

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS MINORITY IN THE BORDERLAND: THE CASE OF LATGALIAN OLD BELIEVERS (LATVIA)

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Abstract. Territorially scattered or dispersed minorities have been representing certain realities of political geography, therefore the risk of ethnic or religious conflicts due to rapid globalization and cosmopolitanism tendencies demands a search for new conflict-reducing mechanisms. The Old Believers' community of Latvia, an ethnic-denominational group within the Russian ethnos, presents a sustainable form of the country's political, ethnic, cultural, and religious landscape. Latgale, the south-eastern part of Latvia, has the greatest Old Believers' group residing outside Russia. The aim of the research is to investigate the Old Believers' community in Latgale region as a model for settling ethnic conflicts, focusing on the exploration of their life experience and oral testimonies by applying cultural-historical, biographical, descriptive methods and qualitative data analysis.

Keywords: scattered minority, ethno-religious, conflict-free, coexistence, borderland, oral testimonies, Old Believers

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1. Introduction

Borderland is a territorial system that is under the impact of border factors, whereas a border region is a territorial system impacted by a group of factors related to borderland (Spiriajevas 2019: 18). Both of them can be defined as toposes with multilayer and diffused identities of the people living in them, thus, they represent complex societies characterized by a unique border culture that “conveys plural expressions of identity and singular imperatives of belonging” (Konrad 2014: 42-43). Borders are not just territorial lines between nation-states, but “dynamic processes of cultural production and negotiation” (Ristolainen 2014: 1208); it is a territory where

“identity is formed and re-formed among those who claim indigeneity and others who cannot” (Konrad 2014: 41). Borders may not only divide similar ethno-religious groups, but they territorialize their thinking, as well as provide specific parameters that they need to live within (Ristolainen 2014: 1208).

Although the territorial borders of modern Latvia were formed in 1920, its ethnic composition has always been rather multicultural. In various cultural-historical periods, the population of the country has been represented by the titular nation (the Latvians) and by various ethnic minorities, the proportion of which in contrast to the titular nation ranged from 24% to 48%. The borderland in the south-east of the Republic of Latvia – Latgale region – represents a territory with a relatively stable co-existence of different ethnic groups and their cultures. According to the most recent data (2018), there are 45.9% of Latvians, 36.7% – Russians, 6.5% – Poles, 5.1% – Belarusians, and 1.3% – Ukrainians in the region (Demogrāfija 2018: 28).

After the proclamation of the State of Latvia in 1918, the cultural autonomy for national minorities living in the country was ensured in the “Constitution of the Republic of Latvia”, adopted in 1922 and signed by the Speaker of the Constitutional Assembly Jānis Čakste (1920–1922) (the first President of the Republic of Latvia from 1922 to 1927), “Latvia as democratic, socially responsible and national state is based on the rule of law and on respect for human dignity and freedom; it recognises and protects fundamental human rights and respects ethnic minorities” (*The Constitution... 1922*). While stating the fundamental principle for the existence of the country – protection of sovereignty, national independence, territory, territorial integrity, it was also declared that “[p]ersons belonging to ethnic minorities have the right to preserve and develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity” (*The Constitution... 1922*).

The protection of national and ethnic groups has been stipulated also by the Law “On the Unrestricted Development and Right to Cultural Autonomy of Latvia’s National and Ethnic Groups” adopted after the restoration of the independence of Latvia in 1991 (*Par Latvijas nacionālo... 1991*). Acceptance or rejection of otherness depends on various factors, also the willingness of both the titular nation and minorities to strive for mutual tolerance which determines the presence or lack of conflicts between various groups characterized by the keyword ‘diversity’. Among such constituting parts of a multi-faced phenomenon of diversity as intercultural communication, otherness, similarity and sameness, it is important also to mention the aspects of territorial integrity and division, respectively. Due to rapid globalisation and cosmopolitanism tendencies ethnic diversity nowadays is discussed also as a possible threat to the territorial integrity or existence of the titular nation, especially in the case of small nations.

The paper is aimed at investigation of Old Believers of Latgale region that represent an ethno-religious group within the Russian ethnos as a sample for avoiding or settling ethnic conflicts while focusing on the exploration of their life experience and oral testimonies containing descriptions and solutions for peaceful coexistence. The Old Believers in Latgale region are approached as a representative model for settling ethnic and religious conflicts. Not only did they survive in any

climatic conditions and under any political regimes (their settlements can be found even in Alaska and in South America), but they also overcame difficulties with the help of their unwavering faith. Faith was the reason they were persecuted for and faith was also the means that helped them survive and integrate into the titular nation without causing any ethnic or religious conflicts.

2. Theoretical framework: Old Believers as an ethno-religious minority in Latvia

There are several fundamental studies dedicated to the in-depth research on the Old Believers' lifestyle, culture, language and religion in the Baltics, including Latvia and Latgale region (Ljonngren 1994, Baranovskij and Potashenko 2005, Zhilko 2005, Koroljova 2013, Ganenkova et. al. 2019 a. o.), however, the aspect of Old Believers' beliefs and attitudes important for settling ethnic conflicts analysed in the article, has not yet been studied widely enough.

The Old Believers – Eastern Orthodox Christians who refused to accept the liturgical reforms imposed upon the Russian Orthodox Church by the patriarch of Moscow Nikon (1652–1658) (Zavarina 2002: 19, Zimova 2002: 58) – have been present in Latvia since the 1660s when after the Schism of 1666 they fled from guberniyas of Pskov, Tver, and Novgorod to the outskirts of Russia (Siberia, the Russian North), as well as abroad – to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Swedish Empire (now Estonia), Prussia, the Austrian Empire, and Turkey (Zavarina 2002: 20). After the migration and resettlement, the Old Believers became a scattered ethnic and religious minority in exile who wanted to preserve church traditions of the old Russian Orthodox Church: the old tradition of putting together fingers (when praying, they put together two fingers instead of three), double hallelujah, an eight-pointed cross, old ceremonies (for example, baptizing by immersing in the baptismal font), and divine service according to olden books. Jadviga Janashek notes, they have even an 'aggravated' self-consciousness (Janashek 2011: 161). For the Old Believers, only their own faith is true, and they themselves are the only preservers of this faith (Orlov 2005: 105).

In the result of the plague outbreak and wars (the Russo-Polish War of 1654–1667, the Swedish invasion or the Second Northern War of 1655–1660), the south-eastern region of Latvia – Latgale, which at that time was a predominantly Roman Catholic territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was devastated and drastically underpopulated, thus in the need of human resources.

Although the first organized groups of Old Believers appeared in Latvia (Liginiški, Latgale region) in 1659, extensive migration of Old Believers to Latvia began in the eighteenth century. Since 1772, Latgale was one of the most remote areas of the Russian Empire of that period and was incorporated into the new Republic of Latvia in the final stage of Latvian War of Independence (1918–1920). Nowadays it is a borderland region of Latvia that borders with the Russian Federation, Lithuania and Belarus and is represented by the titular nation (the Latvians) and ethnic minorities

– a large population of ethnic Russians and other smaller ethnic minorities (e.g. the Polish, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Jews, etc.). Having arrived in Latgale, the largest number of Old Believers settled in Daugavpils, Rēzekne and Ludza districts (Zavarina 2002: 21). According to the statistics of 1780, in Dünaburg (former name of Daugavpils) district, there lived 2 864 Old Believers, whereas in Režica (former name of Rēzekne) district – 778, and in Ljucina (former name of Ludza) district – 340 Old Believers (Zavarina 2002: 30). At the beginning of the 1930s there were more than 60 Old Believers' communities in Latgale, which is a surprisingly high indicator (Markelov 2002: 225). The statistical data of 1935 confirm the rapid increase in the number of Old Believers, namely, at that time there were 78 582 Old Believers who were officially registered in the Latgale region (Bejtnere 2002: 360). Currently, there are about 80 000 Old Believers in Latgale representing 67 religious communities (Zhilko 2005: 27).

On the one hand, the modern Latvian Old Believers try to develop the image of a united community by emphasizing the historical roots of Old Believers on the territory of Latvia and their tolerant attitude towards that country, which has provided them with civil rights and freedom since its establishment. On the other hand, Old Believers recognize those problems which traditional culture faces in modern times. They try to consolidate their power in order to maintain the heritage of traditions for the young Old Believer generations. The most active Old Believers concentrate, by and large, on religious education, in an attempt to revive the interest of young people in the Old Belief (Pazuhina 2014: 270).

For their Old Orthodox faith, Old Believers were anathematized and handed over to justice of civil authorities, and therefore Old Believers in Latvia can be positioned as refugees and exiles, since they had left their fatherland escaping from persecution and were facing a fatal dilemma: to accept Orthodoxy and thus to sin against God and oneself, thereby becoming a betrayer, or to remain loyal to their own faith and conscience which, in turn, meant exposing oneself to mortal danger. Not to break the promise given to God and save their own lives, part of Old Believers made their escape and went into a voluntary exile, so that later to put down roots in the new home country for generations, without conflicting with the titular nation and other ethnic minorities and continuing the Old Believers' olden rituals and preservation of the ancient code: prayer, fasting, work.

Cultural traditions inherited by Old Believers from their ancestors are the means that help them confront the contradictions and difficulties of public and individual life alongside other folks in the linguistically and culturally foreign environment. Preservation of ancient cultural traditions and precepts allows them not only to survive, but also maintain their national identity even in the process of globalization. Due to successful integration, Latgalian Old Believers community presents a sustainable form of religion

and culture in the multinational environment up to nowadays (Koroļova et. al. 2014: 352).

The current study by the authors of the article does not claim a comprehensive analysis of the Old Believers' minority, but, based on the analysis of qualitative data obtained in field studies, examines an important and less studied aspect of the ethnic minority, namely the specificity of Old Believers' peaceful co-existence with other ethnic and religious groups in the borderland.

3. Methodology

The empirical material of the research – oral testimonies and narratives obtained in the interviews with representatives of the Old Believers' community – has been collected in the time period from 1970 till today in Latgale region. It was studied in the cultural-historical context with the aim to describe the model of a conflict-free coexistence in the borderland where Old Believers migrated to and resettled due to religious persecution. For the interviews, the representatives of the oldest generation of Old Believers (older than 70) had been chosen as they have been defined as the most consistent representatives of the Old Believers' religious tradition nowadays. They had been raised following the religious traditions and as adults they have been striving to fully preserve the ancestral way of life in their daily lives. These respondents have also been trying to pass on the main principles of the Old Belief to their descendants. The compilation of the data they provide is important as the number of these respondents decreases rapidly each year leaving their knowledge and life experience unknown to others without accurate recording and scientific commentary. The study is an attempt to recover and document lost experiences and memories. The article summarizes information from 57 selected respondents (49 females and 8 males).

4. Results

Ethnic self-consciousness is an essential feature of a sub-ethnos. The Old Believers have all the necessary prerequisites for this: a common origin, common historical fates, cultural values and traditions, a common language, and territory. Ethnic self-name is interpreted as the awareness about belonging to the ethno-social community, as a social awareness about the place and role of one's ethnic community within the system of cross-national relations as well as the awareness about one's originality, uniqueness of one's culture, understanding about the place of one's ethnos in the contemporary world. If asked about their nationality, the invariable reply is – an Old Believer, namely, their ethnic self-consciousness is based on the denominational factor. The level of self-consciousness of Old Believers in Latgale is typically very high. Their ethnic self-consciousness is based on faith and awareness about their

crucial role in preserving it. In this sense, they consider themselves a nation chosen by God. This fact determines the principal vectors of their behaviour, the system of prohibitions and prescriptions, of cultural values and stereotypes, the character of interdominational and cross-ethnic interrelations with other ethnoses, the character of ethno-cultural narratives. Thus, historically the basic principle of Old Believers is to remain faithful to God and one's own conscience: "[...] I see it from myself, a true Old Believer will never change his faith" (female, Daugavpils).

When describing the history of their suffering, respondents – Old Believers – frequently use the words 'to wander' (*кочевать*) and 'persecution' (*гонения*), which, in their opinion, precisely characterize historical memory: "In Russia, we drove Old Believers away, so that they would go to the Orthodox Church, but Old Believers of the old church did not consent to it, all were divided: part of them came here to Latvia, uprooted and moved to the forest, the other part – to Siberia – all Old Believers stuck to their own faith" (female, Krāslava district); "Old Believers suffered from such a terrible persecution under Peter [the Tsar]. However, Old Believers all the same managed to build – this is why we have a chapel [...]" (female, Krāslava district); "Well, many of them, however, went over to orthodoxy, only some individuals remained, but those who did not go over – they were killed, this was a terrible persecution" (female, Krāslava district).

The Old Believers who fled settled down in different parts of the world, also in Latvia, where they were allowed to practice and maintain their faith thanks to their initially isolated lifestyle and principles of non-conflicting coexistence: "I am a Russian, not simply a Russian, I am an Old Believer, these are old Russians who came in the sixteenth century and lived in this land. I belong to people of the old stock – an Old Believer" (female, Preiļi district).

As testified by many respondents, during the time of Kārlis Ulmanis' government (Presidential term 4 November 1936 – 21 July 1940) they had been allotted land holdings, and the Old Believers were still very thankful to Latvia for that. Life on individual farms enabled them to adapt and put down roots in the exile, as well as inspired deep respect and reverence for its government and people: "The Latvians gave us their land, their sky, and we have to respect this" (female, Rēzekne district); "In independent Latvia everybody kept an individual farm" (female, Daugavpils district); "I am thankful to Latvia" (female, Rēzekne district).

The label 'Ulmanis era' is referred to the time period from 1934 till 1940, when as a result of Latvian coup d'état on May 15, the parliament and political parties were dissolved. Although the authoritarian regime was established, due to the tolerant attitude towards minorities and their culture, as well as on-going processes of allotting land holdings which was based on the Agrarian Reform in Latvia in 1920, the president became a peculiar analogue of the 'Golden Age' and a mythologized personality not only for Latvians, but also minorities, e.g. the Old Believers, "The Germans were the first to arrive, then came the Russians, and again the Germans – the Russians lived peacefully under Ulmanis" (female, Rēzekne district); "Under Ulmanis, when before state holidays it was necessary to paint a house, we were given such paint as ochre, though old, it must be painted, and ochre was given for nothing"

(female, Rēzekne district); “Under Ulmanis we baptized, under the Germans we did not baptize, under the Soviets we also did not baptize, if only on the sly” (female, Preiļi district); “Under Ulmanis all children attended church” (female, Rēzekne district).

In descriptions of their living space and daily real facts, the respondents quite often use the word combination ‘our Latgale’, which testifies to their regional identity and belonging to Latvia: “Big [strawberries] were rejected, [the buyers] said they were Lithuanian, while our Latgalian [strawberries] were bought well for the jam” (female, Preiļi district); “[...] in our place, in Latgale, brown and greyish-brown [cows] were bred” (female, Rēzekne district).

It coincides with the statement by Dagmara Bejtnere related to the earlier period:

[t]he Old Believers not only earnestly adhered to their faith on the Latvian land, but also emotionally, over time, imbued with a sense of belonging to this land. This is evidenced, in particular, by the statistical data of the period before World War I, when many people left for Russia with the approach of the front line, but the Old Believers remained in Latgale (Bejtnere 2002: 359-360).

Against the backdrop of other nations and ethnicities living in the region (Latvians, Russians, Poles, Belarusians a. o.), the Old Believers stood out for their diligence, their readiness to do any job and not to complain of their destiny (Podmazov 2002: 178). Their religiosity and principles of ethics, as well as respect for the land they lived in, gradually also developed the trust of Latgalian people in them: “Our generation is like mad for work” (female, Daugavpils district); “Young girls did not idle about the corners” (female, Daugavpils district).

The lifestyle of the Old Believers was strictly regulated and highly moral. In their everyday life, they followed several canons and observed strict taboos, lived in harmony with their faith and life code established throughout centuries, as well as observed family traditions and life model: “The very first faith began with Old Believers” (male, Preiļi district); “Old Believers have preserved everything that is ancient, they took Christianity from Byzantine Greece” (male, Krāslava district); “There are icons in every Old Believer’s house” (male, Krāslava district); “If he is an Old Believer, he has to be such, he has to attend church” (male, Rēzekne district); “Old Believers were pious. They would not give you their own jug to drink of. Before your meal, you must pray the God, after the meal – do the same. It was not allowed to smoke, to drink alcohol, and Old Believers had to wear a beard” (male, Rēzekne district); “We, Old Believers, do not have any changes, as it was centuries ago, so it is now” (male, Daugavpils district); “In [19]46 I got married, I am honest, I am faithful” (female, Preiļi district).

The Old Believers established an especially close contact with the representatives of Latvia’s titular nation – the Latvians. To a great extent this can be attributed to the denominational belonging of the Latvians (the vast majority of them were Catholics, consequently they were not Orthodox believers – the ones who had deported Old

Believers) as well as to the features of Latvian character in which the Old Believers identified the features typical of themselves (precision, keeping everything in order, honesty, calm nature, diligence etc.): “She is a Latvian, from the West, I like her very much: she is punctual, accurate” (female, Daugavpils); “The Latvians are very accurate, there a priest would come, would sprinkle holy water with aspergillum and give blessing, and that’s all [about baptism]” (female, Rēzekne district).

It is natural that the Latvians were fascinated by the Old Believers’ life code, in many respects so close to them. As a result, a model of a peaceful coexistence was developed, manifesting itself not only in mutual respect, but also in an intensive communication, everyday sphere including: “When we arrived here, the Latvians helped us” (female, Daugavpils district); “There were the Russians, Latvians in my form, all were equal, everybody helped each other” (male, Rēzekne district); “[...] but we did not have even a cow, we had nothing, we went to the Latvians” (female, Rēzekne district); “We were neighbours, somehow, they found a common language with the Latvians, they did not quarrel [...]” (female, Preiļi district); “We lived friendly, the Latvians and Old Believers” (male, Rēzekne district); “We all found a common language, be it the Latvians or the Russians” (female, Rēzekne district); “And these are my friends Latvians, where I lived under the Germans” (female, Rēzekne district); “I have lived as a Latvian all the time” (female, Krāslava district).

In interviews, the Old Believers claimed that their ancestors and all future generations always accept the language and culture of their host country, however they never forgot their own ethnic and the more so their denominational identity. The Old Believers’ life philosophy manifested itself in their ability to find balance between ‘ours’ and ‘alien’ and to become ‘ours’ themselves.

First, which is especially important, the Old Believers recognized the state and statehood of Latvia founded in 1918: “When I attended school, we all stood and sang a national anthem, I remember it even now, but the cross was Russian” (female, Preiļi district); “How many governments we have seen: that of the first Ulmanis, Soviet, German, again Soviet and our dear Latvia” (female, Rēzekne district).

Their respect for the country they lived in earned the titular nation’s mutual esteem for the Old Believers and strengthened their position in the local society.

Second, the Old Believers tried to learn the official language and frequently managed to succeed admirably in this respect: “He understood Latvian well, the Latvians were the neighbours, he could speak it” (female, Rēzekne district).

Considering their concern about the purity of language, indicative is the fact that the language of the Old Believers in Latgale shows cases of borrowed Latvian lexemes and sayings, which has attracted linguists’ attention too: “But my husband uses ‘barkan’ [from Latvian ‘burkāns’ – ‘a carrot’], evidently, he has taken it from Latvian” (female, Rēzekne district); “Have to go to ‘pagasts’ [rural municipality] and get timber” (female, Rēzekne district) etc. However, it is more an exception than a regularity as they paid great attention to the purity of their mother tongue.

The above testifies to the fact that in their attempt to preserve their culture, traditions and faith the Old Believers were tolerant towards the representatives of the titular nation, towards Latvian (and Latgalian) culture and traditions: “Astici is

an Old Believers village, but all around there are Latvian villages, and everybody can speak Latgalian” (female, Rēzekne district); “The Latgalians were so kind and gay, we enjoyed ourselves at their places, but they – at ours, thus we celebrated all holidays twice” (female, Daugavpils); “Latvian folk dance. A Hungarian dance, waltz, I danced with a Latvian and with a Russian” (female, Preiļi district).

The Old Believers often draw parallels and try to find things common for both interrelated cultures, which allows accepting the other nation as kindred to one’s own: “Catholics’ prayer is very much like ours, but Orthodox believers’ is different, ours is sung and intoned beautifully” (female, Preiļi); “Just like the Latvian national hand-woven ribbon, lace the tie and go!” (female, Rēzekne district); “Boots are like those of townsman’s, as if wearing Latvian ‘pastalas’ [simple footwear made of one piece of leather – a part of Latvian traditional outfit]” (female, Preiļi district).

Important are also statements showing how the Old Believers and the Latvians came together on holidays and participated in important life rituals: “Earlier we were together on all holidays” (female, Preiļi district); “There was a festivity not long ago, the day of candles, both the Russians and the Latvians attend it” (female, Preiļi); “We were together with the Latvians, only when we attended funerals and went to weddings” (female, Rēzekne district); “But the people were of two beliefs, in the midst, but together (at the funeral of a husband – Old Believer and a wife – Catholic)” (female, Preiļi district); “A Latvian woman had to be buried, and they asked whether they could bury her in Old Believers graveyard, and nobody objected to it, she was buried in Old Believers’ – after all, we all are Christians” (female, Rēzekne district).

One more essential phenomenon of today’s Latgale cultural environment has to be underlined, namely the fact that parents no longer object to marriages between children of the Old Believers and Latvians, though formerly they had recognized marriages only between the Old Believers and had strictly observed this rule. Today, mixed marriages are quite frequent; however the Old Believers try to preserve their belief even in cases like these: “[...] before, God forbid, to give an Old Believer in marriage to a Latvian” (female, Rēzekne district); “Now they marry also Latvians” (female, Preiļi district); “My daughter’s husband is a Latvian, but I am not fastidious, if only the heart would be good” (female, Rēzekne district); “She, a priest’s grand-daughter, married a Latvian, the priest was not satisfied at first, but then he said: ‘My dear, live with him, you can live with him, only do not change your religion!’” (female, Preiļi district); “According to God, anyone can be converted to Old Believers religion, but from Old Believers’ to a different one – cannot, this is a sin” (female, Preiļi district); “She used to go out with some Latvian guy, but without saying a word, that Latvian changed his religion to Old Believers, and became a Russian” (female, Preiļi district); “A good Latvian boy, he is considered a Russian, we have won him over to our faith, in life you have to belong to the same religion” (female, Preiļi district).

It is noteworthy that children of mixed families are baptized following the traditions of the Old Believers and Catholics: “The first girl was born and was baptized an Old Believer, the second girl was born and was baptized a Catholic” (female, Rēzekne district).

This positive experience in communication with the Latvians and Latgalians

since the seventeenth century does not mean that the Old Believers of Latgale have had the same harmonious relationships with absolutely all denominations and ethnic groups living in this region. Due to mental trauma, their attitude to people belonging to the Orthodox Church was quite negative, however an open conflict as such has never arisen: “We call members of the Orthodox Church ‘belohvosti’ [white-tails], ‘belohvosti’ – members of the Orthodox Church” (female, Daugavpils district); “Old Believers don’t trust orthodox believers, you see, everything is much easier at them, I was there when my grand-son was baptized” (male, Rēzekne district); “To attend orthodox believers’ parties was considered a sin” (female, Daugavpils district).

The rift caused by historic conditions and preserved in historic memory was gradually healing. Recalling the WW II events, the Old Believers use bitterer expressions about the Germans than those they used to say about the orthodox believers (The Russians): “Under the Germans cows were taken away from us” (female, Preiļi district); “The Germans burnt down our village, there remained just single houses, among them our house remained safe too” (female, Daugavpils district).

During the Soviet period (1940–1941; 1944–1991), the Old Believers were in the ambivalent position. From the end of the 1940s until the end of the Soviet era, the period of secularization continued, but they tried to practice their traditions and rituals, for instance, funerals were held according to two traditions based on the deceased person’s status: the atheist funeral customs included music, which religious Old Believers considered a sin, and they were mainly followed by the families of the employed and those who had had high positions; the religious ceremony was with open or secretive funeral prayers and it was mainly held for either elderly deceased without any family members and/or relatives in a communist party or other people who had managed to hide their religiosity. However, in both types the presence of the Old Believers’ religious leader was obligatory. Due to their diligence and hard work some of them had attained and held prominent positions, which was beneficial for the protection of, for instance, some of the Old Believers’ prayer houses even in the time of secularisation. Nevertheless, their deep religiosity was also the cause for their inner sufferings as they needed to solve the dilemma how to preserve their religious faith and also adapt to the new state power. Many of young Old Believers refused to betray their faith and join the Komsomol, formally known as the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (or VLKSM), which was the youth organization of the Communist Party. At schools and in public space in general, cross necklaces were brutally removed. It was not only young people who were persecuted and punished, but also adults, for example, those attending Easter or Christmas religious ceremonies or following religious rites and traditions, such as burial rites of the Old Believers. The older generation (especially elderly women) refused to follow the Soviet rule and not only kept religious icons in their homes, but also protected them in case the Soviets were trying to confiscate them. However, middle-aged people were hiding the icons as soon as ‘strangers’ were noted to enter the house, “There used to always be icons at [Old Believers’] home, however I personally could not keep them, however, there was a cross; but I was not allowed to wear a cross necklace (former teacher)” (male,

Rēzekne district). Anyone whose family members or relatives followed religious traditions could have been persecuted by being dismissed from work, even from a prominent position, “If I had gone [to the prayer house on Easter] and someone had proven that, I would have lost my job” (male, Rēzekne district).

The Old Believers are not willing to remember this epoch and do not discuss this in interviews as initially during the Soviet period it was forbidden to speak about it, but after Latvia regained its independence it was not seen as a topical theme as faith and culture were no longer threatened.

5. Concluding remarks

The hundreds of years long history of the Old Believers on the territory of Latvia is a clear example of the possibility of successfully preserving one’s cultural identity in an environment dominated by people of different nationalities and religions and integrating into the new society by deep respect towards the local cultural identity. Times, social formations and states changed, but the Old Believers remained loyal to their traditions bequeathed to them by their forefathers. The main thing in their life is to believe in God, to follow all His commandments, live honestly, work hard, and pray to God. This deep religiosity allowed ‘Time’ to always work in their favour. Whenever they found themselves in a difficult position, they studied the experience, manners and customs of the others, always and everywhere learnt the skill of living and surviving, got stronger and harder. They jokingly explain this phenomenon by the fact that their baptizing is right, they are christened by immersing in icy water, thus a physical tempering has resulted in moral tenacity. Traditionalism gave way to openness, and in the epoch of globalization this cannot be otherwise. The Old Believers are open to everything that is new, and in this sense their conservatism, except religious one, is out of the question in our time. They try to make all civilization blessings serve them and be successful. For them, it does not matter where to live, the thing they wish is to be given the possibility to pray without anybody’s interference and not to be persecuted for their religion. Whatever country they might have settled in, they were always notable for tolerance, respect to alien traditions and rituals, and they expected the same attitude towards themselves. Deep religiosity went hand in hand with industriousness. The principal rule of the Old Believers: to live as their fathers and grandfathers had told them, to work hard, pray, to keep fast and church holidays – to some extent contributed to their cultural isolationism which enabled them to remain a peculiar ethnic group, and helped them to preserve fundamental traditions of Russian culture. Historically, the Old Believers’ culture involves dominance of inversion, respect for the old times, isolationism. Their whole life, culture, daily and ceremonial behaviour are motivated by the devotion to the Old Believers’ religion.

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