

## ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Governing and Living Through Failure: Russian Speakers in Ethnocentric Nation-Building Projects of Estonia and Latvia

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## ABSTRACT

This article contributes to nationalism studies by demonstrating how states use failure as a governance tool to regulate national belonging and by showing how people experience and reinterpret failure in ways that unsettle dominant national imaginaries. Drawing on ethnographic research with Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia, we explore how individuals cast outside ‘communities of value’ as ‘failures’ negotiate such experiences differently across generations. We show that while state discourses frequently frame Russophones as failing national cohesion, their mundane withdrawal or occasional refusal of dominant discourses, frequently dismissed as passive or disobedient, can be read as subtle acts of care and agency that sustain alternative modes of life. Situating these experiences within literature on failure, we argue that failure is not merely deviation from national norms but a historically sedimented, affective and generative condition that illuminates the contradictions of ethnocentric nation-building while opening space for reimagined forms of national membership.

## 1 | Introduction

‘Russian-speaking people are like “faces of failure” (*lica neu-dach*)’, Andrei says, gazing pensively into his cup of tea as he sums up everyday life in Estonia from a corner table in a small café in Narva.<sup>1</sup> In his view, ‘these people became collateral damage of the new political system, trapped in a web of expectations placed upon them’. Andrei, a young man in his late 20s, was born in this Estonian border city, completed university and became politically engaged in the public life of both the city and the country. While Andrei speaks flawless Estonian, his parents, whose life orientations differ from his, still struggle with the language. They, according to him, appear disconnected from domestic political issues and distant from Estonian society at

large. Although Andrei is openly critical of such detachment, he also describes how the political climate of judgement seeps into his own emotional life as a young person weighing his options and life strategies: ‘At times I put myself in that category as well. I don’t understand why Estonia treats its people like this’.

In this article, we take up the themes raised by Andrei, as well as by other research interlocutors, to ask: What impact does being labelled a failure—whether attributed from the outside or internalised—have, not just on the imaginative, discursive level, but on the everyday lived experiences of those who bear that label? And how do these experiences differ across generations and countries, producing distinct ways of negotiating national membership, responsibility and hope for the future?

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Failure has recently received growing scholarly attention, whether seen as a site of power-laden expectations (Appadurai and Alexander 2020), moral self-assessment (Beekers and Kloos 2018) or infrastructural breakdown and dysfunction of everyday life (Carroll et al. 2017; Ojani et al. 2020). While some research has engaged with the concept of failure in postsocialist contexts (e.g., Brkovic 2022; Laviolette and Martínez 2019; Tereškinas 2018; Thelen 2011), the concept has been rarely brought into sustained dialogue with nationalism studies, especially in the Baltic context, where nation-building is commonly examined through analysis of alignment with national norms (Bērziņa et al. 2023; Petersoo 2007). Failure is implicitly used either to highlight integration policy shortcomings (Ozoliņa 2016; Rozenvalds 2004) or attributed as personal qualities of minority subjects (Annus 2023). We build on, yet also shift this perspective by treating failure as a key mechanism of governance through which nation-building is enacted. It is produced, we argue, through the state's moral judgements and enhanced through affective hierarchies of value, while also being inhabited and negotiated in everyday relational practices, opening space for alternative forms of sociality and nationhood. In this way, failure becomes central to the ongoing reproduction of the hegemonic conception of nation and to understanding minorities' experiences inside or outside the national community.

In this article, we draw comparatively on two cases of the sizeable Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia within enduring ethnocentric nation-building politics (Järve 2009; Rozenvalds 2010).<sup>2</sup> The post-Soviet nation-building approaches of both countries have historically been put in dialogue due to similarities in their minority policies, particularly their initially exclusionary citizenship laws, the centralisation and reservation of political power for the majority ethnic population and avoidance of accommodating cultural and political rights and needs of ethnic minorities (Agarin 2016).<sup>3</sup> Similarities, however, extend beyond institutionalised exclusion to the symbolic level, where the nation and its 'internal others' are imagined in antagonistic ways.

While postsocialist Estonia and Latvia are not exceptional cases within nationalism studies, their vernacular entanglements with contested historical and geopolitical orientations offer an important vantage point for examining how nations are defined and reinforced through processes of disenfranchisement and exclusion. As Annist (2022, 140) notes, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, actively uprooting the Soviet past, understood as a hostile occupation, and 'dissociating it from state-building process' became central to constructing a new order in the region, defined as 'modern' and 'European'. Yet, nearly 35 years later, the legacy of Soviet occupation of the Baltic states still lingers in the form of a sizeable Russian-speaking population: 37.7% in Latvia (Official Statistics Portal 2023) and 27.4% in Estonia (Krumm et al. 2023).<sup>4</sup> The significant presence of Russophones, whose dominant status during Soviet times was almost overnight transformed into one of subordination in newly established democracies, has played a significant symbolic role in the geopolitical tensions in the region since the early 1990s. The Russophone communities have been framed as a threat to democratic transition (Norkus 2007) and to the survival of the titular cultures and languages (Cheskin 2013). At the same time, some Russian speakers' limited engagement

with state language and civic life has contributed to their portrayal as 'unruly' or insufficiently committed national subjects who fail to achieve parity with representatives of the titular nation (Dzenovska 2018).

To explore the interplay between ethnocentric state logics of governance and the lived experiences of Russian speakers who do not conform to dominant notions of national membership, we draw on two ethnographic studies conducted in Estonia and Latvia between 2016 and 2019 as part of separate research projects in cultural anthropology and political science. Alina examined narratives of belonging in Narva, Estonia, based on 27 in-depth interviews with individuals between 22 and 70 years old, revealing tensions of dislocation and efforts to reimagine self and place (Jašina-Schäfer 2021). Lena focused on nine Russian-speaking high school students in Riga, Latvia, combining participant observation and group discussions to explore how youth navigate difference and disagreement within an ethnocentric school environment and country dynamics (Herberga 2023). Revisiting our data through the lens of failure, we supplement material collected before the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war with recent interviews and media analysis. As representatives of the Russophone minority in the countries we examine, we recognise that our positionality shaped the selection of our theoretical framework and data analysis. Our perspectives are necessarily situated and partial, that is, the claims we make are informed by the specific social and historical locations from which we write (Jašina-Schäfer 2022).

In the following section, we discuss how Estonian and Latvian nation-building operate as modes of symbolic regulation, in which failure functions as a means of naming and managing otherness (Ssorin-Chaikov 2016). In both countries, failure becomes a way to mark out those who appear to disturb the state developmental logics and imagined national futures through their perceived 'unresponsiveness' to and a lack of investment into local cultures. This logic also shapes what Anderson (2013, 6) labels 'communities of value', historically defined by shared ideals, common culture and normative conduct, yet structured by both exclusion and failure: Those who are excluded are seen as having failed, while those who fail are, in turn, excluded.

Crucially, this paper also examines what failure as a mode of governance does in practice, and how Russian speakers navigate it. Shaped by the specific context of postsocialist transformations and anxieties, national cultural essentialism and neoliberalism, both states produce frameworks that position Russian speakers as either 'good' or 'bad', yet always marginal to national membership. As a result, their capacity to act as moral and political agents remains limited, at least in the conventional sense where agency is associated with liberal ideals of personal choice, autonomy and spectacular forms of resistance. Instead, inspired by a relational and affective perspective on agency—one that foregrounds often overlooked forms of subtle action and inaction as emphatic social acts (Mazzarella 2021)—we spotlight more diffuse and mundane responses, such as withdrawal and waiting out in Estonia and performative yielding or refusal to comply in Latvia. We demonstrate how these responses, although often perceived as shameful or even as failure in themselves, reveal alternative forms of sociality that Russian speakers craft within a discursive field of norms and expectations.

## 2 | Failure as a Form of Governance

In his book 'Border Conditions', Platt (2024, 6) describes the social positions and cultural imaginaries of Russian speakers in the Baltic countries as fragmented and ambivalent. They are neither fully national nor diasporic, neither entirely integrated nor completely detached, 'never displaced, but out of place nevertheless'. This complex geography of ambivalent existence and liminal belonging, suspended between Russia and Europe, between socialist past and neoliberal present, fits uneasily into institutional efforts to construct a homogenous society based on a narrow understanding of nationhood in both Estonia and Latvia.<sup>5</sup> As such, these lived liminal realities are frequently represented in political and medial discourses not only as objects requiring urgent management but also as Martínez notes in reference to North-Eastern Estonia, where Russian speakers constitute a significant majority, more often as signs of failure and deficiency: lives, practices and places deemed beyond worth, beyond repair and ultimately 'unworthy of salvaging' (Martínez 2025, 16).

Building on this, our research seeks to understand how Russian speakers themselves make sense of these social conditions while living as a perceived failure—not merely as personal missteps, but as a mode of governance shaped by (1) (post-)socialist social ruination that dispossess those who appear to bear the marks of state socialism (Annist 2022; Dzenovska 2020; Martínez 2018) and (2) national and neoliberal frameworks that render Russian speakers as an obstacle to national development due to their lingering Soviet mentalities (Kesküla 2015; Ozoliņa 2019).

Since failure is 'something we experience and declare often' (Appadurai 2016), it has become a focal point in social science research, with scholars trying to understand its daily manifestations. Most commonly, failure is regarded as the outcome of social action that 'has gone astray', rendering it a condition of constrained possibilities, unfulfilled potential and thwarted aspirations (Mica et al. 2023, 4). It represents a state of 'breakage' (Carroll et al. 2017), a 'no-thing' (Scott 2023), one that lacks an anticipated future and disrupts evolution as defined by dominant cultural models, political economy and technology (Appadurai and Alexander 2020). As the antithesis to movement—a central tenet of modernity and development, driven by the promise of a better future—failure invariably unsettles existing norms and 'provokes puzzlement, diagnosis, and the search for a remedy' (Appadurai 2016, xxvii). Being affectively tied to ambivalence, deviation and unbecoming, failure thus 'feels rotten all around' (Howe and Takaragawa 2017) and is rarely acknowledged as an inherent feature of social and political change.

At the same time, as Ssorin-Chaikov (2016) argues in his research into Soviet modernity, failure is not a mere 'side effect' of the project gone wrong. Rather, it is a historically sedimented, politically generative, affective and embodied condition that offers a valuable lens for understanding 'ruination from within, rather than from without' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2016, 694). In other words, failure functions as a mode of governance and a 'device of naming otherness'—marking out those practices that seem to disturb or offend the developmental logics and imagined national futures with their 'incorrigible wilderness' (716).

Just as Ssorin-Chaikov explores the material and ideological 'debris' of multiple unfinished Soviet projects—not as a mere leftover, but as living residues sedimented in the present-day political structures that shape life and representation in Northern Siberia—the often-problematized position of Russian speakers in the Baltic countries can similarly be seen as a continuous process of (post)socialist social 'ruination'. This, we argue, is a contemporary political project of governance that, as Stoler (2008, 196) writes in her research on 'imperial debris', inspirational for Ssorin-Chaikov, 'lays waste to certain peoples and places, relations, and things', while reproducing 'contested scales of differential rights' and racialised relations of the past (ibid., 193). This comparison invites us to understand the perceived failure of belonging of Russian speakers not as mere remnants of a defunct Soviet regime that continue to haunt the present and arguably explain Russophone settlers' 'unresponsiveness' towards integration into local cultures (Annus 2023).<sup>6</sup> Rather, failure emerges through the process of the strategic repositioning of the past, its people, places and symbolic structures, mobilised to serve the politics of nation-building in the present, with tangible effects on everyday life.

While Latvian and Estonian punitive nationalisation policies expressed through political marginalisation and symbolic othering of Russian speakers are often described as a compensatory response to past Soviet injustices, widely recognised as a 'traumatic rupture' (Annus 2018), as Platt (2024, xxii) argues with reference to Latvia—and as we suggest applies equally to Estonia—these policies have 'ironically reproduced matrices of exclusion and imperial schemes of governance [from the Soviet past], allowing distorted echoes of those injustices to carry forward in history in unexpected new forms'.

Reflecting on these themes, Roos (2023) has, for example, pointed to the 'narratives of exceptionalism and racism' in the Baltic countries, which dominate cultural institutions and national media. These narratives build on a 'restorationist' approach that links the Soviet era to the idea of socialist aberration and portrays Soviet-era Russian-speaking migrants as inherently 'Eastern'—an identity that is backward, inferior and in need of catching up. In this vein, for instance, at the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence of Latvia, Artis Pabriks, attempted to separate 'the free world' from morally suspect subjects, effectively pigeonholing Russian speakers into 'accepted' or 'good' vs. 'failed' or 'bad', while acting himself as a benevolent saviour:

The ruthless Russian aggression in Ukraine gives a great opportunity of choice for Latvian Russians to be with Latvia and the free world. I extend you my hand. The other choice is to be supporters of Russian crime and never be understood in free Latvia.

(Pabriks 2022, n.p.)

Beyond the imposed subjectivity, the example above illustrates how the Russo-Ukrainian war has become a new moral yardstick to assess deviation of Russian speakers from the accepted moral norms, represented by the titular nations. This example highlights how social and political crises are leveraged to classify Russophones, reinforcing narratives of failure or conditional

acceptance that extend across multiple spheres of life, as further examples below demonstrate.

### 3 | On the 'Good' and 'Bad' Russian Speakers

In both countries, as scholars have noted, official minority discourse extends beyond political and legal categories. The states seek to govern historical 'difference through regulating conduct' (Dzenovska 2018, 48), attempting to mould Russian speakers into loyal subjects who endorse national projects and conform to dominant notions of cultural belonging. According to Dzenovska, from the Latvian state's perspective, being a 'good subject' (49) means recognising and accepting the national order of things within the public and political life. In contrast, national indifference or resentment towards the state is framed as the behaviour of a 'bad' or 'failed' subject. This figure is often portrayed as lacking sufficient language skills, unable to shed a lingering Soviet mentality, and as having 'lost reference points of value orientation' (Jauns.lv 2023) by considering 'the Latvian language to be a useless dog's language' (Streips 2025), while "remaining neutral," staying "out of politics," or otherwise silently supporting the war crimes being committed by the Russian military' (Delfi.lv 2022). These traits are, in turn, used in the media as evidence of their 'incompleteness' and of not yet having fully arrived in the present, which is represented by the titular nations as embodying progressive 'European' neoliberal values.

In both countries, but especially in Latvia, the category 'good' Russian (or 'good' Russian speaker) has been widely referenced both in media and within the public (e.g., Petrenko 2011; Procevska 2013). This category includes those Russophones who have not only become fluent in titular languages but also have acquired a certain set of cultural beliefs and values that have been considered as 'correct'. This includes acknowledging the Soviet occupation, being critical about Russia's interventions in the politics of the former Soviet republics and condemning its recent war, but also making the right choice about cultural events or entertainment places. Yet, whether Russian speakers are deemed 'good' or 'bad', the politics that govern difference, as Dzenovska (2018, 48) argues, remain ultimately 'deceitful'. In Latvia, but also in Estonia, where the explicit purpose of the state is to ensure 'the continuity and flourishing of the cultural nation' (Dzenovska 2021, 154), Russian speakers may reside, and some may even be recognised as 'good subjects' who have successfully integrated, but, as Dzenovska (2018, 50) puts it, the state 'will never be truly theirs'. Paradoxically, then, Russian speakers are simultaneously expected to reach the predefined hegemonic 'norm', yet are also 'doomed to fail' (Appadurai 2015, 131). Despite adhering to 'the right' set of values, the 'good Russians' nevertheless remain Russian, relegated to the outside of the 'community of value', and positioned culturally to the 'other side of the civilizational border' (Kesküla 2015, 102).

In this context, the hegemonic image of Russian speakers continues to cast them as socially destabilising forces to be feared, judged and consequently managed by a state that perceives itself as 'embattled' and under continuous threat from within and beyond its borders due to the looming presence of the Russian Federation (Dzenovska 2021). This logic has material

consequences: for example, recent removal of voting rights for non-citizens in local elections, justified by portraying them as threats to the democratic future (Estonia), or proposals advocating the deportation of long-term resident Russian citizens for failing state language examination (Latvia). In both cases, failure functions as a mode of governance—a mechanism of sorting and excluding undesired forms of difference, which is continuously reproduced.

### 4 | Failure as Alternative Form of Sociality

In the empirical sections, we extend this perspective on failure as a tool of state control by examining what it does in practice and how it shapes everyday socialities of Russian speakers. We focus in particular on unacknowledged and less visible subtle acts, such as withdrawal and waiting out, adherence and refusal, that people use to negotiate exclusionary governance, which renders them marginal. To do so, we draw on recent critiques of dominant liberal notions of agency as personal choice and the capacity to act, wherein various forms of inaction, subtle action and disidentification are often perceived 'as shameful, cowardly or even as failure' to be good citizens (Vorhölter 2024).

In an effort to move beyond a binary vision of the world, where action is seen as good and suspended passivity as inherently bad, scholars have called for attention to forms of agency within nonagency, exploring the intentionality behind non-doing (Mazzarella 2021; McGranahan 2016) as well as its generative potential. Thus, while failure is often associated with passivity—the realm of the negative, as discussed earlier—we are interested to explore how it can be also experienced as 'meaningful', revealing hidden forms of sociality, agency and possibilities for social change (Scott 2022, 2023).

Scott argues, for example, that failing to become does not necessarily imply a lack of development. Rather, it can represent both an act of omission by neglecting to act and a 'deliberate decision not to do, have or be something specific', expressed through avoidance, refusal, rejection, dismissal, staying silent or yielding (Scott 2023, 112). According to Scott, this constitutes a process of disidentification, in which 'an individual consciously rejects, rebels against, or refuses to be a certain type of some-body'.

Deliberately not doing or becoming something is thus not simply a rupture or passive withdrawal from relations. As McGranahan (2016) argues, in particular historical and cultural contexts, it can also be productive—social and affiliative, hopeful but also wilful. In theorising individual and collective acts of refusal, she shows how refusal can form a part of movements for self-determination, rights and recognition, and rejections of particular structures and systems:

To refuse is to say no. But, no, it is not just that. To refuse can be generative and strategic, a deliberate move toward one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another. Refusals illuminate limits and possibilities, especially but not only of the state and other institutions.

(McGranahan 2016, 319)

This more nuanced understanding of failure as potentially deliberate and meaningful resonates with Butler's (1997) reading of failure as a site of hope. Like Scott and McGranahan, Butler challenges the conventional view of agency as tied to major resistance and measurable success. Instead, she argues that when individuals fail to live up to dominant social norms and expected identity performances, this very failure can become a source of agency. Rather than simply being a sign of perceived lack, failure disrupts the repetitive performance of what society deems 'normal', rendering the subject intelligible not through conformity, but through rupture (Butler 1990). From this perspective, agency emerges as a refusal to perform the roles and behaviours through which dominant identities are maintained (Brooks 1997).

It is particularly these deliberate and performative acts of failure, often perceived as nonacts or nonappropriate acts, and stigmatised by the very governance practices that paradoxically produce them, that we draw on in our research, highlighting two interrelated yet distinct experiences and practices of failure in the ethnographically specific contexts of Estonia and Latvia.

## 5 | Withdrawal and Waiting Out in Estonia

As Appadurai and Alexander (2020, 1) note, the sense of failure, as a product of judgement, is 'real, and it produces disappointment, regret, remorse, and other costly effects on individuals and groups'. This disappointment was palpable during my fieldwork in Narva, Estonia's third-largest city bordering Russia. It was, for example, echoed in the words of my interlocutors, who described Narva as 'the family's black sheep' or 'an ulcer on Estonia's body'. Sometimes, it was even etched onto the city's walls with graffiti reading 'We will cover our sorrows with indifference' (Figure 1).

Today, Narva's population is around 95% Russian-speaking, most of whom arrived during the Soviet times from across the USSR to fill major labour shortages caused by the region's rapid industrial expansion in the Ida-Viru region, which was preceded by the forced displacement of the original inhabitants in 1944. However, since the early 1990s, the city has undergone what Pfoser (2016) describes as 'nested peripheralisation'—an uneven local experience of transformation from a showcase of

socialist modernity to a neglected eastern periphery, positioned at the margins of the Estonian state, national identity and global capitalism. Alongside nationalisation and de-Sovietisation campaigns, Narva has suffered from disinvestment, deindustrialisation and depopulation, leading to the ruination of factories, houses, parks and entire districts (Martínez 2018). For example, the Krenholm area, once Narva's most vibrant part and 'the centrepiece of proletarian internationalism', with its textile factory serving as a unifying force for the city (Kaiser and Nikiforova 2007: 549), has suffered the most devastating decline, becoming defunct and standing today as an artefact of the hardships that the city has endured. No new industry or economic initiative of comparable magnitude has emerged to foster the city's development.

As a result, many Russian-speaking residents—13% of whom hold 'grey passports' (undetermined citizenship) and 35% Russian passports (Narva Linnavalitsus 2022)—see themselves as mere 'side-effects', as some put it, of the sweeping transformations in Estonia. Perceived by the Estonian state and public as failing to establish a respectful relationship with the country they reside in, they often withdraw from circumstances which they regard as beyond their control, rejecting imposed notions of identity.

'I have withdrawn from everyone and from Narva', Nataliya told me over dinner in my rented apartment. In her late 50s with a grey passport, she wavered between exhaustion, frequently claiming she was 'at the limit', and the determination to 'somehow go on with life'. She recounted how she moved to Narva from Tallinn in the early 2000s, an unusual choice, she noted, made in pursuit of a fresh start and an escape from strained personal relationships with her relatives. Initially filled with hope for a new beginning, she soon realised she was stuck with nowhere else to go and no one to rely on. Over time, Nataliya lost her job and the apartment bought with her only savings. By the time we first met in 2017, she was struggling to make ends meet. Having worked as a seamstress for years, she was deeply disappointed that her profession had become devalued in the neo-liberal context, forcing her to change jobs for marginally better wages while struggling with further devaluation as a Russian speaker (see also Kesküla 2015 on industrial workers as a new underclass in Estonia). 'I was so certain I would make it work. I wasn't afraid of anything. But I failed. I failed because I encountered so many hurdles', she sighed.

For Nataliya, then, all of Narva felt as a 'stifling place' populated by 'nobodies' like herself—people who feel trapped, stripped of value and recognition. 'Yes. We are nobodies. We pay taxes, we live here. We contribute, we fulfill all the laws. And yet, we are nobodies. We are dependent on work, so we need to grovel, you've got to step on your own throat. They load you, pressure you, squeeze from people their last bits', Nataliya said, expressing not only disappointment but also a deep sense of betrayal. Neither her hard work nor her tax-paying subjectivity seems to matter when it comes to being acknowledged as a deserving part of the national body in the country.

But how do people like Nataliya navigate disappointment and withdrawal and how, if at all, do they operationalise failure? At first glance, withdrawal in response to state judgement may



**FIGURE 1** | Photo taken by the Author 1, March 2017. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

seem to conform to the public perception that Narva's Russian-speaking residents are insufficiently invested in the nation, rejecting the idea of the national way of life as the 'virtuous life' (Dzenovska 2018, 49). How can they be considered part of the 'community of value', when they are not engaging in practices seen as 'good' in Estonia? Indeed, Nataliya, who was born in Estonia, has neither learned the language due to a lack of opportunities to practice it (though she wishes she could) nor applied for Estonian citizenship. And yet, like many other interlocutors, she, as I came to see it, waits without giving up hope that her form of life might still be socially included.

Her attachment to this possible yet always uncertain recognition by the state and by fellow ethnic Estonian citizens ('they don't want to see how much labour, time, and craft you invest [...] but I fight, I try to prove something') resembles what Hage (2009, 97) describes in his research on contemporary neoliberal Australia as 'waiting out': the sense of moving forward in life, while actually experiencing entrapment and frustration. One response to such 'stuckedness' is migration, but more often, according to Hage, people attempt to 'stick it out', embracing situations of pathological uncertainty as they stay put. Celebrating one's capacity to endure rather than calling for change not only makes life bearable but also allows people to claim endurance itself as a marker of a dignified life and as a basis for laying claim to national membership.

Nataliya is not alone in her quiet resignation from imposed national terms that she experiences as heartbreaking, nor in her endurance for being recognised nonetheless. Across Narva, this sentiment circulates in conversation, glances and gestures. For example, at a language café I attended regularly, it was common to hear people express cynicism at the futility of their integration efforts and their life-long investments in the country, only to later articulate hopes for recognition grounded in their imaginaries of change.

According to Vadim, a local businessman in his 40s, born in Estonia but holding a grey passport, such expectations can be summarised as follows: 'And so, all the people, especially those with a grey passport, keep waiting for the state to realise that there are no "other" children, only our common people, and that they should be treated equally'. While admitting to his struggles to learn the Estonian language and occasionally falling into despair over the persistent Estonia's public images of Narva and its people as 'foreign' (*chuzhie*), Vadim nonetheless continues to hope for the state's 'loyal treatment of all of its people', emphasising his own deep-rooted belonging: 'You can't say "Vadim get out of here, this is not your country." How come? This is my home. My parents live here and will be buried. My children live here and have Estonian citizenship. Where else should I go?'

The tropes of withdrawal and waiting out, as represented by Nataliya and Vadim, should not be seen merely as flawed detours to 'good' citizenship. Rather, as I came to understand, they may be viewed as distinct modes of social life that emerged from a deeply felt sense of failure to belong that people seek to contest. This mode of life is shaped by a shared experience of structural abandonment and a mutual attunement to the fragile promise that life might be otherwise among those who find themselves similarly positioned in the aftermath of postsocialist loss.

To better understand the rhythms of this alternative sociality, I briefly turn to a Russian-speaking Estonian writer Ivanov (2019) and his novel 'Untermensch', which articulates a structure of feeling resonant with my interlocutors' experiences, helping expand local ethnographic knowledge. In a conversation we had in 2024, Ivanov described his protagonist—a middle-aged Russian-speaking resident of contemporary Tallinn—as a composite figure of peripheral detachment, someone that lags behind the normative time, unable to 'move on' in a future and Europe-oriented country, and living amid abandoned past meanings. It is a figure who lingers, is fragmented and torn. As Ivanov writes: 'Further? There's no point in moving forward anymore, and nowhere to go'.

Yet *Untermensch* is not a novel of self-pity, neither for the protagonist nor for others who fail or get lost. It focuses on persistence, on the moral and affective logics of lingering, dreaming and even refusing to let go. These acts become alternative forms of social life that may appear as dysfunctional or even absurd from the outside, but that nonetheless express meaningful existence rooted in the very failure to fit into idealised images of the good, progressive Western individual or homogenous Estonian nation-state. Echoing Hage, it is grounded in the feeling of being both trapped and moving while standing still. As his protagonist declares: 'Yes, I am nothing now, I am finished. But I will not be moved. I stand firmer than a monument, and I will stand my ground'.

My interlocutors in Narva felt similarly at a loss, yet reminded themselves of their ability to wait out and stay put. As I observed, however, this waiting was not merely about passively or idealistically expecting for the things to change, but involved practical ways of 'implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world' that helped counter 'the dehumanisation implied by a situation of "stuckedness"' (cf. Ringel 2014, 53).

Take Marina, an Estonia-born woman in her early 60s who works in a kindergarten and whom I met at the language café. She shared her ongoing efforts to fit into a national framework that emphasises historical ancestry tied to pre-Soviet cultural heritage and language as the primary prerequisites for belonging—criteria she does not meet. Yet, as she noted to me, she continues to imagine change, while trying to actively bridge these gaps:

I strive with all my heart. I study, I attend. I go everywhere I can, I'm signed up for every possible club. And I passed kõrgtase (advanced level) nine years ago. But what can I do? There's no one for me to speak with here, though I would love to. And there are many people like me in my surroundings, intelligent people who want to, who strive, but we just cannot manage. That's why I try to compensate for it in some way. I do not know the language, but I strive to understand the culture.

Despite bleak prospects for formal recognition, people like Marina, Vadim and Nataliya, continue to emphasise their self-entrepreneurial efforts, which help them to materially craft

both continuity and change in their lives. In Marina's case, these include her work as a kindergarten music teacher, her volunteer participation in choir promoting Estonian folk songs and her personal labour to help sustain life in Narva. These roles, she believes, serve as a kind of moral counterweight, allowing her to navigate exclusionary ethnonational narratives of political membership while remaining aware of the structural constraints she faces: 'Everyone tries in their own way. But it seems that the government, from its high position, doesn't quite understand this'.

What emerges in Narva, then, is not simply a collection of individual disaffections, but a distinct form of sociality shaped by shared experiences of exclusion, failure and waiting out. People like Nataliya, Vadim and Marina, though experientially different, are bound by a mutual attunement to loss, to the dismantling of their city since the early 1990s and to the recognition of one another's ongoing struggles and fragile hopes that things might change. In this context, failure to conform to national imaginaries of the good citizens does not mark the breakdown of social life but, as these examples show, its persistence and transformation.

## 6 | Adhering to and Failing to Perform 'Good' Subjects in Latvia

The self-description of failing to align with the idealised image of the 'good' Estonian subject, along with patterns of social and political withdrawal, as observed among Narva's inhabitants, has, to some extent, persisted across the Estonian–Latvian border and is also reflected in the self-perception of Latvian Russophones. Despite the lack of in-depth qualitative studies on Latvian Russian speakers' sense of belonging and self-perception, their withdrawal is nevertheless evident—particularly in the growing number of so-called 'grey answers' ('I don't know' or 'neither/nor') given in response to politically sensitive questions in public opinion polls especially since 2022 (Hercberga 2024). Consequently, the dominant discourse frequently portrays Latvian Russophones as a homogeneous, apathetic group, resistant to progressive European values, and generally unable to stand on equal footing with ethnic Latvians, reinforcing social binarism. This dynamic is evident in how residents of one of Riga's predominantly Russian-speaking neighbourhoods describe themselves, saying, 'nobody gives a shit about us!' (Potetinova 2023, 8). Being labelled as an unwanted Soviet legacy—marked by worthlessness and abandonment (Potetinova 2023)—mirrors the self-perception of Russophones in Estonia.

However, the homogenised portrayal of Latvian Russophones often breaks down when it comes to the Russian-speaking youth. Narratives about this group are frequently framed through the lens of optimism, especially in relation to the nation's enduring struggles with social integration and unity. As evidence of this, it took only 51% of young Russian-speaking respondents (aged 18–24) to support Ukraine in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war for a Latvian journalist to hail them as 'bridges of hope' (Ločmele 2022). Overall, there is a prevailing discourse of expectations and hopes that Russian-speaking youth will surpass previous generations (Hercberga 2026). In other words, they are

expected to become the 'good' Russian speakers that their parents and grandparents have consistently failed to be.

My ethnographic research demonstrates that the young people, indeed, perform according to these hegemonic expectations, at least when it comes to their public identity performance and in circumstances when the gaze of authority is directed at them, in fact or in their imagination. Nearly 4 months spent with a group of young Russophones both in a school setting and outside of the institutional environment made me realise how well they have learned not to fail these expectations and often perform the 'good' Russian speaker to avoid potential ramifications, especially in today's highly securitised context. The examples of repeated conventional behaviours that reinforce assumed hegemonic standards included filling out a state-commissioned survey on global and regional affairs so that the answers, in the words of Peter (17), matched those 'that were expected to hear from us', or composing a state-commissioned essay to mark the centenary of the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia so that it came out, according to Igor (17), 'patriotic'. 'Does it have to be necessarily patriotic?' I followed up. 'Ah, yes', added Igor with a knowing smile, implying unequivocally of the response.

My observations of the young people took place before Russia's full-scale invasion, the subsequent rightward shift in the state's discourse (Auers 2023) and the intensified securitisation of Russian identity. Nevertheless, the fieldwork context was far from apolitical. Russia–Latvian relations were already tense after the 2014 annexation of Crimea; a contested by the Russophone community education reform aiming at making Latvian the main language of instruction was in full swing, and centenary celebrations of Latvia's independence involved compulsory nationwide activities for students. One key effect of such a politicised environment is that young people constantly feel assessed based on whether they meet or fail the state's expectations, or, in the words of Boris (18), as they are constantly undergoing 'loyalty checks'. The young people's acknowledgment of the state's gaze upon them can be traced in Boris' (18) conception of the aforementioned essay as '*yet another* essay on the topic of how I love my homeland' (emphasis added), or Natasha's (18) remark that the presence of external inspectors (often from the Ministry of Education) during their classes is not an exception but rather a regular occurrence. The students themselves explain such scrutiny towards a Russian-speaking school by its status as a minority school. Although the full transition to Latvian as the sole language of instruction was completed in September 2025, the division between Russian and Latvian schools remains. This means that the mother tongue of most students and teachers in each school continues to reflect the school's original designation as either Latvian or Russian. 'It's about the [school's] language [...], it's loyalty', explains Peter (17), suggesting that a school's minority status can—and often does—call its, and its teachers' and students', loyalty to the state into question.

In this politicised context, my research participants never explained their tendency to comply with hegemonic expectations as a desire to belong, to feel accepted or to become 'Latvians'. Their performance of good subjects is rather driven by, as Natasha (17) put it, 'fear of consequences, which could be rather serious', as well as by the sense of responsibility they feel in relation to their (minority) school and their teachers (Vlad, 17).

The aforementioned vicious circle of acting along the state expectations and thereby reinforcing them is sometimes fractured by very rare moments of subversive behaviour—when young people act against the accepted norms and deliberately fail them. An example of such behaviour happened when an external observer was present at one of the lessons. Here is an account by the event participants of what happened:

**Igor (17):** There was a review of teachers [inaudible]. And when the examiner came, I decided to show off and asked [the teacher who was leading the class] “Shall we answer as it is or as expected?”

**The author:** This is something! And what happened?

**Igor (17):** Nobody heard (laughing).

**The author:** Were you then called to the office of the head of the school?

**Igor (17):** No.

**Boris (18):** God forbid if somebody heard you. [...] There would have been a lot of problems.

[...]

**Peter (17) (commenting how perilous Igor's words were):** Keep the tongue not behind the teeth, but behind...

**Igor (17):** ... behind seven seals.<sup>7</sup>

This event, along with the participants' account of it, presents a compelling subject of analysis on several levels. It demonstrates that the young people are very well aware of the behaviour expected from them—to keep the mouth shut and be quiet. The normative expectations projected upon them by the state are re-asserted through the groups' general compliance with them by keeping their tongues 'behind seven seals'. Such behaviour, learnt through regular inspections, as Natasha mentions earlier, but also through the dominant discourse discussed earlier in the article, becomes a repeated conventional practice that reinforces assumed hegemonic standards. However, when identity is understood as a performative process, it is its continuous enactment that opens it to intervention and re-signification (Butler 1990). In other words, its discursive nature is precisely what enables it to be reinterpreted and redefined. This malleability is where discursive agency lies—within the subject's ability to disrupt and reframe dominant meanings.

Returning to the earlier example, Igor's subversive speech act reframed the notion of the 'good' Russian speaker—not as someone who remains silent, but as someone who acknowledges the dual nature of their social being: both the expected and the lived. In the context of this article, this reframing exposes the tension between the 'good' Russian speaker and the so-called 'failed' one, offering space for alternative subject positions to emerge. By throwing this provocative question and understanding very well the delimitations of the 'good' minority student subject, Igor failed the expectations and performed a 'bad' minority student by refusing the hegemonic constructs and rupturing them. It is this rupture that opens the possibilities of resistance and subversion, since 'any refusal to repeat an act that confirms a subordinate

identity, necessarily has a political effect' (McKinlay 2010, 236). In other words, the young man was able to overturn the meaning of the discursive construct 'good' Russian speaker as silent and obedient and reposition it as vocal, defiant and agentic.

Such subversions—failures to repeat hegemonic norms and expectations—do not always take the form of speech acts but can be, drawing on video footage from one of Russian-speaking schools, acts of embodied resistance. On 24 February 2025, all Latvian state schools took part in the commemoration of the victims of Russia's war in Ukraine by playing the Ukrainian national anthem. While we do not know how this unfolded in most schools, one particular case stands out when, during the performance of the anthem, students remained seated. A footage, captured by a student in the class that later was shared through media, shows the teacher standing in front of the class with the camera on, recording the students who failed his—as a state and the titular nation's representative—expectations to see the whole class stand up to honour Ukraine in its resistance against Russia. One can hear the teacher's voice on the footage saying to the seated class, first in Russian with a Latvian accent and then in Latvian, '[reveal] your true face' (Anstrate 2025).

The moral judgement of students who chose not to stand up for the national anthem of a country at war falls outside the scope of this discussion. However, the ethical issue of a teacher filming minors without the consent of either the students or their parents, while warranting separate attention, remains relevant here, as it highlights the broader trend of increased securitisation and the implicit licence to monitor the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This students' bodily disobedience serves as another instance of failed performativity—a deliberate act of disrupting the repetitive practices that sustain and strengthen authority, which in this case was enacted through the dual position of ethnic dominance and institutional power.

Both examples discussed here could be read as moments of subversions or misfires in the sense that they represent a sort of a hick-up in the line of quotations and reiterations of the convention of what does it mean and what does it take to be a 'good' (young) Russian speaker today in Latvia. The very pertinent question, however, remains—why do young Russian speakers engage in such subversive actions? The public nature of the second incident, in particular, moves their failed performativity to the domain of public judgement, leading to them being labelled pejorative terms, such as 'cattle' or a 'brainwashed pro-Russian mob' (*bidlu vate*) (Anstrate 2025). Why then, despite public accusations and expressed fears of potential consequences, do young Russophones not completely withdraw, as their older peers in Estonia often do, but instead occasionally transgress imposed expectations?

When discussing failure in the context of his critique of neoliberalism, Appadurai (2015, 132) suggests that 'constitutive failure' is the effort of the poor to be heard in public deliberative forums. To translate this idea into the current discussion, the failure of young Russian speakers to adhere to the hegemonic expectations of a 'good' Russian speaker can be seen as their attempt to make themselves heard and seen beyond the hegemonic discourse. In Latvia's highly intensified sociopolitical

context, young people themselves question their ability to impact political decisions—‘we are limited in our actions’ (Peter, 17), or question the notion of freedom of speech:

Freedom of speech – you can say what you want, you can think what you want... [...] ... but! If you express your opinion that you do not like Latvia... then leave Latvia.

(Igor, 17)

Their failures to comply with norms and expectations in relation to them could be one of the rare means they have at their disposal to address the inequality and invisibility imposed by the current ethnocentric politics. By disrupting the expected behaviour, the young Russian speakers subvert and ‘unmask signs of power’ and ‘remake’ themselves (McKinlay 2010, 236), offering other interpretations of what it means to be a young Russian speaker in Latvia today—agentic on their own terms. Young Russian-speaking subjects become intelligible through their failure to perform normative behaviour, failure to enact only a particular—authorised—version of identity. The question, then, is whether there is an interest on the part of authorities, be it a teacher, an adult or a state representative, to recognise and to engage with this deviation, or to critique and dismiss it as a mere defiance?

## 7 | Concluding Remarks

Academic literature has long shown that failure—whether defined as a constitutive element of social hierarchies of belonging or of hegemonic expectations—can serve as a powerful lens for examining the processes and pitfalls of nation formation. Although failure is often cast in negative terms within Western neoliberal thought, this article understands it instead as a historically sedimented, politically generative, affective and embodied condition that offers new pathways for critical reflection on nation-building processes (Appadurai 2016; Ssorin-Chaikov 2016). Drawing comparatively on two ethnographies rooted in the ethno-protectionist contexts of neighbouring postsocialist countries, we demonstrated how older Estonian Russian speakers and Latvian Russophone youth are effectively governed out of national understandings of ‘communities of value’ and how they make sense of their perceived failure. We demonstrated both how failure functions as a mode of national governance over ‘unruly’ subjects, surrounded often by fears or securitised, and as a symbolic entry point for understanding alternative socialities of our research interlocutors. A question worth further examination here is how do these two modes of conceptualising failure coexist and intersect?

We have shown that both groups, to varying degrees, accept and adapt to normative expectations, whether by internalising a sense of failure, withdrawing from public life or seeking to avoid being marked as failures by adhering to the normative behaviour expected of ‘a good’ Russian speaker. In both cases, this reaffirms the disciplining power that state hegemonic discourses exert over minority populations. At the same time, the governing supremacy of imposed labels of ‘accepted’ and ‘failed’ exposes their misalignment with the everyday realities of our

interlocutors. While failure highlights the limits and exclusions inherent in the national projects of the two Baltic states, it also reveals gaps in recognising and explaining practices that fall outside this enduring dichotomy.

At first glance, representatives of the older generation of Russian speakers in Estonia and of the Latvian Russophone youth may appear to differ in how they seek to imbue their different relations with the state with meaning. Although conscious and deliberate attempts to subvert hegemonic norms and expectations are rare among young Latvian Russophones, their presence nevertheless conveys an impression of greater agency in challenging dominant narratives when compared to older interlocutors in Estonia. However, as we show through the Estonian case, failure can also be understood within the complex dynamics of exclusionary governance, social withdrawal and waiting out—where waiting, in particular, is infused with anticipations of systematic change, with hopes that things might one day be different, yet also paradoxically with subtle acts of care. While practices such as withdrawal or waiting are often framed in Estonia as evidence of the failure of ethical relations towards the nation-state, seen as undermining the very fabric of national cohesion, Baraitser (2017, 14–15) reminds us that these too can be read as small agentic gestures of attentive care that help sustain life in the face of ‘inescapable troubles of interdependent existences’. These acts of sustaining life can be seen as efforts to create and protect, at least for oneself and within one’s immediate circle, alternative ways of being—ways that exist within, yet resist, a hegemonically defined mode of existence and relationality. In this light, it would be wrong to deprive older Russophones of agency, even if it does not take the bold form of some of the ‘failed’ performances by young Russian speakers discussed here.

In this way, our analysis pushes academic debates on failure further to understand it as both malleable and changeable, while also offering nationalism studies a new lens for examining how nation-building is negotiated through failure. Both case studies illustrate how the gaps produced by deploying ‘failure’ as a governing principle in the ethnocentric nation-building projects of Estonia and Latvia are actively inhabited and redefined by those labelled as failures. These individuals assign their own meanings to highly politicised questions, such as what it means to be a Russian speaker in the Baltic states, what it takes to belong to the state and what constitutes Estonian and Latvian nationhood. Through their actions, they challenge the idea of failure as the opposite of movement or progress, and contest the idea of the nation as a completed elite-led phenomenon (Isaacs and Polese 2015). By offering alternative interpretations of hegemonic concepts, asserting their contributions through labour and sustaining relationships through acts of care and responsibility, they create and safeguard spaces for alternative and liminal forms of social life. They remain in motion, still in the process of becoming, albeit along trajectories that diverge from those imposed upon them.

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## Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> All names in this article are pseudonyms, and some personal details have been modified to guarantee anonymity.
- <sup>2</sup> Such politics draw on a descent-based understanding of society as ethnically and culturally homogenous. While lacking nuance, this notion remains widespread across Europe, shaping much of the discourse on social integration and national belonging.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, the 1992 citizenship law granted citizenship only to those who could trace direct ancestry to Estonian or Latvian citizens in 1940, before the Soviet occupation. As a result, most Soviet-era settlers and their descendants were denied citizenship and classified as stateless individuals holding grey or alien passports.
- <sup>4</sup> We use the term 'Russian speaker' to refer to people of different ethnic backgrounds who primarily speak Russian at home, and who, or their ancestors, moved to Latvia and Estonia during the Soviet times. We acknowledge that this is an ideologically charged categorisation that positions people in constant opposition and marks them as non-Estonian or non-Latvian. Nevertheless, in this article, we use the term both as an analytical category and an emic label.
- <sup>5</sup> 'In-betweenness' is, however, generally regarded as problematic for modern nation-state formation, which continues to operate as the universal mode of political organisation and belonging—despite numerous critiques, particularly in migration research (Anderson 2019).
- <sup>6</sup> This perception is further reinforced by the fact that some Russian speakers indeed actively refuse to learn the state languages and appear disengaged from integration efforts.
- <sup>7</sup> This extract is also cited in Hercberga's article (Hercberga Forthcoming).

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