

# The Theme of the Polish Minority in Latgalian Press (1920–1934)

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**Abstract.** The article aims to reveal the position of the Latgalian press in the formation of the inhabitants' public opinion of the Polish minority in Latgale (1920–1934). The basis of the research consists of around 50 articles published in the Latgalian newspapers. The research is based on the analysis of qualitative data, discourse-historical approach, using the detaching discursive construction of “we” – “they”, e.g., in the context of the article – “the Latgalians” – “the Polish”.

In the early 1920s, the newspaper articles related to the Polish, mostly to the nobility, desiring to return the *old good times*, when the Polish was the dominating social group in Latgale. In the following years, the Polish were largely reflected as a minority disloyal to Latgalians and hostile to the Latvian state based on this ground. In many cases, the publications about the Polish minority are contradictory; while creating a negative image of the Polish, they are also called ‘faith brothers’ and thereby – allies.

**Keywords:** Poles, Latgalians, Latgalian press, Latgale.

## Lenkų mažumos tema Latgalos spaudoje (1920–1934)

**Anotacija.** Straipsnyje siekiama atskleisti latgaliečių spaudos poziciją formuojant gyventojų viešąją nuomonę apie Latgalos lenkų mažumą (1920–1934). Tyrimo pagrindą sudaro apie 50 straipsnių, publikuotų Latgalos laikraščiuose. Tyrimas pagrįstas kokybine duomenų analize, diskurso-istoriniu požiūriu, naudojant diskursinę istorinę „mes“ – „jie“ konstrukciją, t. y. straipsnio kontekste – „latgaliai“ – „lenkai“.

XX a. antrojo dešimtmečio pradžioje straipsniai spaudoje buvo susiję su lenkais, daugiausia su bajorais, norinčiais grąžinti *senus gerus laikus*, kai jie buvo dominuojanti socialinė grupė Latgaloje. Vėlesniais metais lenkai dažniausiai pristatomi kaip latgaliams nelojali ir šiuo pagrindu priešiška Latvijos valstybei mažuma. Daugeliu atvejų publikacijos apie lenkų mažumą yra prieštaringos: kuriamas neigiamas lenkų įvaizdis, tačiau jie vadinami ir „tikėjimo broliais“, taigi – sąjungininkais.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** lenkai, latgaliečiai, latgaliečių spauda, Latgala.

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## Introduction

The study aims to reveal the role of Latgalian press in the formation of the public opinion on the Polish minority in the period of parliamentary democracy (1920–1934). The research is based on approximately 50 articles in Latgalian newspapers: *Latgolas Vārds*, *Latgalīts*, *Jaunō Straume*, *Zemņika Bolss*, etc.

In 1920, the weekly newspaper *Latgolas Vārds* (1919–1940), during the preparation for the elections to the Latvian parliament (Constituent Assembly), became the semi-official newspaper of Latgalian Christian Farmers' Union (*Latgales Kristīgo zemnieku savienība*, *LKZS*). This was the largest and the most popular newspaper in Latgale. *Latgolas Vārds* focused on maintaining the Catholic faith among the people, but at the same time the newspaper devoted a lot of attention to national and economic issues. The opinion of the Latgalian Christian Party, which competed with the *LKZS*, was expressed through the newspaper *Latgalīts* (1920–1926). The newspaper mainly published political and economic articles; however, a lot of attention was given to the issues of culture and national minorities. The newspaper *Jaunō Straume* (1921–1934) was issued by the Latgalian Labour Party. The newspaper expressed the Latgalian Labour Party's political orientation and had a secular nature. The issuing of the Latgalian Democratic Party's newspaper *Zemņika Bolss* (1924–1926) was related to the development of a conflict between the priest and *LKZS* leader Francis Trasuns (1864–1926) and the leaders of the Latvian Catholic church. The issuing of the newspaper stopped after Trasuns' death in 1926. The main space in the newspaper was given to the articles protecting Trasuns. The newspaper was very harsh towards the Catholic curia. At the same time, the newspaper devoted a lot of attention to reflecting national and economic issues. When creating the article, some publications were used from the *Latgales Ziņas*, the newspaper of Latvians from Vidzeme and Kurzeme that lived in Latgale.

The main authors of newspaper articles about the Polish factor in Latgale were well-known Latgalian politicians and public figures, for example, Francis Kemps (1876–1952; pseud. Skomba), Jezups Trasuns (1898–1978), Juris Pabērzs (1891–1961), etc. Trasuns, while he was the editor of the newspaper *Latgolas Vārds* (until 1924), frequently expressed the opinion of the newspaper's editorial board.

The study is based on the analysis of qualitative data and historical discourse using the discourse detachment structure “us” vs. “them”, i.e., in the context of the article, “Latgalians” vs. “Poles”. The opposition “us” vs. “them” usually creates grounds for stereotypes and prejudice. Someone's negative experience with the “opponent” is often believed to be characteristic of the entire group; whereas positive experience is often seen as an exception (Delanty et al., 2008, p. 4). In this case, attempts to oppose Poles to Latgalians prevail.

## The Theme of the Polish Minority: Influencing Factors

When viewing the theme of the Polish minority in Latgalian press, one has to consider the factors which have had a direct or indirect influence on it.

The Polish minority has almost five centuries long history in Latvia. Latgale is the most closely related to Poland, as Latgale was incorporated in the state of Polish-Lithuanian state until 1972. In the Republic of Latvia (1918–1940), the Polish people constituted the fourth largest national minority after the Russians, Germans and Jews. Just under a half of Latvian Poles were living in Latgale and the county of Ilūkste; large numbers were also recorded in Riga and in the cities of the lands of Kurzeme and Zemgale. During the 1925, population census in Latvia, 1 844 805 residents were recorded. 51 143 or 2.3 % of them were Polish. During the next population census in 1930, the population was found to have increased to 1 900 045 residents, 59 374 or 3.1 % of which were Polish. 539 682 people were recorded in Latgale in 1925, 25 564 or 4.8 % of which were Polish. Whereas the 1930 census in Latgale showed 541 127 people, 29 698 or 5.5 % of whom were Polish (Skujenieks, 1930, p. 72).

Before World War I, almost half (48%) of all land property belonged to more than one thousand private estates, which were owned by landlords of Baltic-German origin, Polish, Russian, Polonised landlords of Baltic-German origin. Polish and Polonised landlords of German origin prevailed in Latgale. Poles were not among the representatives of large landowners only because, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for Polonization purposes, Latgale was populated by small szlachta together with a small number of farmers from the territories of Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus (Malahovskis, 2014, p. 42). During the rule of the Poles, more than 40 families of Polish-Lithuanian landlords moved to Latgale (Inflantia), and more than 20 German landlord families were polonised (Zajas, 2008, pp. 123–126). Along with the landlords and farmers, also the representatives of various professions (Polish teachers, architects, etc.) came to Latgale (Kuņicka, 2020, p. 131). After the State of Latvia was established (1918), a new status was granted to the Polish people – they officially became one of the Latvian minorities with all the political, social, and economic consequences arising from that (Albin, 1993, p. 29). Considering that, in the 20s and 30s, Poland and Latvia had a common 105 km border, a new ethnoprofessional group appeared in Latvia, namely, Polish farmworkers – seasonal labourers at the largest farms (Boldāne, 2011, p. 139).

In the Republic of Latvia, the Polish had all the rights which minorities had. Poles' knowledge of the national language was relatively poor – about 30% of them spoke it. Despite active participation in elections, the number of Poles in the Latvian parliament was relatively small. However, the Polish minority managed to get involved in the administration of the local governments of Daugavpils, Rēzekne, Ludza, Krāslava, and other towns. The localisation of Poles has determined their main areas of activity – agriculture, production, transport, and communications (Boldāne, 2011, p. 139).

When the Latvian State was formed, Latvians still lacked a common national consciousness. Latvians divided themselves into Latgalians and Balts, true and false, changali<sup>1</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Changali (Latvian: *čangali*) – a derogatory name for Latvians living in Latgale (Latgalians) (in the 20s and 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).

chiuli (*čiuļi*)<sup>2</sup> (Brolīšs, 2000, p. 39), etc. Latgalian were often opposed to Latvians and the rest of Latvia. Considering that Latgale did not have enough civil servants, teachers, and doctors, their shortage was compensated for by newcomers from other regions of Latvia – mainly Lutherans. In Latgale, the number of Lutherans was about 40 000 (Skujenieks, 1930, p. 157, 158). These factors created certain tension among Latvians living in Latgale. Moreover, until the 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some Latgalians lacked ethnic self-awareness – denominational belonging to the Catholic faith was often decisive. In 1921, in the Latvian parliament, representative of social democrats Margers Skujenieks (1886–1941) emphasised the problem: “We have large areas [in Latgale – V. M.] where people are not aware of their ethnicity, and when asked about their ethnicity, they say that they are Catholics. If you explain that Catholicism is faith rather than ethnicity, they say that they are Polish.” (LRSSS, 5. ses., 2848., 2849. sl.).

The Latvian Agrarian Reform (1920–1937) presupposed confiscation of land, structures, inventory, cattle, and estates and redistribution of land, which was included in the State Land Fund, to landless and small farmers. Up to 1920, more than 35 000 hectares of property in Latgale were in the hands of Polish landlords. About a half of these belonged to the families of large landlords, whose property area was more than 2000 hectares (Jēkabsons, 1995, p. 93). Landlords did not receive any compensation for the confiscated land and anything associated with it. In 1920, about 50% of Latvian estates were abandoned (Feldmanis, 2005, p. 172) because many German landlords had fled together with defeated Bermontians. Whereas the majority of Polish landlords in Latgale abandoned their estates during the Soviet (Bolshevik) rule in 1919. By 1920, about 3500 Poles, including 120 families of Polish landlords from Latgale, left Latvia (Jēkabsons, 1995, p. 79). The rest of the landowners were left with only 50 hectares (owners of isolated farmsteads – 100 hectares) of land. This resulted in protests of Polish landlords, as thereby the Latvian State “has robbed the Polish minority” (Studnicki, 1927, p. 55), because after the Agrarian Reform only less than 2% of the land as private property was owned by the Polish landowners (Albin 1993, pp. 20–21).

According to the ordinance of the Latvian government, landowners were supposed to return to their lands by March 10, but in Latgale – by March 15, 1920. Otherwise, their property would be taken over by the State. However, in practice, Latvian government authorities in Latgale were not in a hurry to do so until autumn 1920 because in autumn 1920 the problem of Latgalian land being owned by Poles became the most important issue in the relationship between Latvia and Poland (Jēkabsons, 1995, p. 93). Considering that Poland had helped Latvia in the War of Independence (1918–1920) in the fight against Bolsheviks, the issue related to the Polish minority in Latvia also had a political context. This is why at the level of political power Latvia was rather lenient towards the Polish minority. At the end of 1920, there were talks of gradual pay-outs of compensations to former Polish landlords in Latvia. In 1929, Latvia and Poland signed a commercial

<sup>2</sup> Chiuli (Latvian: *čiuļi*) – a derogatory name for Latvians living outside Latgale (in the 20s and 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).

and navigation treaty, which included an additional secret agreement protocol where the Latvian government undertook the compensation of the damage which resulted from the Latvian Agrarian Reform. In accordance with this secret agreement, in the time period from 1929 until 1937, Latvia has paid 5 297 500 lats to Poland (Sviķis, 1960, p. 135).

In conclusion, it is worth noting that Latvian press in the parliamentary period enjoyed all the advantages of the democratic regime and had an important role in the formation of the public opinion. The Press Law adopted in 1924 protected the freedom of the press. Moreover, the law did not say anything about censorship or the rights and duties of a journalist (Treijs, 1996, p. 82). This is why openly offensive or even humiliating comments regarding an opponent were not uncommon in the press.

### **The Pole as a Former Landlord**

The beginning of the 20s is predominated by the image of the Pole as a former landlord who lost his property as a result of the Agrarian Reform in Latvia. At the Latgalian estates where landlords did not return, their authorised representatives practiced illegal sales of land. Authorised representatives of the landlords, having received the money for selling the land, were usually fast to leave Latvia.

Latgalian newspaper columns emphasise that landlords were using the farmers' ignorance of the issues of agrarian law and committing other illegal acts at their estates, demanding ground rent from the farmers. In 1920, the newspaper *Latgalīts* wrote: "During the Bolshevik rule, landlords have scattered in all directions. Now they are crawling back to their estates like crayfish. The problem is not that they are crawling back but that with their arrival they are crushing farmers and tenants even more, like crayfish can crush a finger with their legs (claws)" (Kolps, 1920).

Further, the article stresses that in the Rēzekne area the owner of the Kozlovka estate in the spring of 1920 demanded half of the previous year's crops from the tenants. Since excess had already been taken away by the Red Army men, the farmers began begging the landlord for pity. The landlord did not demand previous year's crops anymore but set a rent in the amount of 80 000 roubles: "Landlords, probably anticipating their end, want to take as high an estate rent this year as the entire estate costs" (Kolps, 1920). One estate owner even ordered to have one farmer arrested by unfairly calling him a Bolshevik, thus having scared other farmers, and made them pay rent for the previous year a second time (Kolps, 1920).

In 1921, the newspaper *Latgalīts* also emphasises that Polish landlords in Latgale have united: "To improve and strengthen their economic interests, i.e., to save their estates" (Paberzs, 1921).

The newspaper *Zemņika Bolss* writes in 1925: "A delegation of Polish landlords with property in Latvia and Lithuania has arrived in Paris. The delegation's objective is to submit a protest abroad against the confiscation of landowners' property without compensation. The members of the delegation are Count Plater, Komar, and others" (Red., 1925).

The view of the Pole as a landlord is also supported by some publication titles: “We are Receiving Information about Atrocities Committed by Landlords in Latgale” (Red., 1920), “Aspirations of Polish Landlords in Latgale” (Paberzs, 1921), “Polish Landlords’ Steps Against Latvia” (Red., 1925), “Bring Polish Agitators to Justice!” (Red., 1924), etc.

## The Pole as a Poloniser of Latgalians

In the context of Polonization, Latgalian newspapers, firstly, refer to Polish landlords protecting their economic and national interests which run counter to the interests of Latvians. At the beginning of the 20s, it was thought that the Polish government was funding the Poles of Latgale (had granted 7 million marks) (P., 1921), who used the money to form illegal organisations in Latgale. In 1921, *Latgalīts* writes about the organisation formed by Polish landlords in Daugavpils “The Committee for the Protection of the Outskirts of Poland”. The articles of association are unavailable; however, its activity shows that the “committee”: “1) sends agents in order to secretly support Polish schools and to implement the Polonization of Latvians [...]; 2) when taking measures for the Polonization of Latvia, especially in Latgale, [...] obtain some influence over our country and social life [...]; 3) make Latgale dependent on Poland.” The article concludes the following: “Our Latvian national and economic interests are opposite to the aspirations of Polish landlords” (Paberzs, 1921).

*Latgolas Vārds* writes: “Using the money collected by taking measures for the Polonization of Latvia, especially Latgale, artificially create a large number of Poles here (from Latvians)” (Red., 1931).

The newspaper *Jaunõ Straume* relates the aspiration for Polonization to Catholic processes in the Catholic church in Latgale: “If the church [...] allows and supports Polish propaganda in temples, this is a crime against the interests of the people” (Skomba, 1931). The newspaper emphasises that in Catholic churches in Daugavpils, Rēzekne, and Pasiene the service is conducted in the Polish language as often as several Sundays in a row (J., 1923).

At the beginning of the 30s, *Jaunõ Straume* also stresses the following: “The old and strong Polish influence in the suburbs of Latgale and in the centres of cities and towns is still too big, especially in the life of the church” (J., 1923).

Poles are mentioned in relation to their distrust of Catholic priests of Latvian origin. In this respect, *Latgolas Vārds* writes: “It shows that Poles are not looking for a priest but a Polish agent [...] see Catholicism in Polonism only, just like it still is there” (Red., 1922). “Poles imagine themselves like during the rule of landlords – Latvians have no right to pray to God in their native language. Poles, like big landowners who hate the language of farmers, disturb the Latvian service every time by shouting and in other ways” (Red., 1931).

Lutherans living in Latgale in newspaper *Latgales Ziņas* are also expressing concerns regarding the Catholic church as a pro-Polish organisation that threatens not only the national interests of Latvians, but also the Lutheran faith: “The defining role belongs to



Polish Catholic priests [...] discrediting articles about Luther and Lutheranism are coming from Polonised circles” (Logoss, 1931). The newspaper clarifies: “We have nothing against the Catholic faith as such and do not wish to argue against it; we are only opposing its leaders speaking up against our faith via uncultured means and discrediting articles. We are arguing against those who use Catholicism to mask their aspiration for Polonization” (Logoss, 1931).

Schools of Polish national minorities are mentioned as a special threat of Polonization in Latgale. At the beginning of the 1920s, 27 Polish primary schools were working in Latvia, one private grammar school (Jēkabsons, 1996, p. 35), and several Polish societies. Latgalian newspapers are expressing the opinion that students are raised with an anti-government sentiment in Polish schools and clubs: “Occasions have been observed when in scout clubs they first pledge loyalty to their “homeland” [Poland – V. M.], and only then mention Latvia” (Red., 1923).

Polish activists created private schools in the suburbs of Latgale which had no schools at all. The most high-profile episode in this relation was the case of an educator and social activist Kazimir Pruchnik (1883–?) in 1921, which also caught international public attention, because Polish citizen K. Pruchnik and his supporters were exiled from Latvia. Latvian government authorities had accused K. Pruchnik and some educators and public activists (17 people in total) “of secretly organising Polish schools in eight locations in south Latgale, of directing and maintaining these schools, of actions harmful to Latvia, of Polonizing Latgalians and Belarussians and raising them in the spirit which is hostile to Latvia” (Jēkabsons, 2013, pp. 51–53). The newspaper *Latgalīts* writes in this regard: “Farewell, *pan* Pruchnik! You must be sad to be leaving having failed to establish Poland in Latgale. But oh well [...] After you, your comrades will come too” (Gosts, 1921).

A few years later in 1929, several illegal Polish and one Lithuanian school were also closed. The teacher from the Lithuanian school was tried for illegal activity, whereas the teachers from Polish schools, according to *Latgales Ziņas*: “Were spared for political reasons” (Balodis, 1932).

Latgalian press harshly criticised Latgalians too for lacking a national consciousness and sending their children to Polish schools: “If parents who do not know a word in Polish are sending their children to Polish schools [...] Polish schools [...] are full of Latgalian children, and they are brought up to be not Latvians but aliens, perhaps even aliens hostile to Latvians” (J., 1923).

Eugenics ideas were popular in the world in the 20s and 30s and were actively discussed and promoted in Latvia by representatives of different sciences (Zelče, 2006, p. 100). In the Latgalian press these ideas were not topical, not like in the press of the rest of Latvia. The monthly magazine *Burtnieks* mentions Poles as one of the ethnicities detrimental to the maintenance of a “pure” nation in Latgale because “Latvians, Lithuanians, Russians, Byelorussians, Poles, and zhyds have mixed here with abandon, and, as a result, we have an ethnographic type with very negative biological racial qualities” (Akermanis, 1928, p. 821).

## The Pole as a Brother in Faith and an Ally

Regarding the Polish minority, in 1923, the newspaper *Latgolas Vārds* specifies the following division: “Poles of Latgale belong to two classes: landlords and farmers. Polish farmers are the same ploughmen, the same artisans or homeowners as Latvians” (Sabris, 1923).

In the newspaper *Latgalīts*, an author writes in a publication about the consecration of a school: “We wish a lot of happiness to our brothers in faith Poles and we rejoice with them” (Red., 1920).

Economic cooperation between the countries is also emphasised, which is reflected in publications about trade and experience exchange travels between Poland and Latvia: “Polish cooperatives entered Latvia through Daugavpils on June 4 to get acquainted with Latvian cooperation and establish tighter relations” (Red., 1921).

The Polish are also considered a kindred nation because of historical legacy. In 1923, a publication in *Latgolas Vārds* explains: “Latvians and Poles have common enemies – Russia and Germany – and common friends – the Allies [Great Britain and France – V. M.]” (Sabris, 1923).

This is why initially the Polish were also depicted in a positive light, setting them apart from other national minorities whose construed image was already negative in the very first publications: “Poles in Latvia cannot walk the path of other aliens who only strive to strengthen their powers on the account of the State to later turn them against the aspirations of Latvians” (Sabris, 1923).

## The Pole as a Farmworker and Competitor

As it was already said, Latvia, including Latgale, beginning from mid-twenties, saw an influx of Polish and Lithuanian farmworkers. Since Latgalian villages were overpopulated, Latgale gave a large number of farmworkers to other regions of Latvia. More than 20 000 workers left Latgale every year (Maldups & Salnais, 1929, p. 49). Since landowners in Vidzeme, Kurzeme, and Zemgale were complaining of the shortage of seasonal workers, the Latvian government allowed bringing farmworkers from Poland and Lithuania as well.

As in Latgale, in the Polish countryside (in the part of Poland was included in the Russian Empire which after the division of the Polish–Lithuanian state in the 18 century) one of the most topical issues was the overpopulation and lack of land. The size of 65% of farms did not exceed 5 hectares (Grzybowski, 2021, p. 21).

In an organised manner, they started bringing farmworkers from Lithuania in 1925 and from Poland in 1928. Moreover, in border territories, foreign workers often arrived in Latvia independently. In accordance with statistical data, Latvia had 18 106 imported farmworkers in 1929. Local workers made up 87%, and the other 13% had arrived from Poland and Lithuania (Sviķis, 1960, p. 107). The number of farmworkers arriving in Latgale was rather insignificant – 74 (Maldups & Salnais, 1929, p. 92).

Considering that Polish farmworkers could be hired for lower pay than Latgalian workers, Latgalians had a negative perception of the import of Poles because farmwork-



ers' pay was thus reduced by 7–9% on average, both in Latgale and in other regions. The newspaper *Jaunõ Straume* writes that in 1928, as a result of the import of Polish and Lithuanian farmworkers: "The pay has dropped by 120 roubles [24 Lats – V. M.], but for women – by 350 roubles [7 Lats – V. M.]" (Red., 1928).

## Conclusion

Considering that the social structure of Poles in Latgale was not homogeneous, publications about the Polish minority are often contradictory.

At the beginning of the 20s, the image of the Polish landlord in the Latgalian press is expressly negative because Polish landlords have lost their property and are thus very hostile to the Latvian State and Latvians. In newspaper articles, the Polish are mainly associated with landowners who wish to bring back the *good old times* when Poles were the prevailing social group in Latgale. In the later years, Poles are mostly depicted as a minority disloyal to Latgale and Latvia.

The negative image of the Pole was based on the fact that the Polish, using their educational institutions and the Catholic church, were opposing the manifestations of Latgalian ethnic consciousness. Thus, the authors of the articles are actualising the Polonization process they believe to be happening in Latgale.

Along with the construed negative image of the Pole, once in a while the Polish are referred to as brothers in faith and thus the allies of Latgalians.

In the conclusion, it is worth noting that after the restoration of Latvian independence, the attitude towards the Polish minority in Latgale (and all Latvia) is no longer based on specific stereotypes. The Polish are represented as an important minority in the political history of Latvia, in the context of the development of Latgale and the contribution to its culture.

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