

Feminist and Bourdieu-Based Perspectives on Inclusive Security in Latvia

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Citation (APA Style):

Colvin, N.M., (2025). *Feminist and Bourdieu-Based Perspectives on Inclusive Security in Latvia*, Vol 1 (1), 69-78.

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Abstract: *This paper examines Latvia's response to Russian influence following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, focusing on media restrictions and language reforms affecting the Russian-speaking minority. While these measures aim to strengthen national security, they risk deepening exclusion and reinforcing narratives of discrimination. Drawing on Anne Tickner's feminist international relations theory and Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology, the study argues that security is enhanced not only through defensive policies but also through inclusive identity construction. A historical review highlights Latvia's long experience of occupation, identity re-creation, and demographic transformation, including the legacy of Soviet-era migration. Approximately one-third of Latvia's population speaks Russian as a primary language, and a significant minority remains non-citizens. These conditions create vulnerabilities that external actors can exploit through disinformation and diaspora-based narratives. Using a feminist lens, the paper reframes security as multidimensional, emphasizing everyday experiences, citizenship, and social belonging. Incorporating Bourdieu's concept of the social field, it proposes integrative pathways such as multilingual education, expanded civic participation, and investment in shared cultural capital to embed Russian-speaking residents more fully within Latvian society. Such an approach reduces susceptibility to malign influence while strengthening democratic legitimacy and long-term national resilience.*

Keywords: *Latvia, Russia, minority, feminist, Bourdieu*

1. Introduction

After the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, states across the former Soviet Union feared they might be next on the list. Many states saw the ease of Russian operations in Ukraine being possible due to the assistance of loyal Russian speaking populations in the area (Bergman, 2020). Latvia began efforts to curb the influence of Russia on the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia known as the *Krievi Latvijā*. These measures included a halt to retransmission of some Russian media sources, a program to replace these services with Latvian Russian language programming, and a controversial decision to significantly reduce the use of Russian in schools (Hodžić, n.d.). Russian media and state sources were quick to highlight what they described as exclusionary policies to a repressed Russian minority (TASS, 2018). This reaction could be seen as use of "Responsibility to Protect" norms set forth by the United States, to justify the activity of Russia in their near abroad.

Societies must take action to protect their selves in an environment where information technology reduces the cost and increases the impact of psychological trauma, whether coordinated or organically emerging. These adjustments are deliberate but not final – occurring at an increasingly rapid tempo and in a never-ending cycle. While protecting Latvia from the malign influence of Russia, the Government of Latvia must ensure its own protections do not lead to an opening for further disruptive interference. Restrictions to Russian language are not only a possible new vector of risk; they can also be seen as a risk to the legitimate rights of *Krievi Latvijā*. To prevent a self-fulfilling prophecy, this research asks: *What are the possibilities for the Latvian state to ethically recreate its identity regarding ethno-linguistic Russian minority to remove the vector of its destruction through possible Russian malign activities?*

A short historical review of the geographic, ethnic, cultural, and security of the region demonstrates the resilience of Latvian identity through its reimagining and deliberate creation. The factors leading to Latvian resiliency are critical to ensuring its survival in the future. Through the postmodern perspectives of Tickner’s feminism and Bourdieu’s sociology, a set of recommend solutions for future exploration are posited. While these proposals are not validated through full research yet, they demonstrate how a more visibly inclusive integrative approach could solidify *Krievi Latvijā* positions in the larger Latvian “social field,” reducing vulnerability to Latvian identity and physical security from external threats.

2. Background

The greater Baltic Sea region is cross-roads between east and west, northern Europe and Central, which created a heterogenous ethnic situation for centuries. The region was one of the last to convert to Christianity, maintaining its pagan roots well beyond other European regions, save for Lithuania. In the 13th century a variety of cultural groups including the Curonians, Semigallians, Selonians, Latgalians, and Livonians all inhabited the region. Vikings, the Hanseatic League, the Holy Roman, Swedish, and Russian empires all laid claim to portions of what is known as Latvia today. What Russia took from the Swedes, they gave to the Poles, and then got back (partially) again. Napoleon makes an (unsuccessful) appearance.

In the late 19th century, industrialization required engineering national political structures to aggregate state power. The mobilization of the national population led to a side effect of emergent national identities in cultural-ethnic groups as well. This led to the first of the Latvian National Awakenings, which would eventually transition to the *Jaunā strāva* or New Current socialist movement of the early 20th century. Even at this time, there was ideological competition of the ways to Latvian-ess, but the idea of a Latvian people was shared. During this period, some Russian inhabitants in the region saw themselves as one of many ethnic groups, bound to rise against the German nobles who controlled the area while still technically a part of the Russian Empire.

The states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were formed in the midst back-and-forth battles between White Russians, Germans, and then Red Russians. Latvians served in units of all forces, but the formative stage came in the waning days of the war with the establishment of national infantry forces, who fought to expel outside powers, which consisted mostly of communist Russians at this time (The Baltic Times, 2019). World War Two marked an extended interruption of independence with the establishment of a communist satellite state in the region, invasion by Nazi Germany, and then retaken by Soviet forces. Despite these endless bloody tradeoffs, or

perhaps because of them, Latvians maintained their identity.

Latvians remained behind the Iron Curtain but were provided special disposition in some ways. The Soviets used the seaside region as a playground and showcase for the supposed superiority of communism. However, these minor advantages were outweighed by massive relocation programs, bringing in ethnic Russians and pulling out Latvians attempting to build trans-union cohesion. Resistance, while ultimately ineffective, lived on through the “Forest Brothers,” losing about 3,000 of their number to combat or execution in the years between 1948 and 1957’s operations (LSM, 2018). The last of the Forest Brothers is said to have only emerged in 1995. The persistence and reemergence of Forest Brother narratives is another artifact of the latest reinforcement of Latvian national identity in response to an external threat.

The end of the Cold War in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania ended mostly with a song, not a bang. In a masterful campaign of soft power, opposition groups in these countries began highlighting components of Soviet Occupation. In June 1986, Latvians remembered the Soviet deportations of 1941, and then repeated the feat with their neighbors again in August (Baltic Way, 2021). These symbolic gestures began again until in August 1989 when over 2 million people joined hands across the three nations as a sign of Baltic solidarity. This led to the USSR admission of illegality of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact which provided a path to reestablishing independence.

The legacy of the Cold War resettlement remains in Latvia, where about 30% of the population speaks Russian as their primary language. Because of the Latvian constitution’s effort to preserve national identity, descendants of Russian relocation were not given automatic citizenship, even though many Russian speakers migrated prior to the establishment of the Soviet state. Approximately 11% percent of the population remains without Latvian citizenship, instead receiving only “nationality”. After Russia occupied Crimea with little resistance many became concerned that this would be repeated in northern Europe. Election of a right-of-center government in Latvia led to banning Russian based education in many schools. These events left some, but not all, Russians in the region feeling disenfranchised (Kim, 2018). The government and media in Russia latched on to these stories as evidence of Russian discrimination. No stranger to psychological warfare, the Russian government reinforced this narrative, in a reinterpretation of responsibility-to-protect doctrine, trying to establish itself as a great power looking after its diaspora.

While period includes great physical violence, it is also marked throughout by the struggle, mutation, creation, and recreation of identity, meaning, and narrative. While these concepts seem abstract, there are very objective consequences for those involved. As the world is increasingly connected to information, the potential for context change is real. To remain relevant, states will need to play an increasingly active role in reimagining their identities. Because tools of constructivism, critical theory, and post-modernism emphasize meaning, they are particularly useful in issues of identity. In particular, the feminist work of Anne Tickner and the sociological perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu can be leverage toward better understanding and action in the situation of Latvia and its Russian minority.

2.1. Analysis through Tickner’s Feminist Approach

Feminism international relations theory is a diverse field that is naturally skeptical of proscribed methodologies and is inclusive of other fields (Tickner, 1997, 620). The more general field of feminism is thought to consist of three to four major phases, or waves, that progressively

reinterpret women's place in society. As Tickner states, one of the most essential questions of feminism IR theory are to ask, "where are the women?" In this regard, there is some good news, in that women make up nearly half of Latvia's workforce, as well as a workforce participation rate amongst females that is at nearly 75%. While women's representation in the workplace is one of the highest in Europe, its representation in government is less evident. Although Latvia is one of the few countries that can celebrate a woman President and Prime Minister, their representation in the legislative Saima is less than 10-20% on average. However, a good argument could be made that women are represented to a greater degree than in many other countries.

In the region, including nearby Finland and Sweden, nations are incorporating feminist foreign and defense policy, including inclusion in institutions such as NATO, the EU, and the OSCE. This provides additional justification for those attempting a feminist perspective in domestic and foreign policy. Tickner does warn that a stereotypical association between women and peace movements paints women as naïve and is ultimately an unhelpful assertion of women's "nature" (Tickner, 1997). Moreover, she reveals that feminism opposes false dichotomies that place women and other groups in a subordinate position of hierarchy, while men are socialized into positions of greater authority, subjectively and objectively (Tickner, 1997, 621). Once socialized, each gender plays the role of its stereotype, meaning that male dominated institutions are more likely to emphasize power, rationality, and knowledge. It is a mistake to see feminist security approaches as "soft". For example, feminist foreign policies delivered Sweden and Finland into NATO in 2022. Finland's Prime Minister Sanna Marin delivered some of the clearest messages in the Russian invasion of Ukraine stating, "the way out of the conflict is for Russia to leave Ukraine" (Sharma 2022).

Despite eschewing an automatic association with peace movements, Tickner does highlight the role of feminism in more hermeneutic or conversation forms of engagement. Therefore, feminist do not begin with the assumption that what is current is natural in the world. Instead, they seek "voices of the disempowered and marginalized not previously heard" (Tickner, 1997, 623). Clearly feminism can be located in discussions of policy and security, but what about the issue of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia?

Feminism highlights important areas for the Latvian Russian minority issue. For example, the dominant security narrative is more likely to highlight that one third of the country speaks Russian, not that approximately 1/3 of that number (or 10% of the population) have a noticeable affinity for Russian policy. This is a much less threatening position that feminism would likely uncover and give voice to. Feminism is also more likely to acknowledge other anthropological and cultural observations that would reduce tension, such as Dr. Indra Ekmanis' (2020), highlights of "banal integration". In her work, she highlights the clear economic disparities from one side of the border to the other, a continuous high rate of marriage between Latvian and Russian speaking individuals, the rise of Latvian language use among Latvian speakers, and the sheer predictability that a city such as Daugavpils would vote to speak Russian, not as a matter of loyalty, but one of practicality. In each of these cases, feminism presents an alternate interpretation to the dominant narrative than a realist or even liberal perspective might highlight.

Many traditional approaches to international relations might miss factors such as banal integration because they do not describe classical sources of power or values. As Tickner (1997) points out, feminism takes a non-enlightenment and non-structural approach to security. Instead, feminist "define security broadly in multidimensional and multilevel terms." What matters to people, might

be personal or communal, and can cover a range of physical, social, psychological, economic, environmental, and other factors that affect life and its quality (Tickner, 1997, 624). While feminist acknowledge power and hierarchy, they are skeptical about the norms of these constructs produce because of the inequality they impose. Practically speaking inequality in hierarchy was first experienced by the Soviet domination of the Latvians. A feminist researcher might claim that this collective trauma is being unjustly transferred to the symbolic remainder of their previous oppressors, especially by a male dominated (right, realist) legislature. Correcting this inequality would be a priority to provide legitimacy of the state. This might be more likely to be achieved as justification for greater gender equality in the Saima.

Tickner (1997) also points out that feminist theorists are likely more concerned with consequences than causes as primary areas of conflict study. A focus on the impacts of Russian minority population might reveal the consequences “between the public and private spheres” which could reveal vectors of future Russian reinforcement. At the intersection of public and private is the role of the citizen - the individual’s rights and responsibilities in the realm of the social. Historically excluded from full citizenship, the feminist perspective would recognize the disenfranchisement of “stateless” individuals and look for ways to reconcile that. This is especially true since Russian minorities are excluded from voting, state service, and the military – areas which women have also been historically excluded. By invoking the protector / protected dichotomy, an important analogy emerges. In feminism, women are subject to decreased agency and self-esteem by their placement in the inferior “protected” role (Tickner, 1997, 628). Similarly, it could be argued that a stateless Russia-speaking minority suffers from similar suppression, increasing their vulnerability to disinformation and narratives of pan-Russo solidarity. Their exclusion from the in-group makes them vulnerable to the allure of an external out-group and creates an obstacle to state cohesion.

When Tickner critically reconstructs Morgenthau’s perspectives on political realism, she makes several conclusions about a feminist reformulation. First, she notes that a feminist perspective requires dynamic objectivity that responds to the environment with either development or domination, as the situation warrants. This requires multidimensionality and contextual contingency, using cooperation as a norm and exercise of power as a last resort. Because power is overtly masculine, it disturbs balance and subjugates the potential for collective improvement. Unlike traditional realism, a feminist reformulation asserts that every political action communicates a moral position. Since morality is non-universal, a process of exploration and alignment must be undertaken to find areas of commonality for compromise. In doing so, it becomes necessary to connect these moral elements to their source, the concerns of all people. From this perspective, a feminist approach would recommend a more inclusive approach to Latvia’s Russian minority situation (Tickner, 1988).

2.2. Analysis through Bourdieu Sociological Approach

The relational nature of elements discussed in feminist analysis is echoed in the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The references in this section are taken from his lectures from 1989-1992 (Bourdieu, 2014). Like feminists, he believed that structures are not universal or natural, rather they are constructed. Bourdieu recognized that social hierarchies were an inescapable reality of social existence. Moreover, he believed that once established, these hierarchies reproduce through the rituals, systems, and institutions that were their artifacts of social power.

Latvia's location on the pathway of conquerors put its structures in continual competition with external audiences. As with competition in other systems, adaptation was a key component for survival. Bourdieu's contribution is that he believed that adaptation was a product not of just mutation of social systems, but rather the deliberate decisions by agents to create change. This is a critical point to the problem at hand because it allows for the survival of a Latvian identity, without sticking to a singular, rigid definition of that identity.

Historically speaking, we see that with each iteration of *Latvian Awakening* the structures that emerge were a product of tied to the particularities of alignment with other structures in the environment. The building-block of this social construction are *fields*, which represent the arrayment of agents in relation to other agents, but also the relationship of fields amongst each other.

The characteristics of fields are created through the struggle between agents to occupy the dominant space in the field. In the situation of the Latvian Russian-speaking minority, it could be argued that there is a cycle of field adjustments occurring between different levels of realization. On one hand there is an internal field struggle to define what is Latvian and what is not. From a historical perspective, this is neither a new nor static situation. For example, the aggregation of 13th century ethnic groups into a Latvian people is one example of an internal field arrayment. The exclusion of Russo-slavic people into this group is likely the consequence of the inter-field struggle between the "Latvian field" and the reappearing Russian field. The proximity of the Russian field "pulls" Latvian Russian-speaking minorities implicitly and explicitly. The major mistake here is identifying language as the discriminating factor, rather than the values of individuals and communities. When this mistake occurs, then self-fulfilling prophetic fields actual grow through interaction. In other words, through exclusion of Russian-speakers, Latvian policy makers run the risk of creating the "out-group" they feared in the first place.

A major concern of Bourdieu's was resolving dichotomies phenomenon, such as the objective and the subjective. He posits that objective structures of social systems can be passed on to the subjective minds of the agents in the system. When a balance is struck between these elements a doxic relationship is created. Doxa represent the deep and otherwise unconscious understanding of the agent passed on from generation to generation, in a process known as social reproduction. From an application perspective, there is a doxic, but vulnerable, relationship between the states and the Russian minority based on trust. To maintain Latvian identity, the state suppresses the use of the Russian language. In doing so, the state creates an otherness which self-referentially justifies its decisions. In other words, in their response the Latvian government may have created a "toxic" doxic.

As quoted at the beginning of this paper, Bourdieu believes that states, not individuals hold the primary responsibility for creating social realities. Blending with the feminist perspective, I posit that the responsibility is to build ethical and effective creations. The Latvian Third Awakening was marked by a separation from Soviet control, with recognition of Latvian traditions as they were understood by the collective memory. This memory was influenced by the narratives (social / cultural capital) of the previous awakenings. However, one could be a Russian-speaking minority living in Latvia and agree with the idea of separation from the USSR. The movement was as influenced by place and values rather than blood or language, making it more inclusive than some contemporary definitions of identity.

With the move toward European integration through the EU and NATO, the Latvian field is

influenced by a wide variety of external fields which include based on ideas such as multilateralism, transatlantic cooperation, and a multiplicity of liberally generated political views. Each of these factors influences the Latvian field, especially in the realm of who is out and who is in. Whether the third awakening is ongoing, or a fourth is underway, it might be asked whether masculine narratives such as the Laplecijas (Bear slayer) narrative are becoming more prevalent over the more feminine Daina (song story) traditions, as a symbolic reflection or signal to the commitment to collective security. Likewise, “harder” social policies such as moves to accelerate the influence of Russian culture might be influenced as much by western fields as eastern ones, or internal Latvian field struggles.

Field influences are not a necessarily a threat, but they will almost always have an influence through the exchange of capital. As power is described earlier by Tickner, Bourdieu also takes a wider approach to capital, adding social, symbolic, informational, and cultural to the economic. He calls the state, “the Bank of Social Capital,” responsible for its investments in relationships. Here he might even partner with Tickner to call for greater women’s participation in investment strategies, as they are responsible for the “invisible work” of social maintenance in most societies (Bourdieu, 2014, 239-241). Combining his and the feminist perspective in another way, the Latvian government may need to find more nuanced approaches to maintain the relative stability of the relationship between the Russian minority and the Latvian identity, if they are to gain stronger long-term coherence. By blending Bourdieu’s concepts and feminist perspectives, we can propose pathways forward that are not just “congruent with their particular interests until a certain period of time” (Bourdieu, 2014, 175) but congruent with everyone’s interests, over durable periods of time.

3. Discussion

On one hand, feminist perspectives are skeptical of the existing hierarchies exerting power, especially when they are exclusionary to certain groups. There is hope in implementing a feminist informed agenda in Latvia, as it maintains some leading indices of female inclusion in Europe. A feminist perspective would hopefully recognize the Russian minority as stuck between a patriarchal rock and a hard place, with the rolling boulder of Russian conservatism the one to avoid. Feminism should recognize that Latvia and European Union present a stronger chance not just of women’s actualization, but for better opportunities for the Russian speaking minority in general. However, feminism would also recognize that policies that appear to target Russian-speakers need to instead increase inclusiveness and participation. The feminist approach is empathetic to the marginalized and seeks their emancipation, yet it does not do so if emancipation leads to greater suffering.

Meanwhile, Bourdieu’s perspective sets the responsibility for reality creation squarely in the state’s area of responsibility. Russia uses state means to create new social realities, actively expending capital to reshape fields and form new doxa. The Latvian government has done so as well. They have even attempted to frame their language reforms as a beneficial to the minority population by providing better educational opportunities and occupational access. But it is difficult to appeal to better angels when the state’s actions make daily life more uncomfortable for the agents in the field. To paraphrase Tickner’s perspective on the use of power, non-cooperative disturbance of internal field coherence should be the choice of last resort, not the first.

People are not unaware of the dynamic for change, or are they necessarily opposed to being convinced of different pathways. However, people generally want to retain their agency when those changes are made. When done truthfully and transparently, states should not fear field adjustments. However, alluring “spin” may be, eventually it can create a crack that is vulnerable to countering capital investments. This is Russia’s recent advantage but also its weakness. It has found the activities in western culture that are out of alignment with the espoused values of the liberal order. In the short term, this helps legitimize itself to fence sitters. However, the grass is not greener on the other side of the border and that difference can be used as an honest assessment and communication of the value of Latvian, European, and Western fields.

While these propositions are framed as recommendations for action, they have yet to have been rigorously explored. Therefore, they should be approached more like a research proposal than fully formed calls to action. With that in mind here are some concrete steps for future exploration:

The first proposal is to “De- weaponize” not “re-weaponize” language by creating educational requirements that are focused on multilingual proficiencies, not a single language. The current approach attempts to increase the field of Latvian culture, by reducing the social and economic capital of the Russian language. An alternate approach might have paired mandatory second or third language instruction, with a proficiency requirement slightly less than the Latvian language. Another option would be to alternate language by school year in these areas, so that a co-development could occur. By focusing on multilingual education, Russia might have become one among many secondary languages, instead of having the appearance of being targeted. As other ideas are introduced, additional language measures will be highlighted.

The second recommendation is to create Trans-Baltic and Trans-European Russian Integration Groups (RIG) to help coordinate Russian communications with a western orientation. In the former Soviet Union, Russian is the *lingua-ruskyi* of especially certain generations. Historically, Russia has sponsored these groups to highlight symbolic and physical inequalities in these nations, causing divisions. However, if former Soviet states could form or reinforce their own Russian language groups, they might possibly change the narrative. While it might be a slow build, highlighting the advantages of generations of Russian speakers outside of Russia could help showcase liberal advantages. These groups may also prove to be a pathway toward reconciliation of actual wounds of division. Third, it may have the advantage of highlighting the possibilities of a more liberal Russia. This is a particularly important consideration if Russia’s invasion of Ukraine leads to a collapse of the current regime. The resulting internal instability will require tools to create a better version of Russia.

The third recommendation is to spend *social capital on cultural embrace*. Through transnational and national cultural integration groups, measures can be taken or reinforced to integrate producers and consumers of cultural and social capital. Reducing the means for negative media transmission from Russian sources was the right decision for the Latvian government. Ideally, they would have been prepared to substitute the loss with positive sources, which they are working diligently to create currently. Transmission is not the issue, but content is. In a country that is closely linked to arts of all type, especially music provides a tremendous opportunity. Sponsoring artists from the Russian-speaking population with grants to shape truthful narratives. Identifying Russian-speaking contributors with western values as artifacts and creators of content is critical.

4. Conclusions

The story of Latvia is marked by the intersection of communities which have combined through force or peace for hundreds of years. The resilience of Latvian culture is a testament to its durability, but also its flexibility. The strength of Latvian people is knowing when to fight and when to adapt. As the world continues to change, but at a rapidly increasing pace, the tempo of adaption will need to change with it. If the nation steers itself too far to one extreme or another, it may experience difficult consequences. However, there is every indication that the Latvian people and government are more than up to the challenge. This paper does not mean to imply that the Latvian government does not understand the sensitivity of this issue, are not already acting responsibly or cautiously. However, it does look to apply schools of thought applicable to the situation to provide an outsider's perspective. It also highlights how this otherwise domestic issue is usurped by external players, creating a difficult two-level game for Latvia. If that was not hard enough, Latvia must also consider the impact of oversimplified understandings of the situation common in some circles, especially the United States. In fact, despite the concern of western defense and media circles, things remain quite stable in eastern Latvia. Latvia Public Media's (LSM) Mike Collier pointed out that the biggest problem with Latgalians is their "stubborn loyalty" to Latvia. Latvia's Russians are no fools – they understand that life is better for them than their relatives on the other side of the border. He goes on to say that "with seminars and briefings on a weekly basis talking up the threat posed by Kremlin "hybrid warfare" and disinformation, we should be impressed that despite being bombarded with such nonsense, Latvia's Russians are remarkably resilient to it" (Collier, 2014). Ann Tickner might ascribe this resilience to the participation of women in visible ways throughout Latvia. Bourdieu might talk about the transfer and storage of capital by adaptive fields. While the past informs the present, it cannot guarantee the future. While Bourdieu highlights those states produce the social construction of the future, he would also acknowledge that smart investments of capital are needed to respond to changing field configurations. The key to the future is to ensure that responses are inclusive not just in their scope, but their integration as a true part of Latvian society. Post-modern, constructivist, feminist, and other integrative tools are useful tools to maintain fair, equitable, and cohesive societies, in Latvia and elsewhere. As Sweden and Finland's feminist-informed leaders have shown, when the time to fight comes, it is better to do it together, held together by our values, not our ethnicities.

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