Discoursive Region Building in Latvia: The Case for a Contemporary Identity Search

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Abstract
Three decades into the independence restoration of Latvia and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the country has integrated well into the Western community. It is a member of the EU and NATO, the Schengen area, the eurozone, and, since recently, OECD. Turning Westwards, Latvia attempted to abolish the post-Soviet and enter the European spatiality above all to secure the country’s physical existence. But not less importantly, to redefine the collective understanding of the Self. The principal argument I make in this article is that countries with the Soviet past may seek their contemporary identity in self-attribution to the desired political regions. That is, embed their new identities in discursive regionalism. The example of Latvia showcases the argument. However, ambiguous discourses of the Latvian regional belonging persist in the national imaginary. The range varies from the post-Soviet and its milder alternative – Eastern European – to the Northern European and Baltic. The mixed regional affiliations result from inconsistencies in the region-building approach exercised by the political elite of Latvia. They stem from the country’s ontological security search in NATO and the EU accession aftermath and amid the war in Ukraine within the newly acquired regional identities contrasted with the vestiges of the Soviet past.

Keywords
discourse analysis, Latvia, region building, ontological security, perceptions

Introduction
2024 will mark 20 years into Latvia’s membership in the EU and NATO. Accession to the organisations was a ‘correction of history’, and a break of ties with the Soviet past, declared the prominent Latvian poet Māra Zālīte following the Latvian EU referendum in 2003. According to the then-President of Latvia Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, the ‘Yes’ vote tore down the last border in Europe demarcated in 1939. Latvia finally ‘returned home’, underlined the Prime Minister of that time, Einar Repše (Vēstnesis, 2003).

The metaphorical reunification with the West had to secure the physical existence of the Latvian state and nation (Dzenovska, 2018). But it also was to craft a new identity of the country – a new perception of Self. While nationalism as means of self-definition was the initial response to the
independence restoration and the post-Communism environment (Kaprāns, 2016), the EU and NATO membership in 2004 added a European layer to the national narrative about what the country is. From the ‘child of concern’ who strove to embed its statehood in the European and Transatlantic space in the 90s, Latvia had become Europe itself (Kozlovska & Kesteris, 2016, p. 8) (Riekstiņš, 2016, p. 13). Since then, Latvia has joined the Schengen area and the eurozone. The country is regarded as high-income, according to World Bank. Recently, Latvia entered the ‘rich country club’ by accessing OECD. And still, the post-Soviet space and its milder alternative – Eastern Europe – has not vanished from the Latvian imaginary. The Nordic region with Latvia among its members has not been established and the Baltic grouping as an organic and desired affiliation space has not been fixed either. Such state-of-the-art differs, for instance, from the Visegrad countries’ experience. They have rebranded themselves into Central Europe in about the same time span (Kazharski, 2022).

The NATO and the EU accession phase have terminated in Latvia. Despite the institutional Westernisation, its aftermath has revealed the persistent differences between the historic ‘West’ and the post-communist newcomers. This has urged anxiety about the country’s actual belonging status and its foundation (‘anxiety of backwardness’ (Subotic, 2018)). ‘Peace anxiety’ (Ejdus, 2020, p. 215) with the disappearance of raison d’être after the ‘return’ to Europe is certainly another characteristic of this time.

It is against this background that the war in Ukraine in 2014 became yet another impulse to rethink the shape of European spatiality in Latvia. Subjectivity and politics on identity have been closed down – securitised (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 241). Othering and contrasting vestiges of the Soviet and, by and large, Russian past with Western practices have become a dominant paradigm in redefining Latvian as European. The repeated aggression of Russia in Ukraine in 2022 further fostered the new East and West divide in the Latvian discourses. And still, neither Latvia’s old and unwanted spatial belongings have dissolved, nor have the new and desired fully established in the shadow of war.

In this article, I take on to investigate the Latvian discourse on the country’s regional belonging since Russia’s war on Ukraine in 2014 (and amid Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine launched in 2022). Not less importantly, I investigate why have the discourses been constructed in a particular way. What is this an instance of thus becomes the guiding premise of this article. I argue that countries with the Soviet past may seek their contemporary identity in self-attribution to the desired political regions. That is, embed their new identities in discursive regionalism. The case of Latvia is taken as an example. In Latvia, ambiguous representations of the country’s regional belonging, however, persist. The mixed regional affiliations result from inconsistencies in the region-building approach exercised by the political elite of Latvia. They stem from the country’s ontological security search in NATO and the EU accession aftermath and amid the war in Ukraine within the newly acquired regional identities contrasted and othered from the Soviet legacies.

To illustrate my argument, I will first introduce Iver Neumann’s discursive region-building approach and then ontological security concept through the regionalism lens. I will empirically blend these two in the later stage. Zooming in on the divergent Latvian regional affiliations, I will apply the region-building approach to depict how political spaces are discursively constructed and, adding to Neuman’s method, disintegrated (explicitly or omitting certain discourses). The ontological security will be employed to investigate the identity features attributed to political spaces and how the Latvian contemporary Self is sought through them. By doing this, I will attempt to demonstrate my theoretical argument – the discursive region building means can serve the ontological security management ends. Whereby nationalism and religion are predominantly linked with ontological security notion in literature (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 756) (Auers, 2022; Dzenovska, 2018; Kaprāns, 2016), regionalism can offer equally fertile soil for crafting state identity, particularly in countries with the Soviet past.

Methodologically qualitative analysis of the Latvian discourse on the country’s regional belonging will be in use. The ruling political elite dictates the discourses and embeds them in the common
understanding (Neumann, 1994; Neumann, 2008). Hence, official and semi-official sources will be assessed (Kazharski, 2020; Weldes, 2015). As for the official discourse, the public speeches of the three leading political figures in Latvia, they are, President, Speaker of Parliament, and Prime Minister are considered from 2014 to 2022, as well as the defining state policy planning documents (e.g., National Development Plan, National Security Concept, State Defence Concept, Annual Report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the accomplishments and further work with respect to national foreign policy and the European Union). Semi-official sources include statements of other political players and representatives of state institutions in the media and social media. Both the domestic and international public appearances will be considered to comprehensively track how the national narrators self-attribute Latvia to political spaces. I use keyword search (Kazharski, 2020, 2022) to identify discourses and their contexts (narratives, tropes, historical references) on ‘Europe’, ‘West’, ‘Eastern Europe’, ‘Northern Europe’, and ‘Baltic’. The following research logic was pursued: the first research round included a systematic analysis of official speeches and documents. When the dominating themes were detected, other semi-official and media (occasionally) resources were used to illustrate my claims better.

**Regions as Contextual and Subjective Imagined Communities**

A point of departure to understand the region emergence and dissolutions in their member imaginary is defining what regions are. The constructivist perspective on regions as practices of representation is applied. Resulting from contested power relations, they are social constructs made in broader social practices. They are a constellation of agency, social relations and power (Passi, 2009, p. 133).

Regions are further conceptualised according to Iver Neumann’s notion of imagined regional communities (Neumann, 1994). The approach is built upon Benedict Anderson’s renowned concept of nations as imagined communities. According to Neumann, international regions are claimed to be ‘a cognitive construct shared by persons in the regions themselves’. Contrary to the orthodox definitions reliant on the fixed geographic, cultural or historical genesis of particular spatiality (changing over time, though), the region-building approach centres on regionality’s subjective and contextual nature. Fluidity and ever-changing boundaries are at its core.

Subjectivity refers to the fact that the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of regional space, hence its borders and very existence, is a product of their authors. Domestic discourse creates a representation of reality that agents suggest (McSweeney, 1999, pp. 77–78). The political elite determines a programme of exitance for a particular collective, be that a nation or a group of countries, and subsequently develops arguments to underpin its existence. For the region to establish, it must be embedded in social consciousness (Passi, 2009, p. 136). Or vice versa, for dissolution, it must vanish. The line where a region is present and where it is not and why is drawn through the discourse. In this sense, the political nature of regions is acknowledged. Although Neumann’s approach does not rely on the omission of discourses as its constituting element, the silence strategy is generally used in discourse construction (Huckin, 2002), including for creating identities in the post-Soviet space (Edenborg, 2017, p. 295). This article will empirically add to his approach in this respect.

Contextuality, to its turn, can be observed in how exactly the outline of a region, just as that of a nation, is constructed. The ‘building material’ (e.g., cultural, historical, and political episodes) is carefully selected. Only elements deemed essential to fill a spatial site with a temporal meaning, acknowledging its existence in the given moment of history, are underlined. Ideas, not kinship, determine the shape of a region, according to Neumann’s approach.

I will apply Neumann’s approach to illustrate the genesis and the construction process of the regional affiliations of Latvia. My endeavour will focus on the underlying narratives and biographical contexts, their constructors and the political goals they pursue.
Ontological Security Through the Lens of Regionalism

The region building is intertwined with the region’s ontological status relative to its founding units. The coherence between the self-perception of a state and the understanding of its region foregrounds regional emergence and endurance in the state discourse. With regional identity and awareness at its core, cognitive regionalisation has been regarded as a ‘new regionalisation’ form (Hurrell, 2007, p. 129). Although multiple logics interact and compete, including economic, geopolitical, security, and identity in defining regional boundaries, identity can arguably consolidate all the other logics. Under such an assumption, the identity of a region may serve not only for delineating the spatiality – the result – but as an instrument for crafting a self-perception of its members who tend to routinely exercise certain logics in a certain way (Subotic, 2018).

Routinised practices and relationship modes with significant others, partners or enemies, are prerequisites for cognitive consistency and biographical continuity. It is a sense of security known as ontological security (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). It is a future-oriented feeling of durability of social life in an ordinary and predictable rhythm. Ontologically secure individuals and societies believe in having autonomy over their routines and future. This has to do with the system of fundamental security (Giddens, 1996, pp. 50–65). Predictability and agency form a safe cocoon for individuals as much as states to guard them against anxiety.

In such context, the common practices as well as institutions manifest spatial boundaries (Passi, 2009, p. 137) and provide states with habitual algorithms for interaction with others. Regional identity thus becomes a layer in the state’s ontological security. Security communities are seen from such a perspective. They enhance the ontological security of their members through the established interaction mode, which signifies their distinctiveness (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018). The EU is an excellent example, with a distinct ‘civilian identity’ embodied in certain cross-member relationship (Mitzen, 2006). NATO serves as another example (Ejdus, 2020, pp. 216–217). Europe, in a broader regional sense, with its particular interpretations of history, specifically of Holocaust, depicts one more identity-based community (Subotic, 2018). Europeanness is also demarcated via commonalities in people feeling of insecurity (Kinnvall et al., 2018).

Following the logic, when a country decides to substitute its practices accustomed to one spatiality with alternative ones, they also attempt to transition from one region to another. Distortion of ontological security foundation is triggered. The search for a new basis of Self may not be easy, especially for countries with foreign subjugation history, say colonial past (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 756). Several authors discuss the post-colonialism in Latvia and the broader post-Communist space (Anns, 2014; Moore, 2001; Silova, 2014).

Traumas, crises, political transitions or even lasting stability, and Latvia has experienced them all, rapture routines or purpose of development bringing existential anxiety to action. To fend it off, identity should be stabilised as generally proposed by Giddens (Giddens, 1991, pp. 35–55), often securitising subjectivity, or opened up for experimenting with the collective body as noted by younger generation scholars like (Kinnvall & Mitzen (2020)). In Latvia, rather than affixing one self-perception, multiple identities are discursively crafted. However, as illustrated later, they all are constructed against one – Soviet (equating Russian) identity, othering and delegalizing its presence in Latvian history. Hence contemporary ontological insecurity of the country is fuelled. Such observation is consistent with tendencies in other post-Communist countries (Subotic, 2018; Subotic, 2019). Nationalism for self-definition in protest to all Soviet and Russian in Latvia has been widely recognised in the literature (Auers, 2022; Dzenovska, 2018; Kapräns, 2016). I will apply the ontological security framework to show that the identities of political regions are bound up with the collective identity of Latvia for doing the same – managing the country’s understanding of Self.
A Broad Consensus Over Latvia’s Belonging to Self-Defined Europe

Latvia is an integral part of the European and, more broadly, the Western community has been a backbone theme of the Latvian discourse. Stressed in most public appearances of the investigated high-ranking power political figures, Europe, with Latvia included, has been socially constructed. Whilst the first paragraphs of speeches are often devoted to ethnopolitics, stressing language, culture and history, the European discourse comes in later on.

In his New Year’s speech addressing the people of Latvia in 2022, former President Egils Levits stated: ‘…We want a modern, grounded in Latvianess [the ethnolinguistic Latvian connotation; the word “latvisku” is used], solidary Latvia in the family of European countries…This clear goal unites us. It allows us to stay the course even in stormy waters…’ (Latvijas valsts prezidenta, 2022). Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš narrated in a speech on the same occasion a year before: ‘…The security situation in the region and at our borders repeatedly shows how important it is to be strong and work together with strong allies, with whom we share values – freedom, democracy and the rule of law. This year we have illustrated that we can defend our border, and NATO and EU can rely on us as equal partners…’ (Valdības māja, 2021). Back in 2014, Latvian Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma stressed Latvia’s role in determining the European agenda ahead of the forthcoming Presidency of the Council of the EU in her New Year’s address (Ministru kabinets, 2014a). She called the EU Presidency a highly responsible and unprecedented task in the history of Latvian state existence in a speech addressing the newly approved government of Latvia. In the same speech, she defined the essence of her mandate ‘…to protect Latvia as a national state, its language, culture and people…’ (Ministru kabinets, 2014b). Both Prime Ministers represent the long-dominating centric and pro-European spectrum in Latvian politics. President Egils Levits was a nominee of the right wing.

The policy planning documents convey a similar political stand. Whilst the National Security Concept of 2019 (Saeima, 2019a) and the National Defence Concept of 2020 (Saeima, 2020a) fixes Latvia’s Euro-Atlantic membership in hard security terms, the National Development Plan 2021–2027 determines the framework of Latvia’s soft security.2 It states, ‘…At the beginning of the 21st century, Latvia returned to the family [Latvian word “saimne” is used] of European nations and became a full-fledged member of NATO and the EU…’, ‘…The Latvian state was founded to implement the Latvian [ethnic Latvian connotation, the word “latviešu” is used] nation’s self-determination rights. Latvia is open and friendly to residents of all nationalities who accept the meaning of Latvia’s existence – the development of the Latvian people [ethnic Latvian connotation, the word “latviešu” is used], their language and culture in its own land…’. The document envisages Riga as an important European cultural, business and tourism centre. The document mentions Europe 75 times (Pārnesoru koordinācijas centr, 2020, p. 6,9). Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs outlined that Latvia is a cultural great power in Europe and the world in this annual review of foreign and European affairs in 2015 (Arlietu ministrija, 2016, p. 24).

The quotations depict three eye-catching aspects. A metaphorical language is frequently used to portray Europe and the Transatlantic region as home, family, community, or a circle of trust. More examples can be quickly found. ‘…It is my honour to welcome you all in Riga, Latvia. Today we are here as one family of allied nations…’ was the first sentence Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma stated during the opening conference of the NATO Strategic Communication Excellence Centre in Riga (Ministru kabinets, 2015). Building upon Giddens’ thoughts, essential security is primarily achieved in the family relationship. A sense of confidence and predictability backs this social construct. If strategically applied, such language in public appearances may point at the ideological aim to form the audience’s attachment and sense of community with certain grouping and practices.

The second aspect is the widespread notion of Latvia’s ‘return’ to Europe. The underlying meaning hints at European spatiality, which has always had Latvia on board. The public speeches of the former long-serving Speaker of Parliament Ināra Mūniece exhibit this idea even better. She highlights
historical and cultural episodes to embed Latvia’s permanent but interrupted during the Soviet era belonging to the European region. The tradition of parliamentarism during interwar Latvia (1920–1934) is widely referred to for demonstrating the value system commonalities with the ‘core’ Europe. The independence restoration is framed as a return to Europe, where Latvia has always belonged. State continuity is an integral part of the national discourse. (Kott, 2022, p. 246) (Petsinis, 2022, p. 94) (Pleps, 2022) Her quotes addressing the Parliament in three consecutive years on the occasion of the Latvian independence proclamation or restoration day are telling: ‘... We are proud of the fact that Latvia, as a European country, built the principles of parliamentarism and democracy into its foundations from the very beginning… [Speaks about independence restoration] Latvians [refers to ethnic Latvians] were FOR their language and culture. FOR freedom, independence, FOR my country in the political space of Western civilization and Europe… We have chosen to live in a European, national and democratic country… Our value system is like DNA, which our fathers and mothers put in us in the cradle and which we pass on to our children…’ (Saeima, 2017), ‘…The pre-parliament of Latvia – the People’s Council – had formulated a modern, even progressive political platform on the scale of Western Europe…’ (Saeima, 2018), ‘…Latvia’s power sources also come from Europe. We did not lose our European identity during 50 years of occupation…The country of Latvia was born and reborn in the most difficult circumstances, but we have always been supported by love for Latvia, for our language, for the heritage of generations…’ (Saeima, 2019b). The state history within European is designed to illustrate what is now is the natural form of Latvia’s being. ‘Cherry picking’ of history elements is noticeable. That is true, quite a progressive Latvian state was established after World War I, with suffrage for women and relatively favourable conditions for ethnic minorities, including granting citizenship to all Latvian residents. (Germane, 2012) But just like many other countries, Latvia succumbed to authoritarian rule in the 1930s. The fact is often overlooked in the official discourse.

The construction of European identity as an integral part of the national identity has had no change for years. But the war in Ukraine in 2014 reinforced the third element – discourse of Latvian (ethnolinguistic connotation) Europeanness. The attitude shift of the right-leaning Speaker of the Parliament, Ināra Mūrniece, was illustrative. For nationalist party Europeanness had transformed from a threat to Latvian sovereignty to a safeguard ring for physical security and proper self-understanding. (Dzenovska, 2018, pp. 210–214) Noteworthy, Latvia underwent constitutional amendments in 2014. The country’s belonging to European cultural space was determined alongside the ethnolinguistic Latvian character of Europeanness in the Preamble. Let me feature one more example. During a state centenary speech in 2018 at the Monument of Freedom, the President of Latvia, Raimonds Vejonis, stressed ‘...In the future, I see a nation that proudly speaks Latvian…Tempered and forged for a 100 years, we are a mature nation. Responsible for its country and its integral place in Europe…’ (Latvijas valsts prezidents, 2018). Europeanness in Latvia has not been politically applied to provide an umbrella identity for the heterogeneous society. It has rather been an instrument of ethnopolitics. The intertwined national (ethnolinguistically Latvian) and European discourses depict regionalism as a supplementary to nationalism form of the country’s ontological security search. Aimed at ethnic-Latvians primarily and crafted by the power political actors.

Europe? Ok. But Which?

If the domestic consensus over Latvia’s membership in the European political space has seemingly been achieved, the degree of ‘return’ and belonging proves a more complex picture.

On the one hand, the complete return to the imagined core of Europe and the broader West has been cemented in the state discourse. President Raimonds Vejonis, in 2015, in his independence day speech outlined: ‘[Speaks of accession to the EU]…was a crucial and even decisive step in the history of our country and region. With this expansion, the “Iron Curtain” fell for good… If, until recently, we could excuse ourselves for lack of experience, then today, there is no basis for such arguments. As mature
and full-fledged Europeans, we are responsible for our actions and future...’ (Latvijas valsts prezidents, 2015a). President Andris Bērziņš in 2014 addressed foreign diplomats, saying ‘...Since January 1 of this year, we have been in the core of Europe, with Latvia becoming a member of the eurozone...’ (Latvijas valsts prezidents, 2014) ‘...We have returned to Europe, from which we have been separated for a long time... The European Union is also a great centre for such values as freedom, democracy, and equality. These are the values we share with our European allies ... We recently joined the OECD, which includes countries such as Japan and others.... As part of the European Union, we are in the world’s richest market...’ stressed Prime Minister Krisjānis Kariņš during the annual debate at the Parliament in 2020 (Ministru kabinets, 2020a). Imagined Europe for Latvia lies upon values, institutions and living standards. Implementation of the first and membership in the second underpins the representation of Europe with and the post-Soviet space without the country. Russia is seen as the main threat to such an order.

Presented quotations reveal the geopolitical nature of the European space in the Latvian discourse. The war in Ukraine has boldened such connotation. The war echoes a battle between the free and non-free world, where Latvia is on the Iron Curtain’s right side this time. Another example stresses this argument. The Speaker of Parliament Ināra Mūrmiece addressed the Parliament with the Latvian independence restoration day speech in 2022, saying ‘[Reference to the war in Ukraine] ...People demand to speak a clear language, to defend Latvia’s interests more loudly, to express support for Ukraine, not to be afraid to cut ties with the Soviet past. ...For the Ukrainian people, this historic borderline means a new future. The future of Ukraine is clear and will be in Europe and Western civilisation...’ (Saeima, 2022).

In parallel, differences in Latvian economic and social trends from the Western European are admitted. Symptomatically the slow economic development is framed as a consequence of the Soviet legacies. Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis was particularly attentive to Latvian economic backwardness. ‘...We are approaching our goal — the average standard of living of the European Union...’ he noted in a public New Year’s speech in 2018 (Ministru kabinets, 2020b). ‘...We want to get out of the group of laggards and get closer to those who are in the middle, that is, the average level of the European Union....’ was his message in the annual address to the Parliament (Saeima, 2018). The dependence on the EU structural funds, lack of foreign investment and emigration were stressed in his other speeches. Other political narrators refer to corruption. The Prime Minister Krisjānis Kariņš briefed the Parliament about the government work in his annual address in 2021: ‘[Speaks of the dissolution of the Soviet Union] ... One part of these companies collapsed completely, and today, even today, we can look at large, empty buildings where production used to take place...We also have to look to the future — how will we become a wealthy nation, a wealthy country? How will we achieve the desired level of prosperity that will bring us closer to the Nordic countries? If we compare ourselves with other European countries, production as a percentage of gross domestic product...Latvia is in 30th place out of 40 European countries...’ (Pārresoru koordinācijas centrs, 2021)

The country does not perceive itself as fully compliant with its Western European or core European understanding of Europe. As a result, Latvia has been in constant search for a sub-European regional belonging, fluctuating between Eastern European versus Northern European belonging.

Eastern European notion carries the connotation of not having achieved the complete transition from the post-Soviet to European. The meaning attached to the region is best illustrated not by its application but by attempts to escape it. Omission of details can be equally important to inclusion in constructing discourses. The purpose of silence can be a marginalisation of its object (Bradley, 2006, p. 1197).

In 2014, the Latvian ambassador to the United Kingdom, Andris Teikmanis, approached the Guardian newspaper with a letter of disappointment. The newspaper used misleading terminology, according to the ambassador, at their ‘New East Network’ platform. The project aimed at raising attention to the happenings in the post-Communist countries, Latvia included (Teikmanis, 2014).
Another example concerns the UN. The organisation has substituted Eastern European regional belonging of the Baltics with Northern European in its taxonomy, was widely and cheerfully circulated message in Latvia in 2017. ‘UN officially changes Status of Baltic states from Eastern Europe to Northern Europe. This is where we belong’, wrote the Latvian MP at European Parliament Artis Pabriks on Twitter (Pabriks, 2017); ‘Latvia IS in Northern Europe! (TV3 Zīnās, 2017)’, TV3 news service republished the news. The identity of resistance was thus discursively crafted in Latvia. This means a narrative distinguishing the country’s favourable image from the one it tries to deconstruct was developed (Passi, 2009, p. 142).

In 2019, the former head of the country’s branding agency Latvian Institute explained the sentiment well in an interview with the Latvian Public Broadcasting: ‘…Latvia is not a part of Eastern Europe, but of Northern Europe, and our country should be positioned that way… Northern Europe is something successful, associated with a good image in the world, on other continents…’ According to her, there are successful and less successful regions in Europe. ‘Of course, we want to be associated with that dynamic, successful, and advanced… Therefore, we do not need to promote by ourselves repetition of the fact that we are from Eastern Europe… We also need to know how to talk about our strengths…’ Among similar features with Northern Europe, she listed Latvian tendencies in IT, innovations, nature and sustainable thinking.

The Latvian Northern European affiliation has been put on paper in the policy planning documents and the political propositions. Although inconstancies over whether Latvia belongs to or strives to be in this region persist. Riga as a North European metropolis was envisaged in the National Development Plan for 2014–2020 (Pārresoru koordinācijas centra, 2012). Meanwhile, the inauguration speech of former President Egils Levits outlined that Latvia should, in this decade, become ‘…a modern, sustainable Northern European country. A country that, compared to the world, would even belong to the world leaders in some areas and could be a model for other countries…’ (Latvijas valsts prezidents, 2019a). Apart from the welfare state example, the nexus between Latvia and the Nordic countries is drawn through their geographic location by the Baltic Sea and shared security concerns. Historical references are made occasionally, recalling the Reformation and the Lutheran church as the largest religious denomination in most of Latvia, implicitly referring to Swedish times there. The Latvian diaspora that emerged in Sweden during World War II is also mentioned. For instance, by Prime Minister Kariņš during the international conference on the future of Europe ‘…In October of 1944, near the end of WWII, as the Soviet army once again advancing through Latvia, my parents (who were 8 and 14 years old at the time) fled in small boats with their families and others across the Baltic Sea from Latvia to Sweden. Sweden took in about 5.000 wartime refugees from Latvia… At least historically, Latvia is predominantly Lutheran, with the South-East having a Catholic majority…’ (Ministru kabinets, 2019).

The Latvian discourse narrates Northern Europe as a thriving region, with Eastern Europe bearing the opposite meaning. Hence affiliation with the desired Self juxtaposed with the unwanted Other is an act of ontological security search in the EU and NATO accession aftermath. National self-esteem constitutes ontological security (Browning, 2015). For Latvia, favourable self-perception is linked to particular regional self-attribute and external recognition – being accepted by inner-circle one longs to be a member of. One can detect characteristics of nations with colonial pasts in such sentiment. Particularly in the desire to replicate external patterns (Kalmar, 2022) and create a vicarious identity (Brassett et al., 2021) to a certain degree.

Broadly speaking, Latvia’s affiliation with the Nordic region is of utmost importance for two reasons. They are an act of de-bordering Eastern Europe withdrawing Latvia from there and setting up an imagined wall to distinguish the Latvianness from the core of Eastern Europeanness – Russianness. The process is called ‘suturing’ that denotes a mix of bordering and de-bordering for stabilising dispersed identity in different semiotic order (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2017, p. 6). Interplay of internal and external features underpin designing a new identity. However, just as fixing a single Baltic Sea
identity shared among Nordic, Baltic countries and Russia is almost impossible because of ‘irreducible and inassimilable otherness of Russia that leaves “the decentred traces”’ (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2017, p. 7), consenting over one self-understanding is challenging in Latvia. The Latvian society-in-making has inherited characteristics of different regional self-interpretations, which complicates the country’s becoming itself.

**Still Eastern Europe?**

Despite Latvia’s attempts to dissolve Eastern Europe in some contexts, the spatiality endures in others. Primarily in economic and security domains.

Economic expediency driven, Latvia joined China’s 16 + 1 (later 17 + 1) platform promoting Belt and Road Initiative among Central and Eastern European countries. Save from Greece, the forum gathered the post-Communist countries. Latvia hosted a 16 + 1 summit in 2016. The same year the 16 + 1 secretariat of logistics was established in Riga, and the forum’s Investment Fund was inaugurated, with Latvia among its first contributors. Around that time, Latvia frequently positioned itself as a bridge between the East and the West. Relatively close relationships were maintained with Belarus until 2020, underpinned by the Latvian cargo transit interests (Djatkoviča, 2020). Also, the Central Asia has been among the Latvian foreign policy priority areas along with the EU’s Eastern Partnership countries. To a certain degree, Latvia has sought economic expediency from its metaphorical distance from Western Europe and close vicinity to the countries to its East with the common past.

The President of Latvia, Andris Bērziņš, in his New Year’s speech in 2015, laid out the idea of Latvia between the Eastern and Western world: ‘... Latvia will never be a fringe of the European Union, it is in our power to make our country an important point of contact between East and West, a bridge that contributes to the development and prosperity of our country and the entire European Union... What is still happening in Ukraine makes us think about how much we have done and are doing so that Latvia and the European Union develop, are protected and safe...’ (Latvijas valsts prezidents, 2015b). Some political narrators highlighted opportunities deriving from the East-West friendship for the country’s finance sector. Latvia was a notorious regional centre for serving non-resident client financial transactions. In this regard, Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis put forth a proposition addressing the Parliament in 2016 ‘...I think it is no secret to anyone that a customer in Helsinki’s Stockman supermarket can also pay in Russian rubbles when paying in cash. Who is the winner? The buyer, the entrepreneur and the Finnish state – thus its residents. We should also think about such possibilities...’ (Ministru kabinets, 2020c).

By 2022, the 16 + 1 initiative had lost its relevance due to geopolitical circumstances and its poor results. Latvia withdrew in 2022. In 2016, the country joined another sub-European initiative omitting Western European states. The Three Seas Initiative comprises 11 other countries, including Latvia, at the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas. Perceived as economic and geopolitical, the project has recently gained momentum in Latvia, with its summit held in Riga in 2022.

Eastern Europe has been likewise maintained in history and security contexts. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the division of Eastern Europe between Nazi and Communist regimes are referred to. ‘Impossible Resistance: Opposition, Adaptation and Survival under Communist and Nazi Regimes in Eastern Europe (1940–1991)’ the international history conference address was titled for President Raimonds Vējonis in 2017 (Latvijas valsts prezidents, 2017). In 2019, former President Egils Levits underlined that the Eastern European perspective should be considered when European history is concerned at the international conference devoted to the Baltic Way: ‘The Baltic Way. Continuation. 30 for the Baltic Way. 80 for the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact’ (Latvijas valsts prezidents, 2019b).

Historic memory about the great-power politics affects the sense of Latvia’s regional belonging today. Enwrapped in geopolitical meaning, the theme of Eastern Europe in need of Western protection
again, today against Russia, can be traced. Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš’ and former President Egils Levits’ public outreaches do more demonstrations of this. While both signal that Latvia aims to become a Northern European country, Eastern Europe often appears when speaking about NATO and security. ‘…K. Kariņš thanked for increasing the US presence in Eastern Europe…’ (Ministru kabinets, 2022), says the Cabinet of Ministers press release from 2022. During a press conference the same year, President Egils Levits stated that Eastern European countries share a common vision of the need to achieve a greater NATO presence (LETA, 2022). Interestingly, whereby NATO generally positions Latvia as part of the Eastern flank or East of the Alliance (NATO, no date), the Latvian discourse frequently places the country in both the Eastern flank and Easter Europe (lsm.lv., 2022).

The Baltic Regional Grouping: A Means Rather Than an End Goal

The Baltic affiliation has dominated the Latvian spatial imaginary for decades, and the war in Ukraine has further revitalised the Baltic grouping. The Nordic and broader Baltic Sea region’s significance has also gained in the Latvian security discourse.

A need for the Baltic country all-time closer cooperation is considered a dominant theme. The importance of the Baltic region for Latvia is the core message. The independence day speech of the Speaker of Parliament Ināra Mūrniece in 2020 stated, ‘…we will continue to strengthen our security, integration in the democratic world and cooperation with our closest partners in the Baltic States, the Nordic countries and the European Union’ (Saeima, 2020b). The National Defence Concept 2020 confirmed that ‘…Latvia’s historically, politically and geographically closest allies are Estonia and Lithuania…’ (Saeima, 2020a).

The national narrative outlines the Baltic cooperation primarily as pragmatic and security oriented. ‘…At such a time, it is important that the cooperation of the Baltic states – Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania – in the military field is more active than ever. It makes us feel united…’ noted the Parliamentary Speaker Ināra Mūrniece during the Latvian independent day speech before the Parliament (Saeima, 2021). The National Defence Concept of 2020 (Saeima, 2020a) and the National Security Concept of 2019 (Saeima, 2019b) urged more collaboration among the Baltic countries and the Nordic region in defence and security. The annual foreign policy reviews by the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2014 to 2023 emphasise the Baltic collective endeavours in security, energy security, the Rail Baltic train project and the Baltic-Nordic cooperation realms.

The joint historical experience, mirrored in present-day turbulence, is stressed in political outreaches too. The independence restoration path of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia is the dominant subject. ‘…We live in a time when Latvia and the Baltics are exposed to new historical challenges. Therefore, it is important for the Baltics, no less than 25 years ago during the Baltic Way, to join hands, rely more on each other and be united in the European family and NATO…’ said President Andris Bērziņš during the Latvian independence day speech at the Freedom Monument in 2014 (lvportals.lv, 2014). Finally, the themes juxtapose the Baltic country individual smallness and the Baltic regional visibility, therefore, greater influence. According to the Speaker of Parliament Ināra Mūrniece in 2015, ‘[Speaks of Baltic countries] …We are strong when we are together. Only in this way can we withstand the tests of today…’ (Saeima, 2015). Prime Minister Māris Kucinskis proposed akin thought in 2018 at the international conference ‘Europe After 100 Before’ ‘…Maintaining the unity of the Baltic states is of primary importance to Latvia. It is interesting that this unity is in a way “defined” by the outside. The US president met with the presidents of all three Baltic states together. The meeting with the French head of state was also in this format. So - the “outside world” sees us together…’ (Ministru kabinets, 2020d). His words reveal the very essence of the Baltic cooperation. Despite the similarities in geography and history, Baltic regionalism is situationally and externally (outside-in) driven. It is a means to certain ends rather than a goal by itself. Such an image of the Baltic region differs, for example, from the romanticised representation of European spatiality in the Latvian discourse, seen as the ultimate destination of being.
Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have boldened the Baltic regionalism via coordinated foreign and security policies. Three countries coordinated efforts to enhance NATO presence in the Baltic region. They pushed for support of Ukraine and sanctions against Russia in the EU (Vilson, 2015). In 2022 alone, inter alia, the Baltic countries cut off the Russian gas among the first in the EU and prohibited Russian citizens from crossing their borders. The Russian ambassadors were expelled from all three countries.

Grounded in fear, securitisation of the Soviet and Russian legacies has been boosted in Latvia (Andžāns & Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2021), Estonia and Lithuania since 2014. Even more intensely after 2022 (Andžāns, 2023), pinpointing the regional nature of tendencies. Although the Latvian-Russian relationship has been ambiguous since the independence restoration, and the perception gap between the Latvian and Russian-speaking parts of the population in Latvia has existed (Djatkoviča, 2023; Andžāns & Spruds, 2020), Latvia sought economic pragmatism in the two-country relationship before 2014. (Bruģe & Bukovskis, 2016, p. 132) (Djatkoviča, 2021, p. 11) The war in Ukraine became a ‘game-changer’. In the post-2014 period, Russia has been increasingly securitised. Hybrid warfare concept was invoked frequently (Bērziņš, 2020). The national security and state defence concepts over securitised Russia in aspects loosely related to the country. The State Defence concept of 2019 (the first one after 2014) mentions Russia 65 times (Andžāns & Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2021, p. 3). Banning Russian television transmission, taking down Soviet monuments, street and building name change, and more have taken place since 2022 in all three countries. A high-speed de-colonisation gained momentum across the Baltic region amid the Russian second war on Ukraine.

Conclusions

In this study, I tried to demonstrate how Latvia has exercised a discursive region-building approach throughout the Russian first and ongoing second aggression in Ukraine. The national discourse on Latvia’s regional belonging has attributed features and created identities for political spaces. Although the war, meaning two episodes of one event, has not triggered major shifts in the regional imaginaries of the country, some regions have been discursively reinforced while others weakened.

First of all, the national narrative reimagined the European and attempted to abolish the post-Soviet political space. Since the independence restoration, Latvia has been adding itself to the former and removing from the latter. The war in Ukraine has not changed the long-term trajectory of the national narrative. Instead, it has been boldened. Juxtaposing the defining features of imagined Europe and their presence in Latvia to their absence or limited scope in other regions, including those carrying Soviet legacies, has been a guiding strategy. Just as Iver Neumann proposes, the region building has been implemented according to the ruling elite’s contemporary political needs. Culturally and historically embedded regions have not only been constructed but also deconstructed.

The region building has not been straightforward in the Latvian discourse on regional self-identification. Whereby Europe and, more broadly, the West, with Latvia as its integral part, has been a generally agreed national narrative, particularly bold in the war context, the debate over where in Europe exactly has been entangled. Latvia proves to be uncertain of its Eastern European versus Northern European belonging.

On the one hand, the genuine Europeaness of Latvia has been defined through a set of values – freedom, democracy, the rule of law, equality, institutions and a certain level of wealth present in the country. Contrasted to limited existence of the given characteristics in the post-Soviet space, the region is seen as unacceptable for Latvian membership. The war has underlined the geopolitical meaning of Europe and Europeanness, and the two spaces have become mutually excluding.

On the other hand, the Latvian socio-economic deviations attributed to the Soviet legacies from the self-defined core Europe – Western Europe – are admitted. They have urged a search for Latvian under-European regional belonging in the EU and NATO accession aftermath. Northern Europe is an area the
The country has been aiming to whilst Eastern Europe is the space Latvia has been trying to escape. Both regions exist in parallel in the Latvian discourse. The former is in many ways deemed a label of success and is future-oriented. The letter bears quite the opposite meaning. Grounded in the past, it symbolises the inability to achieve the complete transformation from the post-Soviet to European or Western. Occasionally Latvia seeks economic gains from balancing between the East and West affiliations too. The geopolitical meaning attached to Eastern Europe is equally important. It echoes the great-power politics of the 20th century in the Russian war on Ukraine. Eastern Europe needs the protection of the West again, but this time, the region is on the right side of the ‘Iron Curtain’.

The Baltic grouping exists in parallel and independently from other spaces. However, it is positioned more as means for security and external visibility rather than an end goal of above-state belonging.

In this article, I likewise attempted to demonstrate why the discursive region building has been implemented in a particular way. The strategy embarked on by Latvia is closely related to the country’s understanding and management of Self. The Europeanness of the Latvian state and nation has been constructed as a natural form of being. The tradition of parliamentarism and republicanism, among other European-like values practised in Latvia during the interwar period, has been linked with the country’s historical presence in Europe. We are people-as-this (Europeans), and people-as-one (Latvians) says the central narrative in the Latvian discourse. A theme of a monolithic ethnolinguistic Latvian nation with its roots in the West has been constructed. It has been developed to delete the country from the post-Soviet or Eastern European space and to erase the homo sovieticus identity of people. At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, by constantly discussing the Soviet legacies in the present context, the post-Soviet space is kept alive. Neumann’s suggestion that you are what you say you are is highly relevant in this sense.

‘Umbrella’ European identity has been scarcely instrumentalised in Latvia to facilitate the cohesion of an ethnically heterogeneous society. Quite the opposite, Europeanness has been framed primarily as a feature of the Latvian ethnic nation. Membership in the Western community has been discursively constructed as a supplementary to the nationalism form of the country’s self-perception. As a result, the new Latvian Europeanness, Westernness, or Nordicness as a counter identity to the post-Soviet has not been established in all the country’s minds. Hence the objective need has been created in Latvia to articulate, protect if you like, politically determined European course of the country.

The war in Ukraine has not evoked a major U-turn in the Latvian regional affiliations. It is likely because the two decades of membership in the EU and NATO allowed to achieve certain predictability of routines, using Anthony Giddens’ term, in the whole society. And the ongoing debate on the country’s exact belonging possibly indicates a positive coping with the post-NATO and EU accession anxiety. However, the strong emphasis on the Latvian Europeanness juxtaposed to all-Russian embedded in ethnopolitics, particularly bold since Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine, points to a shadow side of the contemporary identity debate in Latvia. The country’s physical insecurity has urged the advancement of ontological security of the dominating ethnic group – ethnic Latvians – at the expense of minority communities, most vividly Russians in Latvia. This leads to think that the country is still far from establishing inclusive and ontologically secure nation.

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Notes

1. By national narrative, the author means a dominating and actively promoted among various actors (e.g., political elite, opinion leaders, intellectuals, mass media) with an impact on the state discourse storyline about nation’s emergence. The term is used, for instance, by Epp Annus to describe the nation-building in the Baltic states (Annus, 2014).

2. By hard security, the author means physical security primarily achieved through military means. Latvia in hard security terms depends on NATO’s collective security guarantees extensively. Soft security the author defines as the security of identity. Both terms have been derived from J. Nye’s concept of soft power (based on the country’s ability to attract by culture, ideology, and foreign policy) versus hard power (based on the country’s ability to coerce by military or economic means) (Nye, 1990).

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