

## 8 State to Love, State to Hate: Vernacular Concepts of State in Latvia

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### 8.1 Introduction

The noun *valsts* (the state) is among the most often used words in the online comments left by the readers of Latvian news portals. Apparently, Latvians are concerned with the idea of the state. This certainly indicates a certain salience of the concept that needs further investigation the results of which are described in this chapter. The original data comes from two sources. First, 243 randomly selected readers' comments containing the word *valsts* published in 2011–2016. The texts were extracted from the corpus of comments *barometrs.korpuss.lv*, which processes the publications in three largest Latvian news portals *Delfi.lv*, *TVnet.lv* and *Apollo.lv*. The second source of the empirical data are twenty in-depth informal interviews carried out during a short field trip to the central (conducted by me) and northern (conducted by Kristīne Rolle) part of Vidzeme province in summer 2015. This material was combined with the field-data that I had collected over a longer period while carrying out research on other topics throughout Latvia, which occasionally contained information about attitude towards the state. The transcripts, notes and texts of the Internet comments were coded and analyzed in a manner of grounded theory. While the texts from the Internet required a lot of guess-work as of to what the authors actually meant and the meaning had to be extracted from the context and manner in which the noun 'state' was used, the interviews presented the possibility to get much more precise answers, test some assumptions and find out motivations.

Just like the 'expert' concept of the state, the Latvian vernacular concept presents a wide variety of perspectives in which the speakers discuss state, some of which are contradictory. Sometimes multiple concepts are, with no apparent confusion, used in the course of one or two consecutive sentences. Therefore, the vernacular concept of the state is not a coherent model that Latvians use in their everyday life, but rather it is a vague, ill-defined 'word' of everyday parlance. Nevertheless, it presents a spectrum of attitudes towards the state and also provides some clue as to why the term creeps up as the most frequently used noun in the Internet communication.

In this article I will argue that Latvians (the data comes almost exclusively from ethnic Latvians, all collected material was in the Latvian language), in contrast to at least part of the academic discourse, do not strongly contrast themselves as a body of subjects to the state in general. Instead, the picture is of a mixed and contradictory nature. Firstly, sometimes the state is strongly treated as a Latvian national/ethnic project. Thus, the state is mostly a representation of the Latvian ethnic community. This representation is well-visible in the discourse on the Latvian language as the state language. However, conceptually this is difficult to reconcile with the fact that much of what is the state now was the state during the Soviet regime. It is also quite clear that the actual process of running the state is not ideal, resulting in difficulties to associate the state buildings or political actors with the state, substituting them with generally honorable members of the community and buildings with historic value. This schism is further expressed in a generally perceived helplessness regarding influencing the state policy, which partly explains the activity of commenting the state on the Internet – a semi-magical means of influencing the reality.

## 8.2 Expert views on the state

What I am describing here is a vernacular concept of the state, i.e., one that is expressed by members of the general public who are not specialists or experts, but who use the concept without much conscious reflection upon its content. In contrast to the vernacular usage, academics have had long and difficult discussions about the nature and content of the state and, indeed, the very definition of the concept. In addition, there has been no shortage of authors who have argued against the possibility of using the concept of the state as an analytical concept (see Abrams 2006; Mitchell 2006).

Several large trends in expert interpretations of the concept can be identified. The first is the positive idea that the state is out there, and one can define it. Max Weber's definition of the state represents (and is often referred to) this direction: "[A] state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (1946: 78). Versions of legal definitions of the state also enumerate elements that a state should possess to be treated as a state. Thus, for instance, the Convention on Rights and Duties of States (the Montevideo declaration) gives this definition:

"The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: a) a permanent population; b) a defined territory; c) government; and d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Available online: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/intam03.asp/](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/intam03.asp/).

However, these kinds of definitions crumble as soon as one needs to use them for the purposes of social analysis. What, for instance, is the minimum of the state (regarding territory and community)? Who are the 'community' here? Who and over whom does the community have the monopoly of violence?

The opposite view deconstructs the state as a fiction of sorts. The classical Marxist approach portrays the state as an apparatus that is designed to protect the interests of the ruling class at the expense of the exploited classes. As a result the ultimate goal of social evolution according to the Marxist vision should be destruction of the state itself (Abrams 2006: 91). According to the Marxist interpretation the idea that the state is anything more than just a mechanism of exploitation is a fiction, part of the ideology needed to maintain this mechanism operational, a kind of ideological mask. American political scientists came to a similar conclusion when at the wake of the discipline in 1950s they dismissed the concept of the state as an analytical term in favor of 'political system' (Mitchell 2006: 171–72). This echoed what social anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown wrote in his foreword to a book conspicuously called "African Political Systems" (rather than states) that "The State, in this sense, does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of the philosophers" (1950: xxiii). For an anthropologist studying traditional forms of political organization in Africa (divided by colonial empire-states) it was all too clear that the Weberian approach could not be applied to make sense of the ethnographically observed realities.

Eventually the concept of the state re-entered the academic discourse. While in some domains the concept denotes a particular type of social organizations (as in debates over strong, weak or failing states), in another, particularly where empirical reality of the state is studied, the state is left altogether undefined simultaneously accepting it as a social reality that exists in people's minds. The analysts that accept this perspective, move away from trying to understand what the state is to how is it made, enacted and experienced in everyday settings. The concepts of governmentality and discipline developed by Michel Foucault (1977; 1991) and of state effects proposed by Mitchell (2006) have a heavy influence upon the studies, especially in the field of anthropology of the state (see for instance Reeves *et al.* 2014; Mühlfried 2014). Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (2002; Gupta 2006) argue that the state is produced and enacted through the everyday encounters with various entities that stand for the state – including such details as the visit of a state inspector to the factory or an encounter with a policeman. Buildings and infrastructures certainly play an important role in producing the state and are routinely manipulated to this end (Scott 1998; Bissenova 2014; Laszczkowski 2014; Bellér-Hann 2014). However, whether buildings indeed produce the effect they are intended to and whether the citizens perceive a building as representing the state (and if so – which particular buildings) is not quite self-explanatory. Mühlfried (2014) has attempted to investigate, which buildings highland Georgians in Tushetia associate with

the state while Scott (1998) builds the whole 'state perspective' around architectural and space-linked elements.

There are several large lines of the academic discourse this article engages with. The first is the assumption about the opposition between the state and the citizens (or subjects) as two more or less cohesive entities. In this discourse the state is a power-holder that actually or potentially oppresses the citizens and the citizens are actively or passively resisting the oppression. Although as Mitchell (2006) has shown, this division and opposition is a result of particular mundane activities and in practice cannot be observed, contemporary policies that rely on the concepts of 'civil society' as opposed to the 'government' embed such division in concrete everyday experiences. Therefore, it is plausible to expect that when Latvians speak about *valsts* they would treat it as somehow separate from *tauta* (the people, the nation).

The second line states that it is a near natural desire of a citizen to be engaged with the state processes as deeply as possible. The active citizen suffers if he/she is not able to exercise the entitled power. An alternative line advanced by Clastres & Hurley (1989), Scott (2009), Sedlenieks (2013), Mühlfried (2014), is that citizens do not necessarily desire being engulfed by the state and consequently are prone to escape the state rather than actively and creatively cooperate with it. While the perspective whereby the citizenship is a uniformly desired entitlement is based on the idea that the state is a product of the community (as in Weber's definition) which acts as one, the second perspective tends to take an approach which interprets state in much less favorable manner. The state is not necessarily a beneficial force for every individual subject, it is, as Marx pointed out, also a mechanism of exploitation often usurped by one or another power-group. Sedlenieks and Mühlfried have argued that in societies such as the former socialist countries that have experienced a 'century of perestroikas' (Grant 1995) the safe bet for a subject is to keep away from being drawn into the state rather than engaging fullheartedly in the duties of an active citizen.

In what follows I demonstrate that the totality of positions and attitudes of Latvians vis-à-vis the state oscillates between three points. One point is the assumption that the state is in fact a Latvian ethnic project. Another point is that the state is an entity that is somehow distanced from the speaker and the group that she/he describes as 'us', but which is often benevolent, caring and protective. The third point is the evil one where the state is a clearly antagonistic power the aim of which is to exploit the subjects. However, these three points are more analytic rather than representing some kind of sociological groups or situations. Perhaps it is even possible that this large spectrum is possible because on the everyday level Latvians imbue the term *valsts* with meanings that might have been described analytically more precisely with some other words, for instance 'government', 'community', 'country' or even 'territory' and 'land'. This large spectrum of meanings that can be attributed to the word partially explains why *valsts* became a noun number one in the Internet comments.

### 8.3 State as an ethnic project

To a certain degree the idea of the state for contemporary Latvians cannot be separated from the ethnic idea, i.e., the state is an ethnic project and it is difficult to even think outside this frame. This became clearly visible in a conversation that I had with Guntis, a man of about 70 years. Most of his life he has lived in approximately the same area of central Vidzeme and most of these 70 years he had to spend in the Soviet Union. When I ask him about the similarities or differences between the state in the Soviet period and now, in the independent Latvia, this is what he answers: “The Soviet times – it was not a state. Did people have any power then? I would say it was the heaviest occupation for Latvia”. For Guntis, the power of the people seems to be an element that differentiates the state from a ‘heavy occupation regime’. This regime in turn cannot be the state because apart from the lack of popular power it was not the Latvian ethnic project that he now associates with the concept of *valsts*. Elsewhere Guntis is even more direct:

Each nation (*tauta*<sup>2</sup>) has the right to self-determine. Latvians have Latvian state, its task is first of all ensuring existence of Latvian nation. I fear to think what will happen if the Africans arrive. There are plenty of Muslims from Central Asia already in Moscow ... altogether one cannot know what will happen and if Latvians will last for long.

Thus, the state is here to protect ethnic Latvians and the regime that has not such an aim, cannot be even classified as a state. Unexpectedly, this became apparent when I asked Guntis and other interviewees to name people that they associate with the state. They mentioned people with ‘national backbone’ rather than politicians or policemen. Consider the following conversation with Uldis, a man of about 60 years:

Yes, there is someone named Ainārs, he was the chief postman back in the days [Soviet period]. He originally is from Piebalga, but he has lived here all his life and knows all the people. I once nominated him for the Person of the Year prize and he got it. He was one of the first activists of the Popular Front, the chief of the horse-breeding section, he still remembers all names of all horses even from 30 years ago!

*Question:* But why do you associate him with the state?

Because he is a fierce nationalist. We have also Juris, he is also a fierce nationalist. He lives here nearby...

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<sup>2</sup> The first definition of the word *tauta* given by the online *Modern Latvian Language Dictionary* (tezaurs.lv) outlines a group of people of common ancestry and language; the second definition is “totality of residents (in a state, country, territory etc.)”. *Tauta* does not have the citizenship component that the English term *nation* has. Latvians use also the term *nācija* to speak of *tauta* in relation to the state.

Thus, the person to be associated with the state is the one who is a good nationalist. The connection with the political or administrative state structures is not a pre-requisite for such an association.

More interesting facets of the close link between the ethnic belonging and the state are revealed in the Internet comments that mention the ‘state language’ (*valsts valoda*).<sup>3</sup> The Latvian language became the official (or in Latvian ‘state language’) in 1998 with the amendments to the Constitution. The subsequently adopted State Language Law (*Valsts valodas likums*) declares that Latvian is the ‘state language’ in Latvia. All other languages except the almost extinct Livonian are considered foreign.

When the ‘state language’ is mentioned in the Internet comments it is almost invariably in a xenophobic context. The authors, as it seems, draw a particular authority from the fact that they are native speakers of the state language. The fact that the commenters speak Latvian and the state also ‘speaks’ Latvian, creates a special, ethnic bond between these two actors. Consider the following comment:

Vsem “osvoboditelyam” [to all “liberators” who comment in Russian]! I know the Russian language very well, but I am not about to use it here, therefore I am going to ask in the state language. (TVNet 2014)

The comment starts with a phrase in transliterated Russian, calling out to all “liberators”. The double quotes emphasize that the supposed liberators were not, in fact, liberating, but occupying forces. The fact that this is written in Russian means that the “liberators” were Russian and that the descendants of the “liberators” (here identified with the occupation forces themselves) do not speak Latvian. Instead of saying ‘the Latvian language’ the author emphasizes that Latvian that he/she is using is the state language and Russian is not. The following quote indicates the same principle: “How about the right of the Latvian people [*tauta*] to use and popularize the state language in their own state and in the public media space?” (TVNet 2014).

In other situations, the xenophobic undertone becomes more prominent. The following comment is about the necessity to translate information from Latvian into the language spoken by the people for whom this information is intended.

The worse they will know the state language the quicker they will give slip to where they feel better. The only case where there should be a [state sponsored] interpreter is in criminal courts. We should have regulation that in all other places in the state the communication must be in the state language. (Delfi.lv 2016)

The first sentence refers to the idea popular in the nationalist circles according to which the people who are not happy about the existing order in Latvia should leave. Most usually it is attributed to Russians, suggesting that they should move to Russia.

<sup>3</sup> Official translation of the term in English is ‘the official language’. Therefore I put the ‘state language’ in inverted commas to emphasise the meaning in the Latvian language.

This sentence also suggests that ethnic non-Latvians do not belong to Latvia. The following comment reiterates “return to motherland” topic:

If you don't want – nobody forces you [to stay in Latvia] – go where you can speak your tongue and don't ask that my country – Latvia ‘teaches’ the state language to the unwilling!! (Apollo.lv 2016)

The language is a particularly salient determinant of ethnic belonging in Latvia (just like in many other societies). It is by language that one often can establish connection between him/herself and a person that is otherwise a complete stranger. As Benedict Anderson has demonstrated, unification of language, creating of ‘official’ or ‘literary’ languages were instrumental in development of nations as ‘imagined communities’. Anderson (2006: 88) describes how the Russian Emperor Alexander III attempted to unify the empire by making Russian the only official language, banning minority languages from the public use. The Baltic provinces of which the lands inhabited by Latvians were part, felt this ‘Russification’ significantly and the period is still remembered in Latvia as violence against basic national rights. ‘Russification’ was among the causes of discontent that lead to the revolution of 1905, which is widely treated in Latvian history as a precursor of attempts to create an independent Latvian state.<sup>4</sup>

Language thus creates a bond between the speakers, symbolically proclaiming that they are somehow the same and at the same time different from others – those that do not speak the language. The idea of the term ‘state language’ (in contrast to, for instance, ‘the official language’) thus establishes a particular link between those who speak the language and the ‘state’. The state of Latvia speaks Latvian, it is the language of the state and thus those who speak this language belong to the same entity, they and the state are at this level identical – members or elements of the same community.

This link between Latvians, the state of Latvia and the Latvian language partially explains the agitated state that Latvian-speaking residents of Latvia descended into during the referendum on the state language in 2012. The organizers of the referendum proposed that the Constitution should be amended and the Russian language should be declared a second state language. There are, of course, many other reasons why Latvians felt threatened by this proposal and mobilized to a loud ‘no’ vote, but the association between the state and the ethnic Latvians was much to do with this mobilization. If there would be two state languages the unidirectional symbolic link between Latvians and the state of Latvia would be endangered. It might have also provided a possibility for Russian-speakers to identify with the state: should the referendum be successful, the state would now be speaking two languages Latvian and Russian.

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<sup>4</sup> Establishing and standardizing the national variations of what used to be called the Serbo-Croatian language in the ex-Yugoslav countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Croatia was an important step after the socialist Yugoslavia split into several independent states (Brković 2014).

The link between the state, the Latvian language and ethnic Latvians also gives opportunity to imagine that speaking the Latvian language is a declaration of loyalty while speaking Russian inevitably gives grounds to doubt the loyalty of the speaker. This explains the hostile tone of the above-quoted Internet comments.

The fears that the referendum of 2012 and some other events sparked among ethnic Latvians, lead to work on the so-called ‘core of the constitution’ initiated by lawyer Egils Levits. His idea was that there is an unwritten basic set of principles that the Latvian Constitution, *Satversme* was based on. The group of lawyers set to work and eventually a new, greatly extended preamble was developed and adopted by Saeima in 2014. This preamble was supposed to work as an explanation of why the state of Latvia exists and what are the core values of this state. Ethnic Latvians (*latviešu tauta*) and the Latvian language achieve a particularly prominent position in the document. The preamble states:

Since ancient times, the identity of Latvia in the European cultural space has been shaped by Latvian and Liv traditions, Latvian folk wisdom, the Latvian language, universal human and Christian values. Loyalty to Latvia, the Latvian language as the only official language, freedom, equality, solidarity, justice, honesty, work ethic and family are the foundations of a cohesive society.

Although it is not self-evidently clear from the text, ethnic Latvians and the language are given here an extraordinarily central space. Thus, if the original preamble which was only 13-word long used the term ‘The people of Latvia’ (*Latvijas tauta*), not differentiating ethnic belonging of the ‘people’, the new preamble clearly set ‘the ethnic Latvian people’ (*latviešu tauta*) as more central to the state. The language of the Latvian ethnic group was clearly embedded in this imagery of the Latvian state. This embeddedness of the ethnic Latvians, and their language as core elements of the state of Latvia can be seen clearly in the following official commentary on the meaning of the above text by Ringolds Balodis, one of the authors of the new preamble.

The first sentence mentions the Latvian language as an element of Latvian identity along with Latvian traditions, but in the second sentence Latvian language is emphasized as the state language which is the only one [the only state language] and it is linked together with loyalty to the state of Latvia. (2014: 131)

Consequently, it seems that the assumption that the state in Latvia (at least as long as it is the state that is defined by the current constitution) is a project of the Latvian ethnic group, and that this special link is defined through the language the use of which somehow indicates loyalty, is not only a vernacular idea but also one shared by some experts.

The assumption that the state is an ethnic project sometimes causes paradoxical problems when Latvians need to identify the state in more abstract terms. If the state is the state of ethnic Latvians, it seems, the organization that is not created by or for ethnic Latvians, cannot be state at all. This was well visible in the above-mentioned

quote where Guntis said that the Soviet Union was not a state but an occupation regime. This problem manifests itself also in the way some buildings are perceived in relation to the state. When it comes to the representations of the state, as some scholars have argued (Mitchell 2006; Sharma & Gupta 2006; Bissenova 2014), buildings stand prominently as symbols of the state. Therefore, following the example by Mühlfried (2014), I asked my interviewees what buildings they associate with the state. Contrary to what I expected, buildings of schools, museums, and even historic castles (which often are both, schools and museums) dominated the list. Although some interviewees spontaneously mentioned the local and even the central government, it was not the first choice. In one of the interviews it became clear that the interviewee perceived the functional overlap between the supposedly ethnic Latvian state and the Soviet state to be an insurmountable contradiction. When I asked Edmunds if he associates the current building of the local municipality (that also houses post office and several other municipal institutions) with the state, his answer after a very long and considered pause was: “Well, the office of the *sovkhos* [the Soviet state-owned collective farm] used to be there. How can I associate it with the state?”

When speaking about the buildings that represent the state the academic discourse usually assumes that these are buildings that have been built, commissioned or supported by state institutions. The purpose of the construction then would be to give a clear and visible message to the subjects about the presence of the state. The difficulty of Edmunds to associate the building of the local government with the state comes from this kind of association. The building was constructed during the Soviet period by the local *sovkhos*. The offices of the *sovkhos* were situated there. For Edmunds it is clearly very difficult to reconcile the *sovkhos* with the ethnically-bound Latvian state.

However, the interviews demonstrate also another possible, but rather different, way of treating the concept of ‘state’ in relation to buildings, i.e., the state is something that is created or owned by the society collectively, as is seen in this fragment of conversation between Mārīte and Visvaldis:

*Mārīte*: “If that does not belong to me, then it belongs to everybody, if that does not belong to a single individual, then it belongs to something larger.”

*Visvaldis*: “Everything that has been built some time ago, whether 20, 50 or 100 years ago, that is all state. That is mine because I am the citizen of the state. That belongs to us.”

Old buildings thus become part of the community and, by implication, part of the state. This explains why refurbishing and even reconstruction of old buildings (for instance reconstruction of the 18<sup>th</sup> century City Hall and the medieval House of Blackheads destroyed during the war in Riga) was such an important part of shaping the outdoor space in Latvia since regaining the independence. The buildings that once could have been perceived as representing the oppressive rule of the Baltic German

aristocracy (e.g., historic castles, manors or municipal buildings) were now safely included in the public imagery of the Latvian state. Regaining independence was legally positioned as a continuation of the state of Latvia, the existence of which was only interrupted by the Soviet occupation. Thus, reconstruction of the old buildings fitted the pattern of thinking. The buildings themselves were old enough to have lost the association with the current regime and acquire the features of the state as a common property. The more recent buildings, associated with the Soviet rule could not be as easily associated with the state as the above quotes indicate.

The ethnic Latvians thus see the state as a part of their national idea. This should mean that they feel a part of the state and have a personal identity-level connection to it. The reality is more complicated as the connection gets distracted by another perception of the state where the citizens have little power and the state is perceived as an entity on its own.

#### 8.4 Together or apart from the state?

Analysis of the Internet comments leaves a mixed impression regarding whether the state subjects (commentators) feel a part of the state or separate and opposed to it. A large group of comments demonstrate that the authors clearly feel either a constituting part of the state or the part of the community which has created the state institutions as means to achieve some goals. Such statements are most often visible in comments that criticize the realities of the actual practice as in the following comment.

But, first of all, the people of Latvia [*Latvijas tauta*] should clearly demonstrate its negative attitude towards the activities of S. Āboltiņa [an influential politician], because otherwise the state of Latvia will continue on the road of degradation of democratic order. We, the people of Latvia, risk that the degrading of state order will not stop at this precedent. (TVnet.lv 2011)

The state here is a common property, a tool that the people of Latvia have built. The activities of a particular politician can damage this tool and therefore the people need to do something – in this case ‘demonstrate negative attitude’. Another commentator criticizes corruption and by that takes the position of some ownership: “The President needs to work in the [presidential] castle, he must draw changes to the law in order to start imprisoning those who steal from the state” (Apollo.lv 2016). The next example, though, gives somehow less clear picture as of whether the commentator feels a part of the state or not.

This pal [an allegedly corrupt official] needs to be in charge of the amateur theatre in the Riga Central Prison. How rotten should be the state if thieves steal people’s money for years on and nobody can do anything with that! We need corporal punishment – beating with lashes! Lash him to blood so that the back is raw and I doubt he will continue steeling! (Delfi.lv 2014)

Is the author treating the state as something that he/she also belongs to or not? Perhaps more the former as he/she clearly takes offense for the thieves, due to whom, one can assume, the state is so rotten, not that the thieves themselves are the state. Expressions such as ‘our state’ indicate that the author is talking about the state as something that is not separated from the society or which belongs to the society.

The ownership of the state and the sense and reasons for perceiving one as a part of the state, could be more clearly seen in the interviews, because here we had the possibility to ask the question directly. The interlocutors often agreed that the state is the society and as such they themselves belong to the state.

*Osvalds*: “What is the state? We all are the state. The state is the territory that we inhabit and where all the laws and borders are established. We are part of that state [literary ‘form the contents of the state’]”.

*Helga*: “Can the state exist without us?”

*Osvalds*: “It cannot! If there are no people, what happens? We are almost the most important ones [everybody laughs]. There are still no robots”.

Osvalds’ description echoes the two definitions of the state mentioned at the first part of this article, including such elements as the territory, laws and community. However, the idea that people might be the most important element of the state seems so absurd or so bold that it causes laughter. Thus the ‘community’ mentioned in Weber’s definition remains an ill-defined part here. Moreover, at the end of the reply Osvalds mentions robots. It is not perfectly clear, but robots usually are perceived to be machines for work. Thus, the phrase might mean that Osvalds actually thinks they are the most important part of the state not because they are the ones who form the state but simply because they do all the work upon which the state exists.

Sarmite another pensioner from Central Vidzeme replies similarly to my question of whether she feels like a part of the state: “[H]ow can I not be? I was born and live here, but as we talked with the friends: we are only the solders, we can listen how the parties talk and quarrel, but we cannot change much”.

Accordingly, the fact that the subjects are part of the state or even constitute an element that the state cannot exist without, does not mean that the people actually are the state. In all the above examples the state is something rather external to the subjects even if they perceive the state as their own common property or instrument for achieving certain ends. Aina, a pensioner from Northern Vidzeme draws a close emotional link with the state, but also indicates that there is a rather patronizing reciprocation between the subjects and the state: “The state is something that we love. State is what gives us our pension... but only if it is deserved”. Here the state gets almost fetishized as an all-encompassing provider and actor that requires reciprocal relationships. When we directly asked what the purpose or the benefits from having a state are all interviewees could come up with a list, which usually concentrated around security and stability.

Thus, although Smuidra lives in a private farm she still says: “In fact the state has provided me with everything that I have – the house and security”.

Andris who has moved to England and talks to me while on vacation in Latvia tells that “the state is the one that takes care of the people”. For him British state does take much better care of the citizens than Latvian state. In a similarly contrasting way Valentins compares the current Latvian state to the Soviet state explaining that:

Russia, Moscow gave everything. They gave everything: tractors and all. Do you think we could have earned all with our own hands? They gave everything. During the Soviet times there were *kolkhozs* [collective farms], if five tractors came then because the Moscow had assigned five tractors. The factory produced, and they shared. The same tractors were sent to Kazakhstan, but it is not like that here. Here the farmer is breaking his back, working hard, buys that tractor and nothing works and that's it. The state does not help.

The discourse of the state that is supposed to help and provide benefits (rather than redistribute the common wealth) was widely shared throughout the interviews, although not nearly always in as critical a light as described by Valentins.

Although the state is a national project for Latvians and although it is a tool created by the people, it also can become an entity on its own, quite separate from the subjects and when it does, the behavior of the state is usually quite negative towards the citizens.

## 8.5 Persons to be identified with the state

This brings us back to the state as a Latvian national project. The state as described by the people in the interviews and the comments alike ideally is the Latvian ethnic project, it is something that they like and that they identify with through the means of shared language. This ethnic project, however, does not work quite like expected. It has been corrupted through crooked politicians and sometimes contaminated by survivals of the Soviet past (as represented through the buildings that are now used by the current state institutions, but which used to be Soviet offices of power). As a result, the politicians or high-ranking bureaucrats that one would expect to be associated with the state, do not achieve such a status. None of the people we interviewed spontaneously named a politician as somebody that they would associate with the state. Instead they named local people with apparent national/ethnic backbone. Thus, for instance, Ilze, the pensioner mentioned already before, says:

Anna, my friend and neighbor is perhaps one of such people. Previously she worked at the Occupation Museum [in Riga]. She does not work there anymore, but she often actively participates [in social life] and reacts to all events. She is definitely a person with a state-oriented thinking. I don't know any other such person...

Ilze cannot think of another person that she would associate with the state. The politicians, bureaucrats that are in charge cannot be associated with the state as they are rather the reason why the state cannot work properly, why it cannot provide in the manner that it is supposed to. Such a discrepancy between the actual actors of the state institutions (like politicians or bureaucrats) and the individuals the interlocutors associate with the state illustrates another gap: despite being part of the state, the interviewees did not feel they could influence much in the way it operates. Sarmīte (above) says that she and her friend believe that they are ‘soldiers’ that can only march, while the commands are given by somebody else. Baiba links politicians with the people who elect them, but feels that the task of the voters is mostly to be commanded or ruled over:

I would say that the MPs are also the state, because without the MPs we are small and insignificant: whatever they decide, we obey – to all the laws and all the parliaments. And without the people they are nothing – over whom are they going to decide to?

The space between the state as the entity that is ‘our own’, with which one identifies on a very personal level, mediated by the state that might be providing different benefits and the realization that one is just a soldier, a receptor of orders without many possibilities to do something, to participate on the level of decisions is important in understanding why there are so many references to the state in the Internet comments.

## 8.6 The magic of Internet

The comments on the Internet should not be treated simply as malignant ranting whereby some individuals who have nothing better to do are expressing their primordial hate. Instead, it should be treated as an attempt to turn the machine of the state to the correct path. I was prompted to this by Andra, who, upon hearing that I was researching relations of citizens and the state, exclaimed: “But I am, every day, actively participating in the state”. Expecting that Andra was an activist of some NGO or another group, I asked what she meant. To my surprise she answered that she was posting comments on the Internet news portals. She perceived this activity not as a pastime or a channel for her anger but as a productive activity that she performed as a citizen. There was a clear sense of mission in what she was telling. From this perspective the comments that claim the state to be part of the society, as ‘our’ or ‘us’, may be read also as texts whose purpose is to attack the malady by words, by intentions, by the “energetic value” and thus improve the situation. The commenting on the Internet therefore becomes akin to a magic ritual whereby words are believed to have the potential to escape the medium on which they are written and influence the world. There is, indeed, a whole range of

comments that contain prayer-like formulas or curses, for instance: “God bless Ināra and Latvia! Latvia! Latvia!” (Apollo.lv 2016), “May she has God by her side when Devil takes her to hell” (Apollo.lv 2016).

Similarly, the comment quoted earlier in the text, which demands that people (probably on the Internet) express their negative attitude towards MP Solvita Āboltoņa so as to preserve democracy and the state, comes very close to this idea. It is, of course, difficult to draw a line between a simple use of metaphoric and powerful language and magic rituals. Both are supposed to have impact by means of words. It is clear, though, that at least for the people who engage into writing comments in the Internet news sites, the commenting becomes an arena of real or imaginary enactment of citizenship. Commenting that include swearing, telling jokes about the powerful (see, for instance, Mbembe 2006; Scott 2009) are widely used ‘weapons of the weak’. Whether these weapons are effective in this or any other situation is a different story.

## 8.7 Non-Latvian perspective

The data on which this article is based, as stated in the introduction, comes almost exclusively from comments in the Latvian language and from the ethnic Latvian interlocutors. The perspective of the people who are not ethnic Latvians or do not speak Latvian has been left out. This is an important drawback of this study since only about 60% of inhabitants of Latvia are ethnic Latvians. However, it is possible to speculate that their discourse on the state in Latvia would not be remarkably different. If Latvians perceive the state in Latvia as a largely Latvian ethnic project, it can be expected that the non-Latvians would hold a similar idea. On these grounds they cannot be expected to have the same kind of positive identification with the state of Latvia. Quite the contrary – due to the language they speak, their relations with the state of Latvia would be perceived as somehow alien or antagonistic. The discourse on the ‘state language’ constantly reminds them of this awkward position of speaking the language that is not the ‘state language’.

In this context it is possible to expect that the state as an actor on its own would be more prominent, leaving non-Latvians even less integrated in the project of the state as the ethnic Latvians themselves are. This situation could be observed during the construction of the large brand-new building, the Latvian National Library that lasted six years (2008–2014) and the costs rose to almost 270 million euro. Although the construction was criticized for the costs and lack of proper management, ethnic Latvians in general accepted the building as an achievement of their state. The building was nicknamed the Palace of Light (*Gaismaspils*) after a legend describing a millenary rebirth of a nation and put into poem and song by no less legendary poet Auseklis and composer Jāzeps Vītols about a century ago. For ethnic

Latvians the Palace of Light was thus both a national symbol and an expression of the common achievement of their state. However, the building received much more critical attitude among the Russian-speakers who generally saw the building as a waste of money.

That non-Latvians also perceived the Palace of Light as not particularly suited for their identity is apparent from the contents of the 'Peoples' bookshelf'. This is a bookshelf that is centrally displayed in the building and is several stories high. Everybody was (and, at the moment of writing this text, still is) invited to contribute a book that is particularly important for the donor. Although there are some books in other languages, and some books are in Russian, the absolute majority is in Latvian. Supposing that the majority of books were donated by the residents of Riga where ethnic Latvians are not a majority, it is clear that Russians were much more reluctant to donate books. For them, the Palace of Light then is a construction that Latvians erected, that represents the ethnic Latvian character of the state.

## 8.8 Conclusions

I started the paper with inquiring as to why the concept of state (or the noun *valsts*) is so prominent in the Internet comments. The expert concepts of the state fluctuate from treating the state as antagonistic to the citizens on the one hand, to being an expression of the citizens on the other, and then again being an imaginative effect with little physical reality. What becomes apparent after the analysis above is that for non-expert Latvians the state clearly is real enough. There is no notion (at least no visible notion) about the illusory nature of the state. It is no less real than the Latvian nation or the language. Since the Latvian interlocutors and the authors of the Internet comments treat the state as a part of their ethnic project (along with at least some experts), they feel that there exists some bond between them and the state. Perhaps in some moments they could even say that the people and the state are the same. Although such an idea is not something that would spring to mind readymade. That is because the state at the same time is treated as an (at least potentially) exploitative, threatening or simply unjust. People may form an important part in it, but not as equals. They are either soldiers or workers while, perhaps, politicians keep the steering to themselves and thieves (the concept that overlaps with the idea of politicians) appropriate the benefits that should have been distributed fairly.

This picture invites us to expect a rather revolutionary spirit. However, that is not something that could be seen in either of the materials I analyzed. The commentators or interviewees may be at times very critical and very disappointed. They clearly see deficiencies and they clearly see the fact that some resources are (due to ignorance or ill intentions) unequally and inadequately distributed. But the answer to this problem is not a willingness to change the system or as it seems – to engage in the political

struggle. Rather what could be observed was a reluctance to be involved in the political activities on an equal level. This possibility is replaced by restraint, an escape from the involvement or commenting on the Internet – an activity that resembles a magic act. The commenting could be interpreted in the light of Scott's ideas of the weapons of the weak, i.e., activities that are undertaken by those who do not see or do not have any other means of political struggle.

Thus, it seems that there are in fact two states – the ideal, cozy ethnic Latvian one, which is almost synonymous to the idea of an ethnic group or nation – it exists by itself, composed of the individuals and is somehow eternal, floating above the everyday problems. Then there is another one, which is difficult to identify with and which often is unfair or plainly evil. Reconciliation between these two parts is hard and at times creates some cognitive dissonances like exclusion of buildings of old Soviet-time buildings and active politicians from the spheres associated with the state.

At the same time the state itself never gets questioned. If there is an idea that the state is an unfair organization, it is not at all clear what could be done apart from punishment of the ones who steal. The state is treated as something that exists objectively, but at the same time quite independently of the people. Cognitively it is not only linked to the idea of nation or ethnic sentiments, but also is similarly related to the individuals, that is, the individuals form the body of the state (or nation) but have little or no influence over it. They feel proud or they love the state (or the nation), but that does not matter much because the state is going to be there anyway. Both the Internet comments as well as the interviewees were quite angry and critical when the state was in question. The analysis shows that this anger often comes from the notion of state as a common property or resource that should have been divided equally, but which is not. In addition, all common property becomes the state.

The state thus is a strange mix. It may be represented by buildings, by people, by some practices and rituals. It in some sense is eternal like nation or ethnic group, simultaneously it clearly did not – there were occupations and annihilations throughout the previous century. And still the common property was created, and it did belong to the people commonly, this property is something that lasts throughout the changing political regimes and acquires new, confusing meanings. So do some people and some structures. The concept of state is not clearly defined nor can it be defined, but this is precisely what makes it usable for wide coverage of both that which one loves and that which one hates.

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