

Proposal for Internment Europe: From Colonial Practices to Contemporary Control

Internment Without Camps: Baltic Nation-Building, Memory, and the Exclusion of Russian Minorities

Following Foucault's insight that power operates through dispositifs, structuring life outside formal institutions (1975), internment must be reconceptualised as a wider set of practices that exclude, categorise, and control populations. In the colonial context, this took the form of deportations, concentration camps, and forced labour. In contemporary democratic Europe, it often manifests in subtler forms: legal exclusion, bureaucratic marginalisation, and discursive securitisation that render some groups permanent outsiders. Hence, this proposal takes Estonia and Latvia as case studies to explore how internment persists "without camps." It argues that Russian-speaking minorities are confined not through barbed wire but through legal categories, memory politics, and securitisation discourses that reproduce colonial logics in a decolonial context.

The research lies in the paradoxical position of Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states. They are not colonised subjects under Estonian or Latvian rule after 1991. On the contrary, Estonia and Latvia consistently present themselves as decolonising nations that have regained sovereignty after five decades of Soviet occupation. In this framing, Russia is the coloniser but not the Baltic state. However, the Russian minorities, many of whom are descendants of Soviet-era settlers, have been subjected to enduring exclusion, statelessness, and suspicion. They are securitised as "fifth columns" and reminders of past domination, even though younger generations have assimilated mainly linguistically and socially. Thus, this paradox is my paper's central puzzle: **how a decolonial nation-building project can produce practices that resemble internment. Why do states that cast themselves as victims of colonisation adopt exclusionary strategies that recall colonial logics of confinement?**

To address this, I use three theoretical frameworks.

First, securitisation theory (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998) explains how political elites elevate ordinary social issues into matters of existential security. In the Baltic context, language laws and education policies are not just about culture or identity but are used to reinforce national security. These measures are seen as ways to protect against foreign influence, especially from Russia.

Second, ontological security theory (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008) highlights how states seek continuity of self-identity. For Estonia and Latvia, ontological security depends on sustaining the narrative of survival against Russian domination. For them, Russian minorities challenge identity because they remind them of the trauma of occupation; so, treating these minorities as a security threat restores a sense of ontological stability.

Third, postcolonial and decolonial studies (Annus 2018; Tlostanova 2012; Morozov 2015) provide the conceptual language for the Baltics in the broader genealogy of empire and coloniality. These states emerged from what Annus calls "Soviet colonialism," which combined demographic engineering, Russification, and cultural suppression. Independence in 1991 was thus framed as a decolonial rupture, a restoration of pre-1940 statehood. However,

paradoxically, decolonisation also produced exclusion: Estonia and Latvia saw Soviet-era settlers as outsiders, leaving many people living in the country without full political rights.

This exclusion was institutionalised through citizenship regimes. Estonia's 1992 Citizenship Act restored citizenship only to pre-war citizens and their descendants, while others were required to naturalise through stringent tests. Latvia's 1994 law created the unusual status of "non-citizen," which granted residency but denied political rights. At their peak, nearly one-third of residents in both states were stateless or semi-citizens (Krūma 2010; Poleshchuk 2001). Despite gradual reforms and naturalisation, tens of thousands remain in this category today. The experience of statelessness in the Baltics exemplifies what I term civil internment. Drawing on Arendt's (1951) notion of the stateless as stripped of "the right to have rights," I argue that exclusion from political participation, employment restrictions, and mobility constraints amount to a confinement. It is not physical detention but bureaucratic and symbolic internment, enacted through documents, laws, and administrative categories.

Civil internment is reinforced by securitisation discourses that intensified after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Baltic elites increasingly portray minorities as latent collaborators or vulnerabilities to "hybrid warfare." Russian-language schools are treated as breeding grounds for disloyalty, while consumption of Russian media is seen as infiltration (Saarts 2016; Laruelle 2015). Even community organisations are monitored for potential links to Moscow. This reflects what Stoler (2002) described in colonial contexts as the creation of "dangerous classes": groups categorised as inherently suspect, not because of individual behaviour but because of their symbolic position within power structures.

However, the paradox deepens when one considers the everyday realities of integration. Many Russian-speaking youths are fluent in Estonian or Latvian, attend national schools, and express loyalty to their states (Cheskin 2016; Zabrodskaia 2015). Nevertheless, suspicion persists. This suggests that securitisation is not driven by empirical risks but by collective memory. Baltic national identities are built upon the traumatic memory of Soviet domination and Russification (Etkind 2013). Despite the Russian minority assimilation, they cannot escape their symbolic role as "remnants of the coloniser." In this sense, memory itself functions as a form of internment: it confines minorities within a narrative of suspicion, denying them full recognition.

The comparison with broader European internment practices underscores the significance of the Baltic case. Scholars describe the EU's migration regime as a "detention archipelago" (De Genova 2017; Tazzioli 2020): a dispersed geography of camps, hotspots, and offshore centres that confine migrants in spaces beyond visibility. The Baltics maintain internal equivalents. Alien passports and non-citizenship operate as mobile sites of confinement, keeping individuals territorially within the EU but symbolically outside it. Just as the EU externalises migrants into spaces of invisibility, Estonia and Latvia internalise minorities into bureaucratic categories of semi-belonging. The logics are parallel: populations deemed undesirable are confined legally and discursively in Latvian registries.

This convergence raises critical questions about the nature of internment in contemporary Europe. If internment can occur without camps, through documents and discourses, how should we trace its genealogies? What does it mean that liberal democracies, celebrated as models of

rights and inclusion, sustain practices that mirror colonial exclusion strategies? Moreover, how should we understand the EU's complicity? While minority rights were monitored before accession in 2004, post-accession silence allowed Baltic exclusion to persist largely unchallenged (Sasse 2008). This parallels the EU's externalisation of migration control: both demonstrate that confinement is not antithetical to democracy but embedded within it.

The broader contribution of this proposal is therefore conceptual. First, it advances the idea of civil internment to capture how confinement occurs through legal-bureaucratic means in democratic settings. Second, it highlights memory as confinement, showing how collective trauma narratives can imprison minorities in roles they cannot escape. Third, it links ontological insecurity to decolonial nation-building, demonstrating why suspicion persists even when integration occurs. Together, these insights extend the study of internment beyond camps and allow us to trace continuities from colonial laboratories of confinement to contemporary European democracies.

The research questions guiding this project are thus:

- 1. How can we conceptualise internment beyond camps, in contexts where confinement is enacted through law, discourse, and memory?**
- 2. Why do decolonial nation-building projects, such as those in the Baltics, reproduce exclusionary practices that resemble colonial logics of internment?**
- 3. How does collective memory function as a confinement mechanism, shaping which groups are securitised as dangerous?**
- 4. What does the Baltic experience reveal about the compatibility of internment with liberal democracy and EU membership?**

By examining Estonia and Latvia's Russian minorities, neither colonised nor entirely accepted, integrated yet perpetually suspect, this research contributes to understanding internment's genealogies and contemporary forms.

References

- Annus, Epp. 2018. *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands*. London: Routledge.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1951. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

- Budryte, Dovile. 2022. "Resilience and Vulnerability: Baltic Security Discourses in the Shadow of Russia." *Europe-Asia Studies* 74 (6): 1023–1044.
- Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Cheskin, Ammon. 2016. *Russian-Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia: Discursive Identity Strategies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- De Genova, Nicholas. 2017. "The Borders of 'Europe': Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering." *Social Text* 35 (3): 121–134.
- Etkind, Alexander. 2013. *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1975. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Galbreath, David J., and Joanne McEvoy. 2013. *The European Minority Rights Regime: Towards a Theory of Regime Effectiveness*. London: Palgrave.
- Hughes, James. 2005. *Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in Conflict*. London: Frank Cass.
- Jasutis, Gražvydas. 2016. "Hybrid Threats and Minority Security in the Baltic States." *Journal on Baltic Security* 2 (1): 5–14.
- Krūma, Kristīne. 2010. "Non-Citizens in Latvia: The Debate over Their Status and Rights." *European Journal of Migration and Law* 12 (2): 143–170.
- Laruelle, Marlene. 2015. "Russia as a 'Divided Nation,' from Compatriots to Crimea: A Contribution to the Discussion on Nationalism and Foreign Policy." *Problems of Post-Communism* 62 (2): 88–97.
- Mitzen, Jennifer. 2006. "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma." *European Journal of International Relations* 12 (3): 341–370.
- Mole, Richard. 2022. *The Baltic States and Russia: Fear and Distrust*. London: Routledge.
- Morozov, Viatcheslav. 2015. *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World*. London: Palgrave.
- Olick, Jeffrey. 2007. *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. London: Routledge.
- Poleshchuk, Vadim. 2001. "Non-Citizens in Estonia: Between Ethnic Apartheid and Democratic Integration." *European Centre for Minority Issues Working Paper No. 7*.
- Saarts, Tõnis. 2016. "Securitisation of Ethnic Relations in the Baltic States." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47 (1): 113–136.
- Sasse, Gwendolyn. 2008. *The Politics of EU Conditionality: The Baltic States and Minority Protection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Steele, Brent J. 2008. *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. London: Routledge.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tazzioli, Martina. 2020. *The Making of Migration: The Biopolitics of Mobility at Europe's Borders*. London: SAGE.
- Tlostanova, Madina. 2012. *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Zabrodskaja, Anastassia. 2015. "Language, Identity, and Integration of Russian-Speaking Youth in Estonia." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 18 (5): 570–584.