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Divided memory, parallel societies? Latvians and Russians in Latvia after 1991

After the downfall of the Soviet Empire independent Latvia was re-established concentrating solely on the Latvian nation. The reconstruction of a national Latvian history was a crucial part of the nation’s identity politics. While attempting to cover the previously ‘white spots’, which were a result of the Soviet ideology, and finally talk about the history of occupation, the focus of Latvian historiography changed completely. Not only did it now address new topics like the deportations during the Stalin era, the new historiography also transported a completely revised, national Latvian narrative of history. The Russian speaking population of Latvia found it difficult to reflect itself in this new narrative; moreover, they found themselves portrayed as “the other”, the occupants during Soviet time.

Since Latvia was in the spotlight of OSCE and EU due to its large “Russian speaking minority”, the question of how to integrate the Russian speakers into the Latvian society was discussed widely on a political level. This led to a number of political measures and initiatives. However, the problem of divided memories was not addressed. In Latvia, there is no common culture of memory. The media – Russian versus Latvian media – transports different memories. There are “two parallel media spheres” and some researchers also talk about parallel societies.

This paper will focus on the parallel spheres of media, which still often use ideological terms from the Cold War era and therefore – often indirectly – refer to the totalitarian theory. This will be discussed in the general context of divided memory in Latvia.