy is ideal for research that starts from the premise of an empirical qualitative sociology that is in dialogue with existing theory and findings from previous studies, especially quantitative studies. The study presented in this thesis aligns with this approach. Moreover, one particular strength of the flexible coding strategy as outlined by Deterding and Water (2021) is the utilization of modern QDA technology.

3.6.1 Software and tools

I used MAXQDA for the qualitative coding process of the in-depth interviews. One particular benefit of this was the dual use of transcripts and the original audio files simultaneously. To do so, I utilized MAXQDA's own transcription tool to generate transcripts in Russian language. These transcripts were then translated to English, using a paid version of *DeepL*, an AI-driven large

language module. To avoid any distortion or translation errors of the original data through errors in transcribing and translating, I manually verified all English transcripts against the original audio recordings.

Nonetheless, there is one potential shortcoming of this strategy: translating from Russian to English while maintaining the depth of what was said during the interviews is very difficult, and there is a substantial risk of losing important details due to differences between the two languages. To address this, MAXQDA offers the option to link the original audio files to the translated transcripts using time stamps. This allows for easy and convenient line-by-line cross-checking of the Russian-language audio with the English transcripts. In this case, using this tool proved extremely valuable, as it enabled accurate and efficient interpretation, coding, and development of the codebook. If a section of the translated transcripts seemed unclear, this function allowed to listen to the original audio of the same section. Overall, this function was used very frequently, and it helped to ensure correct and sensical translations from Russian to English.

3.6.2 Coding Strategy

Based on the flexible coding strategy by Deterding and Waters (2021) I coded the interviews along the following stages:

1. Indexing: Applying broad descriptive codes tied to interview questions or major themes to organize the data.
2. Analytic coding: Application of conceptual and thematic sub-codes to smaller sections of the indexed data relevant to specific research questions or areas.
3. Validation and theory building: Use of QDA tools to test, re-interpret and validate emerging themes across different respondents.

The flexible coding strategy outlined by Deterding and Waters exemplifies a pragmatic blend of inductive and deductive approaches to qualitative data analysis. While grounded theory traditionally emphasizes purely inductive coding, which generates codes exclusively from the data without reference to prior theory, flexible coding begins with a theoretical and methodological foundation. Researchers enter the field informed by existing literature, conceptual frameworks, and hypotheses, which guide the design of semi structured in-depth interviews and the initial organization of the data.

Despite theoretical grounding, the actual coding process remains inductive in its execution. In the first stage, researchers index the data broadly, using the structure of the interview guide, which reflects prior theory. This allows for the development of more refined analytic codes in the second stage, which are then systematically applied across cases. This approach allows to remain open to unexpected findings while ensuring that the coding and analysis remains coherent throughout the process. For example, the application of this flexible coding process enables the development of themes such as “Russian-speaking identity in Latvia” (informed by Cheskin 2013), while leaving room to inductively develop codes based on the respondent narratives and examples, thereby expanding the theme and complementing it.

In this way, flexible coding encourages an abductive analytic logic: it acknowledges the value of prior knowledge but enables for new and possibly unknown codes to emerge. It avoids the rigidity of deductive frameworks while also remaining open for inductive methods - offering instead a transparent and theoretically engaged pathway to develop results. Following this strategy also ensured consistency throughout the coding process.

3.6.3 Codebook

The codebook was generated through the steps outlined above in this section. The analytical part of this study is based on the themes that emerged through the coding process.

Codebook

1) Belonging and Home

Analytical description: Captures how non-citizens define “home” and belonging and through which feelings or things they express themselves when doing so.

Include when: The passage centers on where, how or why the person feels at home; place-based memories; family/community attachments; statements like “this is my homeland” or “I belong here.”

Exclude when: The main focus is on legal status or state treatment, or on political participation.

Sub-code examples:

- 1A. Family & kinship anchors (relatives, children in Latvia)
- 1B. Place memories & everyday geographies (districts, streets, schools)
- 1C. Emotional rootedness (affective attachment, “feels like home”)

- 1D. Homeland across periods (Soviet-era vs. independent Latvia)

Illustrative quotes:

- “My homeland is the country where I was born. It is the country where my mum lives now. It is the country where all my relatives on my mum's side live. I love this country, just as a country.”
- “I was born here, my father was born here... I have friends here, I work here, I have my field of interest here. In fact, this is my homeland, simply put.”

2) Feelings Towards (Non-)Citizenship

Analytical description: How non-citizens perceive and emotionally evaluate their status (e.g., “Alien”, “non-Citizen”), including shame, anger, stigma, perceived injustice, and reactions to the topic of naturalization.

Include when: The theme is about the status itself, labels, naturalization, tests, loyalty expectations, or the meaning of having that status.

Exclude when: The primary content is everyday discrimination or general identity beyond status.

Sub-code examples:

- 2A. Stigma & humiliation (“Alien”-label)
- 2B. Loyalty & recognition (offense at being asked to prove loyalty)
- 2C. Naturalization perceptions (forced, unfair, pointless)
- 2D. Family-status mismatch (mixed-status within families)

Illustrative quotes:

- “By the year 2000 I already had the right to obtain citizenship by naturalization. But it must have been shame that I had to ask the state where I was born to consider me loyal... it seemed offensive to me.”
- “I have the passport of a non-citizen. My children are citizens, my wife, a citizen... I, unfortunately, yes, that's who I am.”

3) Language, Culture, and Identity

Analytical description: Self-definitions of identity outside legal status: how respondents construct, explain, and negotiate who they are and through which characteristics.

Include when: The emphasis is on personal/collective identity, cultural/heritage language, memory practices (e.g., monuments), cultural belonging separate from the Russian state, or when other markers are expressed as part of the own identity.

Exclude when: The focus is on discriminatory policies or unequal treatment, or feelings about the status per se.

Sub-code examples:

- 3A. Russian as heritage/bridge (family/community language)
- 3B. Cultural practices & memory (music, literature, monuments)
- 3C. Locally rooted, distinct identity (Russian-Latvian, not “Russia”)
- 3D. Distancing from the Russian state

Illustrative quotes:

- “I don't have a connection to Russia. I have a connection with Russian culture in terms of music, in terms of literature, and, of course, in terms of language.”
- “I am a Russian speaker... Russian is not Russia, and I don't want to be labelled as such.”

4) Experiences of exclusion and discrimination

Analytical description: Where externally imposed labels and self-identity collide in practice, producing exclusion, discrimination, or unequal treatment; across institutions, policies (e.g., language/education), and everyday encounters.

Include when: The passage recounts concrete experiences of unfairness/exclusion; language policy impacts; bureaucratic hurdles; hostile social interactions.

Exclude when: The speaker is mainly describing their feelings about status or general identity without an exclusion event.

Sub-code examples:

- 4A. Institutional exclusion (documents, kinship proof, exams)
- 4B. Policy arenas (language and education, school/university restrictions)
- 4C. Everyday othering (hostility, “know your place”-comments)
- 4D. Protest/resistance (acts of claim-making, public dissent)

Illustrative quotes:

- “If such documents could not be provided... you get the status of a non-citizen... My grandmother was born in Riga... before Latvia became an independent state.”
- “When... independence took place, he told me you know, we Latvians don't need you Russians to know Latvian at all, we need you Russians to know your place.”

5) Agency and Political Alienation

Analytical description: Expressions of political disconnection and lack of voice or representation: disenfranchisement, lack of representation, distrust, resignation; how exclusion shapes (non-)participation and perceived (in)efficacy.

Include when: Voting rights, inability to influence, no representation is indicated, disappointment post-1991/EU, exit or withdrawal.

Exclude when: The focus is primarily on identity or on an exclusionary event without a political angle.

Sub-code examples:

- 5A. Disenfranchisement & lack of voice (no vote, silencing)
- 5B. Under-representation (no party/agenda fits)
- 5C. Distrust & disappointment (authorities, post-1991, EU hopes)
- 5D. Resignation (leave the country, issue “dies out”)

Illustrative quotes:

- “I’m just out of the loop... it was very difficult to influence the situation.”
- “At the moment I don’t see any party that would represent my specific interests... If there is no choice for me, why should I vote?”

3.7 Positionality of the researcher

Positionality, perception, and identity play a significant role in this study. Qualitative research is a shared space shaped not only by the participants but also by the researcher and the relationship between them. It is reasonable to assume that my own experiences, beliefs, and cultural background are important variables that may affect the research process and influence both the context and outcome of the data collected.

I studied as an exchange student at a Russian-speaking minority high school in Riga for one year in 2010/11. During this time, I lived with a host family who spoke Russian as their primary language. I also attended a school program taught entirely in Russian at a well-known, traditional Russian high school. I generally felt that my presence within Latvia’s Russian-speaking minority was met with interest and openness. These experiences have deeply shaped my sustained interest in Latvia’s unique situation concerning language use, education, and, eventually, citizenship.

This personal connection to Latvia, particularly to its Russian-speaking community, supported the empirical phase of this study. I was not a stranger to those I initially contacted for general

information or for recruiting potential interview participants. The topic of (non-)citizenship in Latvia is sensitive and often politically charged. It can be perceived as threatening to individual identity and one's position within Latvian society. Given this sensitivity, the research, particularly through interviews, was vulnerable to the effects of "social desirability bias," where participants may provide answers they believe are socially acceptable rather than reflecting their actual experiences (cf. Bryman 2015: 216). This is especially relevant in studies that aim to capture bottom-up perspectives on deeply personal topics. My previous engagement with Latvia's Russian-speaking community and my familiarity with local dynamics likely helped to mitigate some of these concerns.

Moreover, my position as a researcher also influences how the data is interpreted and analyzed. As Bryman (2015) notes, the interpretation of empirical data always includes the researcher's own constructions of the social world. This qualitative study, therefore, relies on my subjective interpretation of findings in light of the predefined research question. While such bias can never be fully eliminated, it can be anticipated, acknowledged, and reflected upon throughout all stages of the research process.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009: 57ff) emphasize the importance of trust and openness in researcher-participant interactions, as well as the need for reflexivity concerning the researcher's own position. They argue that participants should be given space to ask questions and seek clarification about the study's purpose, while the researcher must remain continually aware of their own role in shaping the data. In line with this, I engaged in regular discussions with university colleagues familiar with the broader field of citizenship studies, though less so with the specific case of Latvian non-citizenship. These exchanges provided some valuable input for reflecting on emerging findings and for testing the balance between my interpretations and the voices of participants.

3.8 Methodological limitations

While this study is designed to provide in-depth insights into the lived experiences of Latvian Russian-speaking non-Citizens, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged, especially concerning the scope and method of data collection.

The sample for this study is intended to capture a range of perspectives, as it is typical in qualitative research. As such, it is not statistically representative of the wider population (Pope et al. 2000).

Nevertheless, qualitative social research methods are uniquely suited to highlight nuanced meanings and processes that large-scale surveys cannot access.

The snowball sampling strategy used in this may have induced bias, because participants may share similar backgrounds and perspectives due to their social networks. This is reflected in the generally high level of education in the study sample. As it is typical for qualitative research, this study does not intend to be statistically representative of Latvia's non-Citizen population. It intends to highlight and reflect a range of experiences and perspectives to investigate the complex and often overlooked aspects of citizenship and belonging from an agent-focused perspective. In this regard, while the findings offer relevant insights, they cannot be generalized to the entire Russian-speaking non-citizen population of Latvia.

Furthermore, although efforts were made to include a diverse backgrounds in terms of age, education and gender, the sample used in this study does not reflect the diversity of Latvia's non-Citizen population. Most notably, as mentioned in the section above, the study sample lacks diversity in educational backgrounds. These sample limitations may limit the range of captured perspectives. Also, with only one female participant, the study cannot represent possible differences in citizenship and gender. This is an important notion, because comparative studies on citizenship and gender in Latvia are missing in the academic discourse. There are many reasons to suggest that non-citizenship unfolds differently based on gender. For example, general restrictions to citizenship in 1991 were related to military status, which could impact males differently than females. Gender perspectives on non-citizenship in Latvia remain unanswered in this study because of the gender imbalance of the study sample.

The overall time and resources for this study limited the possibility of including more interviews. As outlined in this chapter above, gaining access to the non-citizen population in Latvia proved much more difficult than I anticipated. A longer time frame would have allowed for a larger sample to include in this study. The interviews I conducted and included in this study reached thematic saturation and support the overall validity of the results within the scope of this research.

4 Discussion

4.1 Overview

This chapter discusses and interprets the main empirical findings of this study with regard to the conceptual and historical frameworks outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. The findings highlight the ways in which citizenship is shaped by non-citizens not only by normative definitions, but through everyday actions, relationships and lived experiences of individuals who negotiate and contest their belonging (cf. Lister 2007; Kallio et al. 2020). To keep the aim of this thesis in view, this chapter investigates possible answers to the question:

How do Latvian non-citizens perceive and experience citizenship and belonging?

Interpreting the in-depth interviews with Latvia's Russian-speaking non-citizens, the chapter explores the ways in which non-citizens define and experience citizenship. The findings are contextualized against the backdrop of a multidimensional approach to citizenship as a social, political and historically grounded phenomenon that is shaped by both formal status, identity, social interaction and notions of belonging. Instead of looking at citizenship as a static legal category, this chapter investigates it as a dynamic, contested and lived process (cf. Lister 2007; Isin/Nielsen 2008). Adopting this perspective, the empirical insights reveal lived experiences of citizenship through an actor-oriented perspective in Latvia.

In the following sections, I analyze how non-citizens in Latvia experience and perceive citizenship in their everyday lives, based on the first-hand narratives they shared during the interviews. The results strongly underscore that citizenship in Latvia is a lived and contested condition, rather than a formal, static category. The discussion in this chapter is structured thematically along the main themes that emerged through flexible coding of the collected data. These are: (1) the meaning of home and belonging (2) feelings towards (non-)Citizenship, (3) Russian-Latvian identity, (4) experiences of unfairness and discrimination and (5) disenfranchisement and political alienation. Together, these themes reflect important aspects of the multidimensional nature of lived citizenship, encompassing the relations between the state and the individual, the individual and society, and the individual and both physical and symbolic places, as well as aspects of identity. Each section situates the thematic findings within the conceptual discussions of (inclusive) citizenship and the historical developments that have shaped Latvia's citizenship frameworks.

4.2 Analysis

4.2.1 The meaning of belonging and home

Where is ‘home’ for Latvia’s aliens? To understand citizenship among non-citizens in contemporary Latvia, it seems fundamental to address this question. Although ‘home’ is neither a political nor a legal category, the question of belonging nevertheless carries an immense importance. According to Yuval-Davis (2006), belonging encompasses social locations, identifications and emotional attachments as well as political values, all of which are reflected in the ideals of citizenship. Views about Latvia as a home and the feeling of belonging to Latvia emerged as an important topic in all narratives recorded as part of this study. This section therefore analyses how non-citizens define home and belonging, and what meanings they attach to these concepts. The interviews show that belonging and home were predominantly connected to family, childhood memories and specific places in Latvia. Most notably, these feelings were defined in non-normative ways and largely disconnected from status, rights or the relationship between citizen and state. Instead, belonging to Latvia as home was expressed through a sense of rootedness and emotional attachment.

“My homeland is the country where I was born. It is the country where my mum lives now. It is the country where all my relatives on my mum's side live. I love this country, just as a country” (Dmitrij, 26 March 2025)

Bloemraad (2008: 156) suggests that the feeling of belonging is a foundational aspect of citizenship. Consistent with Bloemraad’s view, the empirical material in this study did not tie belonging to legal status or political rights, but to memories, relationships to people and things, and local attachments. In most narratives, home emerged as an intimate and family-related network of feelings. Notably, references to the feeling of *being at home* or that of belonging varied significantly under different contexts. The responses highlighted that Latvia, both as Soviet Republic before 1991 and as an independent state, was, in their perception, the only home they have ever known. These attachments were primarily tied to childhood memories and the physical places of residence, such as the districts that the individuals grew up in, as well as family networks and everyday life in Latvia.

“I was born here, my father was born here. My grandfather and grandmother came here to work in Soviet times. My parents met here too, in Riga, and I have a family here. (...) I have friends here, I work here, I have my field of interest here. In fact, this is my homeland, simply put.” (Konstantin, 11 April 2025)

The feelings expressed by respondents underscore that belonging is experienced as a lived relationship with places and people rather than as institutional and legal recognition. This aligns with Lister’s (2007: 51f) argument that purely normative and legal concepts of citizenship are too narrow to capture deeper layers of substantive lived citizenship, based on a sense of belonging. This argument is also strongly supported by the following section, which analyses the feeling of belonging in relation to Latvia as state and non-citizenship as legal status.

Many of the respondents outlined emotional and intimate ties to Latvia through their personal histories. However, these expressions of belonging and home often shifted drastically when expressed in relation to the state or state authorities. Reflecting on state institutions of Latvia, a strong shift in the perception of the concepts of home and belonging was observable. While all participants felt that Latvia is their home on emotional and personal levels, the state of Latvia or state institutions are connotated with a sense of rejection in several narratives. This underlines the ambivalence of belonging to Latvia as seen by non-citizens: emotionally embraced, but institutionally distant. Belonging is experienced as incomplete, based on the sense of systematic legal rejection. The vertical frameworks of formal citizenship seldom take into account the subjective notions of what individuals consider to be their home (or the place they feel like they belong to). These shortcomings become even more evident when considering the fact that naturalization procedures aim to prove a sense of belonging but often fail to capture intimate connections as signs of such. As mentioned, narratives of belonging among the non-citizens I interviewed shifted sharply in relation to state authorities. This ambivalent nature of belonging was especially accentuated in one instance:

“The only thing that Latvia does, it pays me the pension that I have earned during my working life of more than 40 years. More than 40 years I worked in Latvia (...). Being paid pensions, that's the only thing that ties me to Latvia” (Aleksandr, 22 March 2025)

The same respondent, however, expressed homesickness during a year-long work-related absence from Riga and his/her family. This contrast illustrates this ambivalence further. Home was

experienced as intimate and emotional, while encounters with the state expressed a strong sense of alienation and discontent.

The findings suggest that for non-citizens, belonging to Latvia is mostly experienced and lived through intimate and emotional relationships to people and places. As the results highlight, for Latvia's non-citizens, 'belonging' only materializes outside of the normative frameworks of citizenship. No respondent in this case study identified any other country than Latvia as home. Notably, even though two respondents had lived outside of Latvia for several years, none of them applied the concept of belonging to any state other than Latvia. This fact challenges the often-repeated narrative that non-Citizens in Latvia are more Russian than Latvian (cf. Dougherty 2025; Mierina 2024; Chanadiri 2024). Language use is often equated with identity, because political public discourses focus on simplistic narratives to draw clear images of categories of identity. The patterns that emerged in the empirical material, however, suggest that language, historical origin or external assumptions do not determine identity or loyalty to one or the other state. Yet, these intimate attachments coexist with a sense of institutional alienation.

As Youkhana (2014:12) notes, normative approaches frequently treat belonging and citizenship as synonymous, which is "agreed to be an entitlement describing a contractual relationship between a person and the state". The experiences shared in this study suggest that belonging is a complex, intimate and emotional experience, tied to places, people and memories. In contrast, citizenship and non-citizenship is seen as bureaucratic burden and perceived as unjust exclusion by the people who are directly affected. The diverse forms of belonging that respondents expressed as their connection to Latvia is often not captured through normative citizenship frameworks. In line with Yuval-Davis' (2006: 200f) argument, belonging is a dynamic process, constructed and negotiated along multiple axes of difference. This argument is supported by the results of this empirical study.

The ways in which respondents expressed a sense of belonging to Latvia suggest that for many non-citizens, citizenship is experienced emotionally - through personal history and emotional attachments to geographical ties and family relationships. At the same time, the lack of recognition of these layers by the existing citizenship framework reinforces the distinction between lived and institutional citizenship further. The non-citizen participants in this study defined their belonging primarily through emotional ties, social relationships and geographical attachments: the house they grew up in, the building that was once their school, the streets and places they roamed in their

childhood. Also, beyond physical places, belonging is felt where family, relatives or close friends live. Deep emotional and symbolic attachments with simultaneous expressions of systematic institutional alienation and social exclusion emerged as a strong pattern among all interviews. Moreover, this finding resonates with Schäfer and Cheskin's (2020: 95) argument that dynamics of belonging are intrinsically linked with substantive citizenship.

In summary, the various narratives describe belonging as lived experience through family ties, friendships and places in Latvia, rather than a formal status. Latvia is experienced and recognized as home and belonging is perceived in intimate and place-based settings, rather than through official recognition. This tension between belonging to Latvia emotionally but being rejected politically sets up the question: how do non-citizens make sense of their legal status that labels them as outsiders?

4.2.2 Feelings towards Non-Citizenship

Understanding how non-citizenship is perceived by the bearers of this status is an important aspect to foster a deeper understanding of citizenship in Latvia. Non-citizenship in Latvia is experienced not only as a legal classification, but as a symbolic marker of exclusion. The label of non-citizen, officially translated as Alien, conveys a notion of otherness that many of the respondents described as humiliating, unjust and inconsistent with their personal history and connection to Latvia. This theme therefore reveals some of the deep gaps between emotional belonging, personal rootedness and imposed identity. While participants strongly felt that Latvia is their home, the status 'non-citizen' was perceived as stigmatizing, challenging their loyalty and love for the country through an imposed label. These notions underscore the emotional dimension that substantive citizenship carries, where recognition and rights are equally important. This section explores these tensions in more detail by examining how respondents articulated feelings towards their own status as non-citizens, as well as their perceptions of naturalization requirements and the symbolic meaning of being labeled as outsiders in their own home.

The fragmented sense of belonging underscores the emotional significance of Latvia as a place that non-citizens consider home, while feeling rejected and excluded. One of the strongest themes to emerge from the interviews was the sharp contrast between emotional attachment to Latvia and negative perceptions of the own legal status in Latvia. Their legal identity, translated to English as

Alien in official documents, is often experienced as stigmatizing, unjust and perceived as a sign of being rejected as a legitimate part of Latvia.

As the interviews revealed, for many non-citizens their status represents more than a legal category. It functions as a form of symbolic exclusion, framing non-citizens and Russian-speakers as different and foreign to Latvia. The story of one respondent particularly highlights the conflicted nature of non-citizenship between loyalty, rejection, and alienation:

“By the year 2000 I already had the right to obtain citizenship by naturalization. But it must have been shame that I had to ask the state where I was born to consider me loyal (...). I had worked honestly as a teacher, I had worked as a researcher, I had worked at the university, and it seemed offensive to me” (Aleksandr, 22 March 2025)

The feelings expressed by the respondent align with Bloemraad’s (2000) argument that substantive citizenship is a multilayered network of rights, duties, feelings and agency. If recognition is withheld, even those who meet the other criteria may reject citizenship. Bloemraad (ibid.) further implies that recognition must go beyond formal acceptance. It is a foundational dimension of inclusive citizenship to feel accepted, which is also reflected in the experiences of the respondents in this study. Non-citizenship was described by all respondents as an unfair status. The observations made, regarding which feelings participants connected with their legal status also echo what Ho (2009) defines as emotional citizenship. Doubt, shame, and anger were linked to the exclusionary frameworks of non-citizenship, highlighting the strong rejection that individuals with this status feel, and indicating why some refuse to naturalize on the grounds of perceived discrimination.

“I have the passport of a non-citizen. My children are citizens, my wife, a citizen, speaks Latvian fluently, both my children and my wife. I, unfortunately, yes, that's who I am.” (Dmitrij, 26 March 2025)

Several narratives reflected a resigned acceptance of an imposed identity; one linked to Soviet occupation and illegal settlement. The way non-citizens often perceive their contested status points to the argument that non-citizenship in Latvia is torn between legal status and lived social realities. This reinforces Lister’s (2007) call to evaluate citizenship through everyday experience of citizens, as opposed to normative frameworks alone.

While naturalization remains, in principle, legally available to most non-citizens, the interview data highlights that feelings of distrust and anger are key drivers for rejecting it. There is strong evidence that many non-citizens feel like their status is imposed and unjustified, reinforcing the belief that demanding naturalization to prove loyalty is discriminating. When asked about their thoughts of naturalizing to obtain Latvian citizenship, one respondent answered that he/she would not do so, “because it is done very forcibly”. The same respondent expressed that loyalty towards Latvia should not be measured through a piece of paper [referring to the naturalization test, author’s note]. Another participant answered that “a non-citizen passport is moronic”, reaffirming his/her conviction that “if you didn’t make mistakes, you don’t have to correct them”. Because low naturalization rates in Latvia are often explained politically with low interest to become a loyal citizen, it is important to highlight that the affected people do not consider naturalization an act of loyalty, but rather as a perceived probation. Among the respondents in this study, this feeling is a key driver for the rejection of the naturalization procedure. This also raises the question whether naturalized Russian-speaking citizens are perceived as more loyal than Russian-speaking non-citizens.

These findings partially answer why naturalization will not be a viable solution to end non-citizenship. From a political point of view, gaining citizenship through naturalization in Latvia could resolve the issue of non-citizenship within months if the people affected would choose to do so, suggesting that the status is self-imposed (cf. Kols 2015). This narrative stands in sharp contrast to the experiences and perceptions of non-citizens themselves. The participants in this study articulated naturalization not as an act of loyalty, rejecting the premise that exclusion is their own choice. Rather, they feel that state policy and its reliance on the historical legacies of Soviet occupation is unjust. Lister’s (2007: 50) concept of inclusive citizenship advocates for justice and recognition, asking when it is fair for people to be treated the same, and when it is fair to be treated differently. The data gathered in this case study reveals why non-citizens perceive their status as unfair. While each narrative is unique, many of them share the conviction that Latvia’s historical past of Soviet occupation is not an individual responsibility. Therefore, the legacy of Soviet occupation, which is frequently used to justify Latvia’s citizenship policies, should not be the basis for their continued exclusion.

“It turns out that many people who were already born in free Latvia, free from any occupation, any foreign influence, they’re stuck with this passport, and I don’t know (...), but my opinion is that I got this passport by mistake” (Konstantin 11 April 2025)

In practice, the use of Russian language continues to be strongly associated with “the language of the occupants” from the outside (Dmitrij, 26 March 2025). Language therefore emerged as the most contested aspect of perceived injustice. Four out of five respondents indicated they speak Latvian fluently and have studied or worked in Latvian-speaking environments but still consider Russian their main language and prefer to speak it in everyday life. In practice, the use of Russian language is a bridge to family and heritage. The strongest argument for this can be found in the protests against the changes in education law, where Russian-speakers in Latvia protested the prohibition of Russian as a language of instructions (cf. Section 4.2.3, 4.2.4). Russian is not only seen as a language, but as a marker of heritage and culture. It must also be admitted that the UN Human Rights regime widely supports the right to using the native language. Article 27 of the Covenant on Civil and Political rights stipulates that linguistic minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to practice the use of their own language. The conflict that arises from language use in Latvia indicates that exclusion is not rooted in a lack of linguistic integration; rather, it reflects symbolic and political meanings attached to Russian as the language of Soviet occupation.

In summary, the interviews portrait that the non-citizenship status is widely experienced as stigmatizing, a perception rooted in the historical narrative of Russians as occupiers and in traumatic experiences under Soviet occupation. This conviction of a security threat to ‘Latvian-ness’ is historically rooted and has clearly taken up new momentum since the escalations of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022. While naturalization remains available, many non-citizens seem to reject it based on the feeling of injustice and forced compliance. This further highlights the polarization between legal and social exclusion. The findings reiterate that citizenship policy must account for recognition not only in legal terms, but in a substantive and honest way. Based on the interview results, it can be concluded that non-citizenship is widely seen not only as unjustified legal status, but as an imposed identity, one that is foreign to the individuals holding it.

While the attitudes of non-citizens toward Latvia and their legal status reveal symbolic and emotional dimensions of belonging, they are also intertwined with questions of identity, culture,

and language. Identity and belonging are distinct but not mutually exclusive. Identity refers to an individually held, culturally and linguistically mediated self-understanding. In contrast, belonging is relational and often place-anchored. Both notions are central to understanding substantive citizenship. Accordingly, the next section examines how non-citizens define and negotiate their own identity.

4.2.3 Language, culture and identity

All respondents in this study described the status as non-citizens as an imposed identity, a label that situates them as perpetual outsiders regardless of the manifold attachments to Latvia as their home. Simultaneously however, when speaking about their lives, memories and daily practices, the respondents articulated traits of identity in ways that are stretching beyond legal categories. Instead of defining themselves through their state-imposed ‘Alien’ status, through their narratives, participants revealed a distinct identity grounded in language, cultural practices and collective memory. This sharp contrast highlights an important point: for non-citizens in Latvia, such implicit self-definitions point to a locally rooted but culturally distinct Russian-Latvian identity. This finding strongly supports Cheskin’s (2013) analysis of identity formation in the Baltics. The theme of language, culture and identity therefore highlights a crucial aspect to answer the research question, because it reiterates that citizenship is strongly interconnected with the own self-constructed identity, stretching far beyond the legal categories that a state assigns to its (non-)citizens. However, a distinct Russian-Latvian identity remains unrecognized in Latvia’s society and citizenship framework. The legal category of non-citizenship is closely tied to the conviction that the Russian cultural identity and language pose a threat to Latvian language and culture. Against this backdrop, several important questions arise: How do Latvia’s non-citizens define their own identity? Does their identity threaten Latvian culture, or does it coexist with it? And how does this identity intersect with their sense of belonging to the country?

As briefly outlined above, the interview results suggest that many non-citizens perceive their legal status as foreign to themselves: an imposed identity based on Latvia’s history of oppression. From the official Latvian perspective, the Soviet Union illegally occupied and tyrannized Latvia for many decades, conducting thousands of deportations and imposing a ruthless policy of forced assimilation (cf. Cheskin 2013: 4). This collective trauma continues to shape the public discourse and institutionalized distrust toward the Russian-speaking population.

Cheskin (2013: 2ff) argues that a main factor differentiating the identities of Latvia's Russian-speakers from Latvians is how each group interprets history. The findings here confirm this to some extent. Several interview participants perceived the removal of cultural or historical symbols as threat to their own identity. Starting in 2022, Latvia's parliament sanctioned the removal of Soviet era memorials in Riga, following the escalations in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (cf. Radio Liberty 2022; DW 2022; Schmitz 2022). For Latvians, Soviet era monuments were still seen as symbol of occupation in 2022, but many Russian-speakers saw them as place of commemoration for relatives who fought and died in the war against Nazi Germany (cf. Berzina, cited in Schmitz 2022).

One interview participant reflected on the removal of a Soviet era monument in Riga, saying "They tried to dismantle it many times, in the end they tried to blow it up, and finally they destroyed it. But this was a place of consolidation (...) Many relatives died during the war" (Aleksandr, 22 March 2025) Such accounts suggest that for many Russian-speakers, these places were not about political loyalty, but collective history, as well as a place to mourn family members lost during the Second World War. For some Russian-speakers, the removal of those memorials felt like an erasure of memory.

The use of Russian language emerged as a central marker of self-identification for all the non-citizens in this study's interviews. For the participants, Russian functions as a bridge within their families, communities, and cultural life. Recent education reforms that phase out Russian as a language of instruction in schools and universities have intensified domestic tensions regarding language use in Latvia. For many Russian speakers and non-citizens, these measures are perceived as exclusionary and have amplified the feeling of not being trusted. (Cf. Camut 2023; Language Magazine 2024) Even though all respondents demonstrated high levels of Latvian language literacy, they continued to describe Russian not only as mother tongue, but as bridge to Russian culture and shared identity.

"I don't have a connection to Russia. I have a connection with Russian culture in terms of music, in terms of literature, and, of course, in terms of language" (Anastasia, 14 April 2025)

In line with Cheskin's (2013) conclusions, the interview data supports the existence of an integrated, but culturally distinct Russian-Latvian identity in this study's cohort. This identity is

rooted in Latvia as a home but shaped by Russian language and culture as heritage. Contrary to many narratives of national security, there is little evidence among this study's interviews that suggests Russian language use is tied to political loyalty toward the Russian state. In fact, all participants of this study expressed that they have no strong ties to the state of Russia.

“Since I am a person who was born back in the Soviet Union (...) it is difficult for me to identify myself. I mean, I am a Russian speaker. I personally think (...) Russian is not Russia, and I don't want to be labelled as such” (Dmitrij, 26 March 2025)

These findings reinforce that Russian-speaking identity in Latvia is defined mainly through language, rather than political alliance. It challenges the simplistic narratives that equate Russophones with loyalty to the Russian state, or, conversely, with disloyalty to Latvia. It can be argued that non-citizen identity is, for many, deeply rooted in Latvia and yet distinct from Latvian culture. The patterns of self-identity among many non-citizens uncover notions of belonging to Latvia, while highlighting unique traits of Russian heritage. Seen through the lens of horizontal citizenship, these patterns of identity indicate a membership-in-practice: anchored and articulated in Latvia, even though it remains unrecognized by the state.

“I think there is not a single person who does not have Belarusians, Ukrainians or Russians on their family tree. That is, everyone is somehow connected, everyone in the post-Soviet space. Somebody 100% will have a [foreign] relative.” (Nikita, 13 April 2025)

Overall, the accounts indicate a locally rooted identity, shaped by Russian language and culture, but not by political loyalty to Russia. It underscores Lister's (2007: 50) claim that citizenship must recognize the intrinsic worth of all human beings and respect their differences to be inclusive and fair. Identity of the respondents remains torn between a unique form Russian-speaking 'Latvian-ness' and an externally imposed label marking them as perpetual foreigners. Identity formation will always remain an internally and externally negotiated process, but the accounts of non-citizens reveal that the legal label and the hostile perceptions of society is perceived as unfair and unjust. Breaking this hardened front could pave the way for a new 'Russian-speaking Latvian-ness' to prosper and seamlessly integrate into society, remaining distinct yet accepted. There are strong signs that, based on the outcomes of this study and although limited in scope, non-citizens do not feel like they exist in a space that allows for their distinct identity to flourish. It would be in the best interest of the state to accommodate and embrace such identities, because they clearly identify

a belonging to Latvia. However, until today, this identity remains seen as a threat to Latvia's core nation. Based on the analysis of the narratives of the interviews, I argue that the legal and social limbo in which non-citizens see themselves in is a much greater threat to a prosperous and culturally, linguistically and socially inclusive Latvia. There are very convincing signs that suggest non-citizens are more Latvian than they are Russian beyond their native language, and it must also be admitted that people have the right to self-identity as well as to embrace and live this identity, which is formed as much by family and personal history as it is formed by societal inclusion and a connection to the country they live in. Therefore, in line with Kuczynska-Zonik (2017), I argue that the current strategy regarding non-citizenship has lost its momentum and is no longer a viable path towards resolving the issue.

In terms of language use, Latvia is facing a complex dilemma. On one side stands a rights-based claim: the use of the native language is integral to cultural identity and personal dignity. Especially in Latvia's case, there is a strong argument in favor of the right to speak Russian, based on the country's history. This is not just a claim of Latvia's Russian-speaking non-citizens, but a universally accepted principle of the human rights regime. On the other side lies the claim of civic integration: the state has the duty to guarantee equal participation, which in practice requires a common state language to ensure all residents can communicate with authorities, access opportunities equally and fairly. Especially since 2022, after the invasion of Ukraine, policy shifts and the renewed fear of Russian aggression have increased this tension, intensifying the sense among respondents that their cultural and linguistic identity is treated with suspicion. The issue articulated here will likely remain one of the most fundamental obstacles in the future. Policymakers must find a way to honor both these legitimate arguments at once and (a) find ways to ensure equal participation is guaranteed for all citizens, while (b) recognizing and protecting minority language practices, and (c) de-securitize language policy by not treating Russian language as a proxy for political (dis)loyalty or to define who deserves to participate. As long as this critical two-sided issue remains unaddressed, language in Latvia will remain a recipe for conflict: claims of identity will continue to be experienced as exclusionary, and the goal of linguistic assimilation will continue to be perceived as denial of identity, perpetually fueling unfairness and exclusion.

While the respondents describe themselves as rooted in Latvia but culturally distinct from it, these self-definitions of identity often collide with those imposed definitions set by the state or society.

It is at this intersection between self-definition and externally imposed identity that experiences of exclusion and unfairness emerge. The use of language is most dominantly at the center of this collision. For non-citizens Russian language operates as a vehicle of culture, memory and ancestry, while for the state it is an instrument of integration and securitization. Russian remains a dominant marker of self-identity for many of the respondents. However, language use has become a persistent pressure point in Latvia, most visibly at the intersection of non-citizenship, security discourse and education policy. These identity findings explain why language becomes a site where recognition and exclusion collide, leading to direct forms of unfairness.

This section showed that identity is self-defined through culture, language and memory, while state frameworks often read these as security risks for Latvia's core nation. This helps answer the research question by uncovering why non-citizens experience citizenship as locally rooted yet politically contested, and it sets up the next section, investigating how these tensions turn into exclusion in practice.

4.2.4 Experiences of exclusion and perceived unfairness

The interviews revealed that non-citizens often encounter the boundaries of their own identity and sense of belonging as forms of exclusion and perceived discrimination. Such experiences do not only occur in formal citizenship frameworks, but also in everyday situations, education and language use. Analytically, exclusion can be theorized as the space in which self-defined identity collides with externally imposed categories of state or society. Building on the findings of 4.2.1-4.2.3, this section investigates where the intimate and place-based belonging and the distinct Russian-Latvian identity meet such social and institutional boundaries. The theme highlights how lived citizenship is marginalized in certain spheres, situating non-citizenship within questions of trust, fairness and recognition.

This section's analytical focus is set on perceptions of fairness and exclusion. As such, the section outlines three mechanisms that emerged as recurring patterns from the interviews: (1) perceived unfairness in citizenship governance, (2) experiences of cultural marginalization through language policy and (3) social othering in everyday encounters of respondents. Highlighting these is important to answer the research question, because such accounts of exclusion shape decisions about naturalization, trust in institutions of Latvia, as well as solidarity within Latvian society.

“I worked at the University of Latvia, which is kind of a base of ‘Latvian-ness’, right? And my colleagues were native Latvians. They perceived me quite normally, as their own. There was never any discrimination. But suddenly everything changed in '91. Some of them, they became hostile.” (Aleksandr, 22 March 2025)

The previous sections in this chapter highlighted how family ties and memory shape belonging, and Russian language and cultural practices shape non-citizen’s identity to a large extent. When respondents spoke about non-citizenship and the effects this status had on their lives, many of them repeatedly described experiences of discrimination. The forms of perceived discrimination they highlighted is experienced on multiple levels: in state institutions, in the application of the citizenship law, and in everyday situations within Latvian society. Across different narratives, participants described moments where language use, cultural markers or their legal status as non-citizens were grounds for exclusion, hostility or treatment they perceived as discriminatory.

According to Latvia’s citizenship policy of 1991, proof of direct Latvian kinship was necessary to obtain citizenship without the need of naturalization. Whether or not such steps constitute legal discrimination, one respondent interpreted it as exclusionary. He described that, after the fall of the Soviet Union, all family documents were lost, but “If such documents could not be provided, then regardless of whether you were born in Latvia, on Latvian territory, you get the status of a non-citizen (...) My grandmother was born in Riga. She was born in 1898, that is, before Latvia became an independent state.” (Aleksandr, 22 March 2025) As Aleksandr noted, this seemed like an arbitrary decision by the state, based on something that cannot be considered the fault of an individual.

Similarly, another respondent, born in Latvia after 1991, recalled:

“When I was already about 19 years old, I decided that I would apply for citizenship. (...). I speak Latvian well, I don't have any problems with the language, I work in it now. And I thought then it would not be hard. And they told me then that I would have to pass all the naturalization exams (...) when you're born here, you've studied and you can sort of make your own decisions, they make you go through all this bureaucratic hell” (Dmitrij, 26 March 2025)

By making participation contingent on tests for someone already socially integrated, the state recasts full political membership as probation, producing and fortifying the feeling of disenfranchisement. It highlights how procedural hurdles replace deeper layers of recognition, despite many signs of substantive belonging.

Language use and cultural practices were also experienced as sites of exclusion and ill-treatment. Education reforms in 2004 (Saeima 2004) and 2018 that increasingly prohibited Russian as the language of instruction in schools and universities were widely perceived as deliberate forms of othering and discrimination (LSM 2018; Epifanova 2018). The Latvian education reforms in 2004 and 2018 triggered protests in Riga against what was seen as “linguistic genocide of Russian-speaking citizens” (Interkomitet 2019). Under slogans such as “Hands away from Russian schools!” (ibid.) and “Latvia is my home - Russian is my language” (Tuko 2022), Russian-speakers and non-citizens protested the language reforms that prohibited Russian as language of instruction in schools and universities. For many of them, the state reforms were seen as symbolic exclusion, challenging identity and belonging of non-Latvians.

Such examples underscore how language and education policy frameworks become sites where identity is contested, and recognition is claimed. Some narratives can also be interpreted through Isin and Nielsen’s (2008) concept of “act of citizenship”. Such acts illustrate moments where non-citizens constitute themselves as claimants of rights by disrupting social and political hierarchies. These acts of citizenship do not always have to take the form of organized protests: Isin and Nielsen (2008: 6ff) argue that, by actively positioning themselves as “strangers” or “aliens” in everyday life, non-citizens constitute themselves as “those to whom the rights to have rights is due”. In publicly articulating these perceived injustices, Russian-speaking non-citizens practice horizontal forms of citizenship. In line with Isin and Nielsen’s core hypothesis, these acts, happening outside formal settings, shape the cultural and civic landscape of Latvian citizenship.

Several respondents recalled everyday stories in which they felt exclusion or discrimination. One respondent remembered a conversation:

“A very good friend of mine is Latvian. When all these events with the restoration of Latvia's independence took place, he told me you know, we Latvians don't need you Russians to know Latvian at all, we need you Russians to know your place.” (Aleksandr, 22 March 2025)

Aleksandr's account exemplifies the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006): language competence is dismissed by a hierarchical boundary-setting. Cultural and linguistic identity is converted into misrecognition and social othering, reinforcing perceived alienation.

Another participant shared an encounter with a citizen on public transport:

“We were travelling in a trolleybus, and she was offended by the free course for Russian-speakers in Latvia. She said they should just leave here and that's it (...) But I'm kind of Russian, I need respect too.” (Anastasia, 14 April 2025)

Likewise, this encounter illustrates how linguistic difference is translated into misrecognition, transforming cultural identity into social exclusion. Taken together, these narratives show how language and identity are mobilized as boundary makers (cf. Yuval-Davis 2006; Lister 2007) and signs of othering in the everyday social encounters of non-citizens.

Yuval-Davis (2006) theorizes belonging and citizenship as a multidimensional process, negotiated through social, cultural and political dimensions. The narratives here illustrate how citizenship is contested simultaneously on all three layers: (1) the political framework of non-citizenship restricts rights, (2) social hostility erodes belonging and (3) language restrictions marginalize a distinct cultural identity. Taken together, these instances reveal that fairness is conditional and recognition in Latvia is unstable. Experiences of exclusion help explain how the fragmented sense of belonging and the contested Russian-Latvian identity are reproduced on several layers, reinforcing the belief of non-citizens that their own identity and belonging to Latvia is incomplete. These layers of exclusions are further enhanced through the political exclusion of non-citizens from practically all forms of political participation, discussed below.

4.2.5 Political alienation and disenfranchisement

It is important to highlight the different emphasis of disenfranchisement and political agency in the analysis of this section. Disenfranchisement refers to the legal exclusion from electoral participation (cf. Isin/Turner 2002; 9ff; Manza/Uggen 2006). Political alienation emphasizes a lived sense of being unheard and unable to influence political decisions or public discourse, often expressed as powerlessness, distrust and perceived non-representation, even where social integration is high (cf. Lister 2007). The narratives of this study's cohort reiterate that

disenfranchisement is a key driver of wider political alienation. Together, they undermine political agency and erode democratic legitimacy.

Already in the earliest traditions of democracy, political participation (agency) has been one of the defining features of citizenship. As outlined in chapter 1, the right to have a voice in collective decision-making is the most fundamental characteristic defining a citizenry, outlining a political and social community. Modern concepts of inclusive citizenship continue to emphasize this aspect, reiterating that participation is not an additional right but the most fundamental condition of equal membership in a political community (cf. Marshall 1950, Lister 2007, Bloemraad 2008, Pocock 1992). If the right to vote is denied for a group of individuals, citizenship becomes incomplete. In Latvia, non-citizens remain excluded from all levels of electoral participation due to their legal status. The interviews uncovered an immense degree of political alienation among non-citizens in Latvia. The narratives further highlighted that political alienation drives profound feelings of wider societal and institutional marginalization. Importantly, political exclusion not only affects the lives of the individuals with such status, but it also weakens the democratic legitimacy of the state, when a significant part of the population is permanently excluded from political participation. The interviews in this study reflect some of the consequences that political exclusion has on non-citizens, but it also outlines the severe consequences for the state of democracy in Latvia.

Highlighting political agency and alienation is vital to investigate how non-citizens perceive and experience citizenship in Latvia. It is at this point, when the capacity to participate, be represented and to influence decisions is permanently lost, that the legal status of ‘Aliens’ becomes a lived reality. Political alienation fundamentally shapes how the respondents in this study evaluate their trust in institutions, as well as their self-understanding as full members of society. The emotional attachments to places and people are converted into contested membership when the political voice is denied. Analytically, political alienation operates as the link between the main themes outlined in this chapter: it reinforces exclusion at the highest level of democracy and blocks the transition of nuanced belonging into recognized citizenship. The lack of political membership also creates a feedback loop: it crushes the possibility of representation and deepens under-representation on the political stage. For these reasons, investigating political agency is paramount to answer the research question: it underlines why non-citizens experience citizenship as simultaneously lived

and withheld, and why the right to participation is a decisive condition for inclusive citizenship in Latvia.

Another important point becomes visible when analyzing political agency in Latvia. Decades of disenfranchisement have widened a structural gap between non-citizens and politics in general. Without the right to vote, many never had a chance to ‘learn’ democratic participation. Three respondents, and many other non-citizens born after 1991, never voted at all, despite being in their thirties in 2025. This is especially troubling because full citizenship presupposes active citizenry; yet several narratives suggest that there are no more strings attached to the political landscape of Latvia. Participation is perceived as illusory and foreign, and choices feel foreclosed because they never existed. The result of this not only civic withdrawal, but the inability to feel like there is a choice. It should be in the state’s core interest to cultivate and active and informed public. Based on the information gathered through the interviews in this study, it seems insufficient to just attempt to close this gap between non-citizens and politics. Merely granting voting rights risks addressing another issue superficially. The interviews show that three decades of political silencing have left non-citizens profoundly estranged from Latvia’s politics, and re-engagement will take sustained effort. Political campaigns and other attempts to politically socialize the people affected will be a difficult and strenuous task, but it will be a necessary step in the future to win back the hearts and minds.

Feelings of betrayal and disappointment emerged as strong themes in the narratives of this study regarding domestic politics and representation. These thoughts and experiences were particularly strong among participants who grew up in Soviet Latvia and supported Latvian independence in the early 1990s. For these participants, Latvia’s transition to a sovereign democracy was seen as empowerment that never came to realize, leaving a lasting notion of broken promises.

“In ‘91 during the collapse, after I voted for Latvia's independence and got what is called ‘a knife in the back’. My attitude towards my homeland changed dramatically. (...) Although I voted in favor of Latvian independence, I got this very status. (...) For me it [Latvia’s move to independence, Author’s note] felt like a revival, a real revival. But I just didn't expect it to go this way. I think I'm not the only one. A lot of people voted the way I did” (Aleksandr, 22 March 2025)

What Aleksandr mentioned here illustrates how disenfranchisement became experienced not only as betrayal, but as a permanent loss of voice in Latvia's society.

Testimonies like these uncover a paradox at the heart of Latvia's democratic project. Many individuals with deep ties to Latvia, who once acted as the founders of renewed independence, were later excluded from political participation and marginalized in Latvia's society. Non-citizenship became not only a legal status but also a symbolic reversal of democratic ideals. The narratives highlight how citizenship in Latvia became a mechanism of exclusion even for the individuals who participated in the democratic process of creating the state. Such stories also resonate with the preceding sections in this chapter, highlighting the contested space in which substantive citizenship is lived in the everyday, but contested politically. The experiences described by some underscore a deep sense of betrayal and trauma that continues to shape social reality.

Beyond historically rooted disappointment, respondents further described a lasting lack of representation and the impossibility to participate in contemporary politics. Grown over many decades, the degree of political alienation among non-citizens is massive. Some respondents indicated that they were very interested in politics, but, at some point, banned political topics from their own lives out of frustration, rooted in the lack of participatory possibilities. Others explained that, even though they are interested in Latvian politics, they never had the opportunity to be politically active. These accounts reveal a deep sense of distrust in the political system that prevails among the people who lack a political voice.

“I'm just out of the loop, so I can't say now whether I trust or not. But there is this feeling, of course, it's very difficult to have influence. I remember the feeling that it was very difficult to influence the situation. (...)” (Anastasia 14 April 2025)

When asked about hypothetical possibilities in the future, several respondents explained that there would be no-one to represent the interests of the non-citizen minority, because non-citizens are also exempt from holding political offices.

“At the moment I don't see any party that would represent my specific interests. In the Latvian Saeima, or in the Riga City Council. So now I believe that there is simply no definite choice for me. If there is no choice for me, why should I vote?” (Konstantin, 11 April 2025)

Anastasia's and Konstantin's narratives further highlight how disenfranchisement and underrepresentation cascade into the deep form of lived alienation that emerged as a theme from the interviews. The denial of one's legal voice and the perceived absence of representation reinforce one another, eroding political agency and ultimately breaking all ties to the political system the individuals live in.

Political disengagement emerges as a dual phenomenon. Non-citizens are not only formally excluded from participating in the electoral process, but they also simultaneously feel substantively unrepresented in Latvia's political system. Even if voting rights were hypothetically granted, all respondents concluded that no political party represented their core interests. This deepens the gap of political alienation even further: politics becomes perceived as irrelevant and distant. These explanations further underscored the degree of disillusionment and resignation among the respondents. One respondent explained that, after working abroad for some years, he/she is closer to obtaining voting rights in another EU country than in their own home, stipulating that in comparison to other EU countries, it would be obvious that non-citizens are simply unwanted in Latvia for reasons of national security.

Another fact that reiterated the urgency of addressing the issue of political exclusion and underrepresentation of non-citizens is the perception of Latvia's future among non-citizens. Talking about hopes and feelings regarding change in Latvia's non-citizenship framework, one respondent said:

“Either they'll just leave the country, or they'll get citizenship of other countries, or they'll just die of old age, and then this issue will die out by itself. Because I'm sure that by that time the state will not change this situation in any way.” (Nikita, 13 April 2025)

Reflections like these reveal how disempowerment gradually transformed into the deep political alienation that could be observed in the interviews. Some accounts relating to the political changes since the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022 further show that this divide is becoming bigger. In numerous instances, the interviews confirm Kuczynska-Zonik's (2017: 8ff) conclusion that there is no constructive strategy to solve the issue of non-citizenship. Although amendments have been made over the years, citizenship policy remains ineffective and will not ultimately eliminate the issue of non-citizenship completely. The percentage of second- and third-generation non-citizens in Latvia is still disquieting today, as Kuczynska-Zonik (ibid.) reiterates. Over time, this

persistent political neglect has translated into alienation, which is highlighted in many of the narratives collected in this study.

“But because of the government's policy that Russian-speakers are not welcome here, the Russian-speaking part of the country is losing heart. Why fight for something does not want you? (...) I mean, if you're not welcome here by the politicians, why would you fight”
(Nikita, 13 April 2025)

Together, all narratives recorded for this study showcase how the right to self-determination of non-citizens (cf. Lister 2007: 51) is undermined. The explanations of the interviewees illustrate a gradual transformation from political exclusion to hopelessness and lack of perspective and ultimately to a complete alienation from core democratic values. Reversing this progress might require decades of work to win again the hearts and minds of non-citizens and successfully integrate them into the political system. The accounts of respondents resonate with Turner's (2016) concept of “denizenship”: non-citizen individuals fulfill social and economic duties, but they remain denied the fundamental political rights that define full citizenship. This creates a form of political invisibility. Over the course of several decades, this invisibility has become customary. Non-citizens are an integral part of society, while simultaneously being excluded from decision-making structures.

Notably, these implications represent a profound issue for Latvia's democratic development. Non-citizens still make up nine percent of Latvia's population (MFA 2024), meaning that nearly one-tenth of the country is excluded from the democratic processes. These forms of exclusion and underrepresentation erode trust in institutions and solidarity, undermining the core democratic principle that all people living under the authority of a state should have the right to political representation. Importantly, the interviews suggest that feelings of underrepresentation are not exclusive to non-citizens alone but are also shared among many of the Russian-speakers with valid citizenship in Latvia. The findings therefore suggest that the right to vote is not just a symbolic issue but a fundamental implication in creating substantive citizenship. Without addressing this obstacle, democracy in Latvia is at risk of remaining partial and fragile. In theoretical terms, extending voting rights would not only restore agency and enable self-determination but also strengthen democratic resilience by ensuring that all members of civil society feel equally respected and accepted in the political community. A more integrated and equal society is also

more resilient to outside threats and foreign interference. While Latvian nationals historically often portray the securitization of non-citizenship in Latvia as necessity to guarantee domestic security interests, the insights of this study suggest the opposite. Prolonging the non-citizenship framework risks deepening alienation, weakening civic loyalty and stipulates far more serious consequences for Latvia's democratic resilience.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Answer to the research question

This thesis applied qualitative methods to investigate notions of citizenship and belonging among Russian-speaking non-Citizens in Latvia. The conceptual approach to this topic drew on a range of theories of the study citizenship. Using a broad theoretical foundation widely confirmed that citizenship is a multifaceted and relational process that unfolds differently under varying historical and geographical settings. Contemporary concepts of citizenship, such as Isin's and Nielsen's acts of citizenship (2008) and Lister's (2007) dimensions of horizontal citizenship proved valuable as tools to investigate how individuals experience citizenship outside of normative and vertical frameworks (cf. Isin/Nielsen: 2009: 3ff; Lister 2007: 50f). However, the case study also highlights that the normative, legal and vertical aspects of citizenship remain vital to draw a holistic picture and answer the research question as comprehensively as possible. The analysis of the findings has highlighted that patterns of incomplete citizenship appear on both the normative layers of citizenship, but also on emotional and individual layers that become more emphasized through the application of alternative citizenship theories. In order to situate citizenship within the complex and ambivalent history of Latvia, it was necessary to balance the use of normative theories as well as alternative approaches to citizenship as a lived process. Marshall's (1950: 10f) concept of "civil, political and social rights" provided a useful framework to highlight which dimensions of citizenship remain inaccessible to Latvia's Russian-speaking non-Citizens, illustrating the incompleteness of their membership. On the other hand, the work of Yuval-Davis (2006: 197ff) helped to make sense of the emotional and affective ties of belonging that could be uncovered in the analysis of the empirical data. Obstacles of recognition, as described by Bloemraad (2008: 160f), resonates with the finding that belonging requires more than just legal status, spanning another bridge between the normative and alternative conceptions of citizenship I outlined and

applied in this thesis. The combination of these theories, together with the qualitative approach that re-shifts the focus toward an agent-oriented perspective, allowed for the Latvian case to be analyzed and understood as both a problem of legal exclusion and of lived identity.

How do non-Citizens in Latvia experience citizenship and belonging?

The case study conducted as part of this thesis revealed several strong patterns within the study cohort. The interview material allows assumptions of a distinct Russian-Latvian identity among non-Citizens in Latvia. This identity is strongly tied to language use, a sense of shared history and cultural heritage that is also drawing strongly on the Russian language. These aspects, it can be argued, act as strong traits of identity and self-definition for non-Citizens. No evidence could be observed in this study cohort that suggests loyalty or strong feelings towards the Russian Federation. On the contrary, the interview data suggests a consistent pattern of rootedness to ‘places and faces’ in Latvia, challenging political narratives that equate the use of Russian language with loyalty to Russia. These patterns were visible by both participants born before and after Latvia’s independence in 1991. Rootedness is most dominantly expressed in the relationships to family members, physical places, childhood memories and a sense of shared memory. In expressing such relationships, all participants included in this qualitative study implicitly or explicitly expressed their belonging to Latvia on informal and emotional layers. Latvia is widely seen and perceived as ‘home’, equally expressing loyalty and belonging to Latvia. These findings were not only a strong pattern in the empirical material, they also support the existing body of academic literature that investigates identity formation in the Baltics (cf. Cheskin 2013; Cheskin/Kachuyevsky 2018; Maksimovtsova 2018). These findings also further support the value and advantages of qualitative methods to investigate citizenship, because such patterns are unlikely to be uncovered through qualitative research alone.

The legal status of non-citizenship remains a deep scar in the identity and self-definition of the individuals living with this status. The analysis of the case study highlights that the status ‘non-citizen’ is perceived and experienced like an externally imposed identity. This does not only obstruct the development of the self-definition as part of Latvia’s society, it also fosters alienation and disengagement. It seems unlikely that two such different identities, one externally imposed and the other self-negotiated, can coexist without friction. This argument is supported by the analysis of feelings of unfairness, exclusion and perceived discrimination; patterns of such feelings

and notions emerge most visibly where language use is contested and where these two incompatible identities collide. While the citizenship framework in Latvia continues to draw a strong distinction between a Latvian and a Russian ‘group’, this dichotomy is questionable, because Russian-speakers are not a monolithic group and the formation of Russian-speaking identity in Latvia is complex and interconnected.

Language, especially Russian, emerged as one of the strongest and most contested themes. Within this study cohort, Russian can be theorized as a medium of cultural heritage, family connection and self-expression. It can be argued that Russian language is central to the distinct and locally rooted identity that can be reconstructed based on the interview material. Simultaneously, however, language emerged as a site of contestation and exclusion. The prohibition of Russian language in education and the hostility towards the language that non-speakers experience is not only seen as cultural restriction, but also perceived as an attempt to erase identity. Based on these patterns, language simultaneously operates as a marker of identity and belonging and a source of alienation and othering.

Another major theme that surfaced in the analysis is the unsettlingly high degree of political alienation. Non-citizens remain (and often have been all their lives) legally excluded from voting on national and the EU level. This restriction transcends to other aspects of non-citizenship, posing a profound barrier to a full and substantive membership for the participants of this case study. Disenfranchisement fosters invisibility, the feeling of injustice and promotes a lasting sense of resignation. It not only weakens the feeling of belonging, but it also limits the inclusiveness and vitality of Latvia’s democracy.

Taken together, the analysis of this case study also highlights contradictions at the heart of Latvia’s citizenship framework. Latvia’s Russian-speaking non-Citizens perceive themselves as firmly rooted in Latvia as their home. Based on the empirical material, belonging is articulated through family ties, places and shared memories. However, this sense of belonging is constantly undermined and put into question by the imposed label of non-Citizen/Alien, by language policies that are perceived as hostile, and by disenfranchisement from all forms of political life. The result of all these aspects is a condition of incomplete citizenship: socially integrated, emotionally embedded but legally and politically marginalized and portrayed as perpetual outsiders, based on a legacy that is foreign to the non-Citizens themselves (cf. Isin/Turner 2002: 2ff; Lister 2007).

Uncovering these contradictions confirms why citizenship must be studied not only through the lens of legal status, but as a lived process, shaped by recognition, belonging, solidarity and everyday practices.

5.2 Contribution of this study and future directions

Many of the limitations of qualitative empirical research have already been outlined in the methodology chapter. However, it is important to admit that these limitations and boundaries shape in how far the conclusions of this study can be generalized. Mainly, the small sample size, the unequal representation of gender, lack of generational and geographic variation and the reliance on qualitative methods stipulate important limitations. At the same time, it underlines the value of nuanced bottom-up insights that only qualitative research can provide. Future research in this specific field should also consider the difficulties of reaching the wider non-Citizenship population. Even though the non-Citizen population in Latvia predominantly resides in the five largest cities, geographical distribution and residence in Latvia's periphery can play a major role in the perception of citizenship and belonging. Reaching these individuals will be a major difficulty for more comprehensive research of non-Citizenship in Latvia. Further, it must be anticipated that there is still a varying degree of distrust in both, politically sensitive research as well as 'Western' interest in this topic. My personal background, including my own lived experiences in Latvia as well as friends and acquaintances in the country could mitigate these obstacles to some degree, but it could certainly not erase them. Gaining access to first-hand information remains very difficult, especially in light of new geopolitical tensions between Russia and Latvia since 2022, that have undoubtedly created new difficulties for this research.

With all limitations in mind, I argue that Latvia's society is at a decisive turning point. The "unresolved question" of non-citizenship (cf. Kuczyńska-Zonik 2017: 9) can be understood as one of the last steps in a long cycle of post-Soviet political and societal transition. Latvia remains one of the most fascinating and successful examples of post-Soviet nation-building, and the country's firm position in the European Union is one of numerous indicators to support this argument. However, this case study indicates that reconciliation is not fully completed in this transitional process. It will be necessary not only on the level of government policy, but also within Latvia's society. While the material aspects of legal citizenship remain important, the empirical data indicates that societal reconciliation will be most crucial to foster societal cohesion. Recognizing

in solidarity the right to linguistic and cultural self-determination could prove as the strongest instrument to resolve the question of non-citizenship in Latvia for the individuals living with this status, but also for the state.

Individuals should not be required to prove loyalty to the country they were born in and the only country they have ever known as their home. Requiring this proof reinforces alienation, whereas recognition and solidarity with Latvia's non-citizens could foster mutual trust and commitment. The results of this case study do not indicate that immediate full citizenship rights for Russian-speaking non-Citizens would threaten sovereignty but rather strengthen it. Political recognition and honest societal acceptance would reinforce equality and shared democratic values on both the national and the European level. Moreover, the extension of full political citizenship rights could serve as a constructive mechanism to promote Latvian language use. By being politically recognized and accepted, the right to participation could be an incentive to engage more with the Latvian language, which is ultimately the language that the political process is negotiated in. In this way, full inclusion through citizenship could potentially increase the use of the state language among Russian-speakers. Recognizing non-Citizens as full part of Latvia's polity does not necessarily weaken the role of Latvian but strengthen it by tying language use to the exercise of such newly gained democratic rights.

This master's thesis contributes to the study of citizenship in Latvia in two ways. First, it confirms the immense potential and value of contemporary approaches to the study inclusive citizenship. Combining 'classical' approaches that focus on the normative and hierarchic structures of citizenship with perspectives that emphasize belonging, recognition and every day lived experiences proved as a fruitful strategy to uncover some of the ways in which citizenship is lived by non-Citizens in Latvia every day. The application of this multi-faceted approach to the case of non-Citizenship in Latvia demonstrates how citizenship cannot be reduced to legal status alone. An actor-oriented approach can help to better understand root causes of citizenship, naturalization, social friction and questions of belonging. Empirically, the case study provides first-hand experiences and insights from Russian-speaking non-Citizens. The patterns that could be uncovered through the analysis of their voices highlight that non-Citizens are deeply rooted in Latvia, but excluded through law, language and social othering. Methodologically, this study

highlights the value of qualitative research in social sciences to investigate patterns of citizenship and belonging.

While this case study cannot give all answers to the complex question of non-citizenship in Latvia, the analysis indicates that the benefits of resolving it could be far-reaching. Citizenship does not erase cultural and linguistic differences, but it nevertheless functions as a foundation for strong, cohesive and resilient societies. What emerges clearly from the findings of this study is that inclusion and reconciliation are not abstract ideas, but real possibilities and practical steps toward realizing the values that Latvia already stands for.

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